West Coast Bauhaus: a case study of the Oberlander Residence II

by

Chanel Blouin

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Abstract

This thesis will consider the joining of West Coast Modernism and Bauhaus-inspired architectural elements in the design of architect Peter Oberlander and landscape architect Cornelia Hahn Oberlander’s second residence in Vancouver, the Ravine House, located on the University of British Columbia Endowments Lands. It will posit that this style hybridization results from the Oberlanders’ particular situation as forced exiles from Central Europe as well as voluntary immigrants to Vancouver. This analysis will interrogate the dichotomy between exile and immigrant architecture that is presented in the literature of West Coast architecture.

The methodology will consist of an analysis of the architecture produced by the German-speaking immigrant and exile communities in Los Angeles from the 1920s to the 1950s, a precursor of the West Coast modernism in Vancouver. It will consider the seminal writings of Reyner Banham and Erhard Bahr in Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies and Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism, with particular attention on their approaches for reading the experiences of exile and immigration in the architectural features of buildings. This approach will be applied to a case study of the Ravine House through a biographical sketch of the Oberlander’s migration as well as a formal analysis of West Coast Modernism and the Indigenous architectures it drew upon as well as the Bauhaus features of the residence.
Lay Summary

The central concern of this thesis is an examination of the West Coast modern and Bauhaus-inspired architectural elements of the late architect Peter Oberlander and landscape architect Cornelia Hahn Oberlander’s home, the Ravine House. Through the interweaving of stylistic features, the Ravine House embodies a complex intersection of influences, one which has not been closely investigated before. This thesis advances a formal analysis of the Bauhaus and West Coast Modernism features of the residence and relates them to the Oberlanders’ migration trajectory. It posits that the architectural elements of the house reveal traces of attachment to their Central European roots as a result of exile as well as the enthusiasm for their new environment on the West Coast due to their voluntary move to Vancouver. It also problematizes the distinction between exile and immigrant in the existing literature on West Coast architecture.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Chanel Blouin.
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I humbly acknowledge that I attended the University of British Columbia and pursued this research as a settler on the unceded Coast Salish territories of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Səl̓ílwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), and xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nations.
Introduction

In 1968, the University of British Columbia held a competition for a residential development on a forested ravine situated on the University Endowment Lands (UEL),\(^1\) a steep, narrow and especially challenging site to build upon. The UEL would confer the site as a prize to the designers of a home with a minimal impact on the ravine and that would conserve its sensitive ecology.\(^2\) The winners of the competition were landscape architect Cornelia Oberlander and her husband, architect and city planner Peter Oberlander in collaboration with Barry Downs Architects. They designed an elongated modular pavilion composed of functional and open spaces, which appears to float over the ravine and construction of the Ravine House began in 1969 (Fig.1).

The design of the residence was highly influenced by the particularities of the forested landscape. In an attempt to reduce site disruption on an already erosion-prone edge, they secured a series of deep-set concrete piloti into the hillside, forming a bridge-like structure upon which the house rests.\(^3\) It is also responsive to the visual qualities of the site as the glazed walls and overhead skylight capture the natural light and provide views onto the ravine and gardens. The careful integration of Ravine House in its natural environment\(^4\) reflects the ethos of what is called West Coast Modernism, the modern residential architectural style that flourished in the 1950s to the 1970s in Vancouver and its surrounding areas, most notably North and West Vancouver, Point Grey, and Burnaby. During the post-war period, architects sought to establish a local vernacular

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\(^1\) The University Endowment Lands is a residential community situated on the traditional ancestral and
\(^4\) Ibid., 12.
by embracing the principles of organic modernism pioneered by Frank Lloyd Wright, including a particular concern for the topography and climate of the area, the relation between the structure and its site, as well as the use of local materials. The ideal and style of West Coast modernism was popularized in magazines such as *Western Homes and Living* published in Vancouver that circulated in the 1950s and 1960s and “made the idea of modern living accessible to a growing middle class”. The magazines featured photographs of the homes by Selwyn Pullan and Graham Warrington displaying the elements of the style including an exposed timber frame allowing for open, fluid spaces and immense free-standing ribbon windows oriented toward the views of the Pacific Northwest landscape.

An important stylistic motif of the specifically Northwest Coast mid-century home is the post-and-beam frame, built with locally sourced cedar, wide overhangs and large glazed walls (Fig.2). The modern iteration of the post-and-beam structure is understood by its proponents as an abstracted expression of traditional Coast Salish architecture. In *Western Living, Western Homes*, Sherry McKay draws the connection between west coast modern houses and Coast Salish architecture, “the merging of the house with the landscape is distinctive. It is this which is emphasized by long, horizontal spreading wings which are nestled into the hill rather than suspended from it. Nature determines the soft browns highlighted only with the autumn red-ochre. The colour palette, the weaving of the construction and detail, and the derivation of ornament from material and structure resembles that of native Indian artefacts, baskets and Salish houses

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6 Ibid., 12.
then reverently discussed by [Ron] Thom and local artists”. As McKay suggests, Salish architecture was esteemed by the pioneers of West Coast Modernism and they integrated the post-and-beam structures into their horizontally organized designs. For instance “a consistent theme through many of [Arthur Erickson’s] buildings is the framing portal of horizontal beam on vertical columns, a welcoming and sheltering motif found in West Coast Native buildings”. Though there are mentions of the influence of Indigenous architecture on West Coast Modernism, this connection has only been made tangentially in the literature. This paper will serve to elucidate this idea. McKay’s passage is significant because it evokes certain ways of seeing “nature” that erases the presence of First Nations cultures by conflating their influence, which is possibly why the literature on mid-century modernism in Vancouver has not seriously considered this relationship. In this case, the colour palette stems from both nature and Salish objects and houses blurring the difference between the natural environment and the cultures of the First Nations communities living on that land.

The Salish winter homes located along the lower Fraser River that influenced the post-and-beam structures of West Coast are an important center of cultural exchange, notably the locus of Potlatch ceremonial events. They are composed of large posts and round wood beams with cedar roof planks that run parallel to the shore with views of the river. They serve to express the social standing of the owners of the home through diverse totemic imagery, including carved totem

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posts, painted screens and painted façades. The Ravine House shares many features of the Salish-inspired Pacific Northwest style, including its structural form made of vertical wood clad piers and horizontal spandrels.

Intriguingly, however, it also incorporates stylistic elements from a very different design tradition. Bauhaus-inspired features are found throughout the house, such as a smooth white façade devoid of ornamentation and cubic pavilions “inspired by Miesian simplicity” with primary colour accent walls on the interior, embraced by artists and architects from the Bauhaus like Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Marcel Breuer. The composition of the house integrates principles of design of the Bauhaus, notably simplicity and functionality. For instance, the coherent arrangement of modules that weave functional rooms with open spaces and also extend into the landscape was influenced by teachings of the Bauhaus, notably the logic of modularity and processes used to create an abstract composition. Cornelia Oberlander’s approach to designing the landscape began by creating a plan view using square construction paper cut-outs, a method that echoes the building block concept (Baukasten) practiced by the Bauhaus School.

12 Downs, An Architectural Collaboration, 27.
13 Ibid., 27-28.
14 The definition of the Bauhaus style that will be used in this paper will draw upon Aryeh Sharon’s position that “Bauhaus is neither a concept, nor a uniform institution” to address the importation of Bauhaus style to Tel Aviv (“In Favour of Scale- Yigal Tumarkin Interviews Aryeh Sharon on the Bauhaus and the Development of Architecture in Israel”, Kav 2 (January 1981), p 80-84 –In Hebrew). Aryeh Sharon was an Israeli architect trained at the Bauhaus at Dessau and was instrumental in establishing the Bauhaus style of architecture in Tel Aviv beginning in the early 1930s, the history and critique of which was recently related by Sharon Rothbard in White City, Black City (2015). Viewing the Bauhaus as a set of teachings promoting a “philosophical way of life” as well as architectural features allows it to be exported as it was in Tel Aviv, Los Angeles, on the American East Coast when Gropius moved to Massachusetts to accept a teaching position at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design, as well as in Vancouver in the post-war period.
15 Herrington, Making the Modern Landscape, 207.
Here, blocks inspired by children's toys representing the modules of the building, allowing designers to experiment with different modular combinations and optimize planning. Through the interweaving of archetypal West Coast and Bauhaus style features, the Ravine House embodies a complex intersection of influences, one which has been closely investigated before.

The Oberlander residence is not the first iteration of Bauhaus-inspired design combined with the emerging regional modernism in Vancouver. The B.C Binning house, built in 1941 and widely recognized as the first Canadian West Coast modernist residence, combines the typical post-and-beam structure and flat roof and large overhangs with features attributed to the Bauhaus, including a white façade and a large colourful mural painted onto the exterior wall of the house featuring yellow triangular motifs that evoke Kandinsky’s teaching of colour-form correspondence, a quintessential aesthetic of Bauhaus provenance. B.C Binning was interested in the precepts of the Bauhaus, including the notion of the “total work of art” (Gesamtkunstwerk ) espoused by the school’s founding director Walter Gropius, which the Vancouver artist interpreted as a harmonious union between architecture, sculpture and painting. He was especially compelled by Gropius’s emphasis on the unity of art and architecture, a set of principles about education and design that the German architect had developed in the interwar

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period. Binning championed similar notions in the Art in Living Group that was active in the 1940s, an approach that informed the maturation of West Coast Modernism in Vancouver.\(^9\)

Although similarly concerned with aesthetic questions of “harmony”, the Oberlanders’ relationship to the Bauhaus also reflects the specificity of their Central European backgrounds—or rather, an attempt to rebuild their cultural identities, which were shattered by their sudden expulsion from their homelands. Such a direct relationship to the origin of Bauhaus ideas, this thesis argues, is important to understand the way in which those European modernist principles emerge in their work. In this way, the Ravine House is a product of forced displacement and cultural breakage and an unresolved relationship with the past. But it is also, as I’ve suggested, a reflection of the optimism and desire to interface with their new surroundings and the architectural community and the burgeoning West Coast modern movement, a motivation and quality which I will argue was due to their voluntary move, as immigrants, to Vancouver in 1953, after working in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Though the architectural features and the landscape design reflect an attempt to create a building that is integrated with the landscape, the modularity of the house and gardens and the seeming precariousness that results from the house’s situation on thin pilotis cantilevered off of the ravine seem to reflect the quality of exile architecture. The trauma of forced dislocation often results in a hesitancy or unwillingness to establish roots, which I will argue is alluded to in the architecture of the Ravine House.

This thesis will consider the joining of West Coast Modernism and Bauhaus elements through a case study of the Ravine House. Beginning with a biographical sketch detailing the Oberlanders’ early training contact with Bauhaus teachings in Europe followed by their forced migration to North America, and then their introduction to West Coast Modernism, it will posit

that this style hybridization results from the Oberlanders’ particular situation as forced exiles from Central Europe but voluntary immigrants to Vancouver. I will begin my assessment by examining the German-speaking exile architecture in Los Angeles from the 1920s to the 1950s, a significant context as it was a precursor of West Coast Modernism in Vancouver, in the writings of Reyner Banham and Erhard Bahr in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* and *Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism* respectively.\(^{20}\)\(^{21}\) I will consider how Banham and Bahr’s definitions of exile architecture versus immigrant architecture might be reflected in the stylistic features of the Oberlander residence in Vancouver. These authors’ accounts of modern architecture in Los Angeles, which significantly influenced postwar architecture in Vancouver, will allow me to present the methodology for reading the experiences of immigration and exile in architecture that will be applied to a case study of the Oberlander Ravine House. This case study will advance a formal analysis of the Bauhaus and West Coast Modernism features of the residence in order to elucidate further how the architectural elements of the house reveal traces of a conflicted attachment to their Central European roots resulting from exile, as well as an enthusiasm for their new environment on the West Coast due to their voluntary move to Vancouver.

**The Oberlanders as Students, Exiles, and Immigrants**

Cornelia and Peter Oberlander’s exposure to the design principles of the Bauhaus is very complex as they were introduced to them during their childhood years in post-imperial Germany and


Austria in the twenties as well as through their formal training at the Harvard School of Design. Peter was born in Vienna, Austria in 1922 and Cornelia was born in Mühlheim/Ruhr, Germany in 1921 and spent her early childhood in the suburbs of Berlin. The period of the Weimar Republic, out of which the Bauhaus emerged, was characterized by the flourishing of the arts and sciences within a newly formed democracy; it “marked a time when modern design and new materials heralded the emergence of a post-imperial society and a levelling of social inequalities”.22 When Cornelia was a young girl, her family showed interest in the activities of the Bauhaus School. Her mother attended dance performances at Dessau and her father, an engineer, had studied the Bauhaus’ prefabricated houses, the precursors of the Packaged House System developed by Walter Gropius and Konrad Wachsmann in the early 1940s for returning veterans in the United States in need of social housing.23 Though Peter Oberlander did not have direct contact with the Bauhaus’ ethos in Vienna in the same way Cornelia had in Germany, he did experience Weimar culture and would discover its principles of design while studying with Gropius during his years at Harvard.

In the 1930s, the Oberlanders fled their respective homelands as their families faced the threat of the rise of Nazism. In November of 1938, Cornelia fled Berlin by train with her mother and sister two weeks after Kristallnacht. They escaped with many of their family heirlooms and were able to ship their furniture, and settled in New Rochelle, New York in 1939. In 1940, Peter moved to England and was then deported to Canada and held in a series of internment camps as an “enemy alien” in Quebec for two years.24 When he was released, he moved to Montreal to earn

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22 Herrington, Making the Modern Landscape, 12.
23 Ibid., 2.
a Bachelor of Architecture at McGill University in 1945. He subsequently became the first Canadian to obtain a Master of City Planning degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) in 1947 and a Doctorate in Regional Planning in 1957. In 1945, Peter met Cornelia at Harvard while she was pursuing her graduate degree in Landscape Architecture. A year prior, Cornelia obtained her Bachelor of Arts at Smith College, where she majored in architecture and landscape architecture.

At this time, Walter Gropius, who had directed the Bauhaus from 1919-1928, was the chairman of the department at Harvard. During his tenure, Gropius implemented a modern curriculum, integrating elements of the Bauhaus philosophy including an introductory studio course modeled on the Bauhaus Vorkurs or Preliminary course. The course was compulsory for all incoming architecture and landscape architecture students and “stressed individual creativity and diversity of materials marshalled into the universal language of form” in order to provide the students with a “common language of visual communication”. According to Cornelia Oberlander’s biographer Susan Herrington, the studio class fostered “self-directed exploration through the manipulation of physical materials” based on the approach of the kindergarten and Froebel’s gifts. These approaches to design profoundly marked the Oberlanders and they applied them throughout their careers. As previously noted, Cornelia often produced geometric cardboard cutouts based on Froebel’s gifts to visualize her landscape plans. Their experience with the

26 Ibid., 25.
27 Ibid., 25.
28 The Froebel gifts are a set of educational materials invented in the 19th century by the founder of the kindergarten, Friedrich Froebel, designed to promote childhood development through creative play. The gifts are meant to be given to children in a specific order and include wooden building blocks and balls of yarn.
Bauhaus pedagogy and design features, though mostly directly at the GSD, influenced their work in Vancouver.

In 1953, the Oberlanders moved to Vancouver when Peter received a professorship at the newly founded School of Architecture at the University of British Columbia. At this time the seeds of the mid-century modern West Coast home had already been planted. B.C Binning and Fred Lasserre, two of the most prominent figures in the art and architecture community in Vancouver at the time, began championing the modernist aesthetic as early as the mid 1940s. As the Pacific Northwest or Canadian West Coast Modernism developed, it acquired recognizable characteristics, namely the aforementioned post-and-beam construction, usually composed of exposed timber structures and large expanses of windows strategically oriented toward the Strait of Georgia and the mountains. Local materials, such as cedar, were favoured to express clear and minimal lines and forms. The buildings featured open floor plans with minimal partitions and flat roofs with large overhangs to repel rain and the summer sun. The West Coast mid-century home was highly customizable and could be adapted to fit the needs of the particular families living in them. The Oberlanders became interested in this style and found it to be a stimulating iteration of modern design as well as a rewarding response to the modern needs of the developing city. The Oberlanders integrated elements of the Bauhaus style, most notably in their personal residence, the Ravine House (1970).

Banham and Bahr suggest that the architecture of immigrants in Los Angeles is more readily adaptive to the new environment and embraces regionalism whereas exile architecture expresses a fixation and a transfer of style elements from the architect’s homeland. By espousing elements of West Coast Modernism, the Oberlanders’ residential designs reflect the tendencies of immigrant architecture, however their adherence to the Bauhaus aesthetic is more in keeping with
their status as exiles. The Ravine House contains elements that integrate both aspects of the architect’s identity, West Coast Modernism of their new adoptive home and the Bauhaus features of their homeland. The structure of the house is expressed by a post-and-beam system, a typical feature of West Coast Modernism drawing upon northwest coastal First Nations architectural innovations. The careful integration of the house on the surrounding ravine reveals the ‘sensitive’ approach to the landscape that is characteristic of the mid-century modern architecture of the Canadian Pacific coast. The fact that the Oberlanders embraced the emerging regional architecture in the construction of the Ravine House as well as eventually becoming important figures in its development, I will argue, reveals the optimism that they felt and their desire to integrate into Vancouver due to their voluntarily immigration to the city.

However, the off-white smooth façade and cubic pavilions distinguish the Ravine House from the natural cedarwood finishings of modern residences on the West Coast in the post-war period. Its purity of form, flat roof and sharp right angles are reminiscent of the architectural features of the Bauhaus style. The post-and-beam structure of the Ravine House is organized according to the principles of modularity taught at the Bauhaus in Germany as well as by the school’s founders and its pupils in the United States. The Oberlander’s use of modular arrangements both in the architecture and landscape architecture of the residence is a manifestation of the rationality and high functionality promoted by Bauhaus teachings. The architectural features are relocated from their roots in Central Europe and integrated with elements of the nascent local aesthetic. This thesis will suggest that the addition of Bauhaus style elements by the Oberlanders in the construction of their residence reflects an attachment to their homeland.

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resulting from their forced dislocation from Berlin and Vienna due to rising pressures from the Nazi regime. The experiences of exile as well as their voluntary immigration to British Columbia for Peter Oberlander’s job opportunity at the University of British Columbia both can be detected in the features of the Ravine House.

**German-speaking Immigrant and Exile Architecture in Los Angeles, 1920s-1950s**

The joining of West Coast architecture and Bauhaus-inspired style elements is significant in that it complicates the distinction that is drawn between “immigrant” and “exile” architecture in the writings of Banham and Bahr. As architectural critics and historians, they maintain that the experiences of immigration and exile translate into architectural features but they consider them to be mutually exclusive. Both suggest that immigrants and exile architects in Los Angeles form two distinct groups with very different cultural production and that are at times at odds with each other. A case study of the Ravine House enables a productive query into this distinction within the framework of West Coast modern architecture, as well as the indigenous architectural tradition out of which its features were drawn, and its intersection with the Bauhaus style. The case study will provide insight into the complexity of the experiences of the exile and immigration, acknowledging that migrations are often intricate and involve multiple stopovers and varying degrees of volition. Though Banham and Bahr’s analyses are useful for distinguishing the differences in the cultural production of exiles and immigrants, their segregation of the two is limiting. By examining the Bauhaus and West Coast modern features of the Oberlander residence, for instance, I hope to problematize the distinction between exile and immigrant and uncover the context of the introduction of Bauhaus influences on post-war architecture in Vancouver.
Banham and Bahr’s definitions of “exile” and “immigrant” in their respective assessments of modernist architecture in Southern California focus on the ways that formal questions around architecture interfaced with the historical and subjective conditions of their designers. Indeed, Banham and Bahr’s definitions of these terms belong to the form of the buildings in addition to the discourses about the experiences and circumstances around the departures from their homelands that distinguish immigrants and exiles. They map these terms onto a discourse about architectural design and the built environment in Los Angeles, while at the same time acknowledging architectural historicity.

In this way, the texts provide insight into reading the signs of the experiences of exile and immigration in the architectural features of buildings. They offer a method for considering the stylistic elements of buildings that reveal voluntary or forced migration through their formal analysis in tandem with socio-historical accounts of the circumstances leading to the arrival of intellectual elites to Los Angeles before and after 1933. Banham and Bahr’s definitions of exile and immigration will therefore allow me to present the paradigm for my analysis of the post-war Vancouver by examining a similar context. The distinctions between the architecture emerging from migration in Los Angeles and Vancouver will serve to elucidate what seems to be the particularity of the Ravine House. In Banham and Bahr’s analyses, the architecture produced by exiles and immigrants in Los Angeles in the first half of the 20th century are necessarily independent and isolated from one another, glossing over the convolutions of these experiences.

Rhodri Windsor-Liscombe suggests that architecture from the “American Pacific coast exerted a powerful influence on the design community in Vancouver, not only because it was closer and more accessible than even Winnipeg, but also because its culture and climate were
more closely related to the conditions in postwar Vancouver". The proximity between Vancouver and the large American West Coast cities of Portland, Seattle and as far south as Los Angeles allowed for fruitful exchanges. For instance, in hopes of galvanizing modernist architectural and landscape design in Vancouver, B.C. Binning invited Richard Neutra, the Austrian-American architect and pioneer of California Modernism, to deliver a series of lectures in 1946 and 1953 at the UBC School of Architecture. Neutra’s steel frame residences with glazed window walls and plans which seemingly merged the interior space with the California landscape, the most famous of which is the Neutra VDL Studio (Fig.3) built in 1932, came to epitomize mid-century architecture in Los Angeles. In his talks, Neutra examined landscape design as an extension of architecture and emphasized the importance of site for West Coast architectural design and other regionalist themes. They inspired the architects in Vancouver to consider the interconnectedness of architecture and landscape, which would later become a cornerstone feature of the Northwest articulation of modernist architecture. Neutra promoted the idea that “the keynote of architecture has been a friendliness to the out-of-doors, a generous opening to the healthy agents and primarily aesthetic offerings of nature…Outside and inside become intimately interrelated. The modern house is a subtly proportioned but straight-forward construction, made to look like what it is: a composed piece of the many fine materials for frame

33 The Oberlanders conceived of a symbiotic relationship between architectural and landscape designs. They considered the building and landscape as a cohesive project and privileged a collaborative approach in order to achieve an architectural design solution influenced by the landscape.
and finishes—inspiring but its fitness [sic] to a new life”. The idea that the harmony between architecture and nature could enhance the way of life of its inhabitants resonated with the architects and landscape architects at UBC who were seeking to optimize the views of the Pacific Northwest landscape and adapt to climate and topographical variations of the area.

Reyner Banham, a British architectural critic and art historian, first posited the notion of “exile” architecture, in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* in 1971. Attracted to the Modernist style of Los Angeles, Banham examined the city’s urban and architectural development, which set out to propose an alternative to the historical monograph or the classical type of architectural gazetteers, such as David Gebhard and Robert Winter’s *Architecture in Southern California*. Though Banham recognizes his indebtedness to their clear and well-mapped study, he identifies one of its shortcomings, writing: “inhibited by the relatively conventional implicit definition of ‘architecture’ accepted by these open-minded observers; their spectrum includes neither hamburger bars and other Pop ephemerae at one extreme, nor freeway structures and other civil engineering at the other. However, both are as crucial to the human ecologies and built environments of Los Angeles”. Banham aimed, therefore, to present the topographical and historical context of the “total artifact” that constitutes Greater Los Angeles, including the range of Angelino architecture that would not usually be included in academic architectural inquiries but that are intrinsic to LA’s makeup. Banham’s analysis of the city’s sprawl was conducted at the same time as architect Robert Venturi’s study of the Las Vegas Strip which began in 1968 and was published in *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972. In his book, Venturi assessed the outgrowth of the strip, peppered with gambling casinos, hotel, churches and bars. The early 1970s were thus

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marked by an interest in the built environment of the American West as a new and particular context, or a comprehensible unity, which includes vernacular buildings and structures that are usually viewed as peripheral and are overlooked by architectural historians. In *The Four Ecologies*, Banham thus argues that Los Angeles has a comprehensible and consistent quality to its built form. He apprehends the city by presenting a model of four ecologies: the beach, the freeways, the flatlands, and the foothills, and documents the distinct architectural cultures proper to each of them.

However, in Banham’s analysis of the Plains of Id, which are the central flatlands in the valley that are populated by commercial streets and have a high residential density, Banham surveys European modern architecture in the area, where he begins to outline his understanding of exile architecture—a qualitatively different form. In chapter 9, *Architecture III: The Exiles*, Banham examines the rise of the International Style of architecture in Southern California as an importation from Europe by way of Schindler and Neutra—a style that would come to feature regionalist influence as well as what he refers to as an “angst” of European provenance. Banham only mentions the notion of angst in passing and does little to provide further explanation of what that means or where the traces can actually be identified in the architecture. Unlike the California pop vernacular architecture of hotdog stands that resemble hotdogs, exile architecture is seemingly more serious, or psychologically weighted.

Using the same terminology as Banham, in *Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism*, Erhard Bahr reconstructs the social history of the German-speaking immigrant and exile community in Los Angeles of the 1930s and 1940s and their contributions to modernism. Between 10,000 to 15,000 refugees settled in Southern California between 1933 and 1941 to escape persecution in Nazi-occupied Europe many of which
were German-speaking exiles from Central Europe.\textsuperscript{36} During this period, Los Angeles earned the
name “Weimar on the Pacific” after the German city associated with the Periclean age of cultural
production during the Weimar Republic and served as an “icon of intellectual and artistic
resistance to the Nazi regime”.\textsuperscript{37} Los Angeles became a cultural haven free from political and
racial persecution for German intellectuals, including Thomas Mann, Theodore W. Adorno,
Bertolt Brecht, Fritz Lang, as well as Austrian architects Richard Neutra and Rudolph M.
Schindler.

Bahr’s monograph presents a selective study of the cultural history of German-speaking
exiles living in Los Angeles through an analysis of their cultural production, which is how the
community was and continues to be defined.\textsuperscript{38} Bahr acknowledges the gaps in our knowledge
about Weimar on the Pacific as the historical records are limited to the cultural elite of the
community.\textsuperscript{39} Bahr’s analysis of the Germanic exile community focuses on the crisis of
modernism and the various responses to it in film, music, art, literature, theatre and architecture.

According to Bahr, the crisis of modernism for the exiles is characterized by the
reinterpretation of the meaning of Modernism following the atrocities of the Second World War,
and more particularly the collapse of the Weimar Republic as they felt their creative works had
failed them. The exiles in Los Angeles questioned the viability of modernism and apprehended the
changes that could be made to prevent it from becoming reactionary and to help them to a gain a
better understanding of the catastrophes of the war and their future artistic missions. Some
believed that “conservatism, a return to established values and techniques was necessary. Others

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\textsuperscript{36} Bahr, \textit{Weimar on the Pacific}, 3.  \\
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 6.  \\
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 4.  \\
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 5.  
\end{flushleft}
tried to reconstitute modernism and give it a new meaning and function”.  

*Weimar on the Pacific* focuses on the solutions proposed to this crisis by the exiles that settled in Los Angeles in the 1930s and 1940s and examines the variety of responses and solutions proposed by exile modernism. More importantly, for this study, Bahr provides a distinction between the exiles and immigrants in Los Angeles that he detects in the differences in their cultural production.

In the book’s sixth chapter, titled “California Modern as Immigrant Modernism”, Bahr contrasts immigrant and exile architecture in Los Angeles. He provides a portrait of the immigrant modernism of Richard Neutra and Rudolph M. Schindler, two Austro-American Jewish architects, in order to understand exile modern architecture and German exile culture *ex negativo.*  

Bahr thus defines exile modernism by what it is not. He contrasts the terms immigrant and exile by considering a biographical sketch of the architects including their motivations for migrating to Los Angeles and their experiences in their new homeland. Based on this contextual analysis, Bahr addresses the differences in the architectural features of Neutra and Schindler’s designs.

He posits that the fact that they left Central Europe voluntarily before the war to seek job opportunities in contrast to the compulsive exodus that the exiles faced had a significant impact on their work. He suggests that the immigrants expressed a desire to be American and intentionally distanced themselves from the community of exiles that arrived later on in the 1930s and 1940s. They viewed the potential of the West Coast differently than the exiles who viewed Los Angeles as an ‘opportunity to for Weimar culture not only to re-establish its identity in exile, but to fulfill its promise’ and sought to reconstitute German modernist architecture. The exiles witnessed the suppression of modernism leading up to and during the war, resulting in the sense that it’s

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40 Ibid., 21.  
41 Ibid., 148.  
42 Ibid., 19.
potential was never realized. When they arrived in Los Angeles, they thought it could serve as fertile ground for its restoration due to the large German-speaking community and a lack of established cultural infrastructure. As California represented a land of opportunity for the individuals that migrated willingly, they more readily embraced assimilation. Bahr suggests that this is visible in Neutra and Schindler’s innovative and “adaptive” architectural expression that became known as California Modernism. Bahr’s approach to California Modernism is to examine its key features through very brief formal analyses of the Schindler House (1922) designed by Schindler to serve as a studio and home for himself, his wife and Richard and Dionne Neutra, the Lovell House (1927-1929) and various other projects. He develops the association of California Modernism and immigration with a reading of the architectural elements that he suggests reflect the aspiration toward adaptability, which he distinguishes as a distinctive attribute of the designs produced as a result of their voluntary settlement on the American West Coast.

In *Weimar on the Pacific*, Bahr’s purpose is to understand the architectural designs of the German-speaking community on the West Coast. His methodology consists of an investigation of immigrant Modernism and case studies of Richard Neutra and Rudolph M. Schindler’s signature examples of Southern California modernism that he examines in order to negatively define exile modernism. Bahr turns to an assessment of the architectural responses of the immigrants to highlight the successful acclimatization and optimism that distinguishes them from the exiles’ struggles with their new surroundings. Though their European background placed the immigrants in proximity to exiles, the dissimilarities in their experiences were so significant that they formed distinct communities and their interactions were occasionally prickly. Bahr cites Neutra’s wife

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43 Ibid., 168.
Dionne expressed criticism about the exiles of the 1940s “for wanting to go back to Europe and finding fault with everything in the United States. For this reason, she maintained, the Neutras did not cultivate contact with the exile community”. Dionne Neutra’s reservations are significant because they reflect the disparate attitudes that both groups had for Europe and the United States.

Neutra and Schindler were students of early architectural modernism in Austria at the Vienna University of Technology and the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts (Wagnerschule) and were trained under the early modernists Otto Wagner and Adolf Loos, the latter of whom famously objected to the use of ornament in design, instead privileging simple forms.\(^45\) Similarly interested in the logic of “simplicity” and “purity”, Neutra and Schindler would become credited with introducing a particular style of architecture in Southern California influenced by the rise of the International Style, which emerged in Europe in the 1920s.\(^46\) The main tenet of the International Style, namely that the “aesthetic of openness and efficiency”, was developed most notably by Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier.\(^47\) Neutra and Schindler both moved to Los Angeles in the early 1920s, almost a decade before the arrival of the first exiles. Schindler was hired to work for Frank Lloyd Wright to supervise his projects. Neutra joined Schindler in Los Angeles soon after receiving an invitation from Wright in 1925. Bahr therefore refers to Neutra and Schindler as immigrants, in contrast with the exiles who escaped Nazi Germany and German-occupied Austria for America in the 1930s and 1940s resulting in a

different reaction to the crisis of modernism. Neutra and Schindler were not exiles because they didn’t endure the expulsion from their homeland but rather left Austria out of preference. Bahr suggest that this, as well as the fact that they “witnessed the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the Austrian Republic from the West Coast” causing the divide between both groups. Though they shared a European, and German-speaking, background, the differences in their experiences had a significant impact on their cultural production. The exiles exhibited a greater level of attachment to their cultural heritage, whereas the willingness of the immigrants to choose a new home in the United States translated into a language of modernism that was specifically Californian in character.

Bahr suggests that Neutra and Schindler’s voluntary immigration to Los Angeles had a profound influence on their designs. While the exiles remained concerned with the European context, they embraced the culture of Southern California. Like many Jewish German immigrants, Neutra and Schindler were interested in swift assimilation. They were inspired by their new environment and experimented with regionalist architecture and developed California Modernism, characterized by reinforced concrete structures which liberated load bearing façades and allowed for glass walls, open floor plans and living patios. They were interested in developing a local idiom offering design solutions for the particularities of the California landscape. Schindler asserted “my early realization that a house is not an international but a local product meant for local use, lead [sic] toward the exploration of the character of California. Therefore I abandoned the modernism imported from Europe and tried to develop a contemporary expression of

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49 Ibid., 148.
50 Ibid., 4.
California”.\textsuperscript{51} This quote is notable because it reveals Schindler’s resolve to part with his European training and influences in favour of a distinctive Southern California style. It highlights the optimistic outlook that Schindler had and the potential he identified in California to foster a stimulating local design language. It also demonstrates his desire to part with the influence and history of his training and its stylistic elements in favour of drawing upon local traditions.

According to Bahr, their experiences as immigrants rather than exiles translated into a desire to customize their designs to their new homeland by incorporating local materials and the look of “native” forms. For instance, the Strathmore Apartments (Fig.4), an 8-unit multi-family complex designed in 1937 by Neutra fused the style principles of the megastructures (Fig.5) of the Puebloan peoples native to the Southwest and the bungalow courts of Southern California.\textsuperscript{52} Neutra and Schindler also turned to American architects such as Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright for inspiration, “the legacy of both Schindler and Neutra was that they were trying to meet the character of the locale when they built new houses in Southern California”. He suggests that “they did not impose their European concepts of modernism upon their new environment, but instead adapted their style to Los Angeles”.\textsuperscript{53} They were intrigued by Frank Lloyd Wright’s burgeoning projects in Southern California marked by “a Mayan-inspired aesthetic based on his newly invented system of precast concrete blocks molded with his own geometric design”.\textsuperscript{54} This contact with Wright’s projects gave Neutra and Schindler a taste for regionalism and drove them to cultivate the California Modern style. This account is, of course, problematic because Bahr refers to Sullivan and Wright as “indigenous talents” when they were in fact settlers appropriating

\textsuperscript{52}Bahr, \textit{Weimar on the Pacific}, 155. \\
\textsuperscript{53}Ibid.,168. \\
\textsuperscript{54}Kaplan, \textit{California Design}, 64.}
the “look” of “native” forms. Neutra and Schindler may have drawn upon architecture that is native to the area broadly speaking in the case of the Puebloan homes and a heavily abstracted version of Mayan architecture in Wright’s projects, however it is inaccurate to say that they did not introduce European influences in their designs. The materials used such as steel and glass and the processes of building, most notably prefabrication, were introduced by settlers at different moments in time. Bahr thus blurs the distinction between the architecture of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and that of settlers such as Sullivan and Wright, by referring to both as “indigenous”. What Bahr seems to be suggesting when he states that Neutra and rejected European influence is, as previously noted, their Central European heritage and its architectural expression instead in favour of designs that “could never have been built anywhere except California”.

California Modern architecture is marked by openness, transparency and a blurring of the boundaries between indoor and outdoor spaces. The homes are often cantilevered off of steep sites and feature characteristic clean lines and continuous ribbons of window. They were constructed in a variety of materials including concrete, glass, white stucco and industrial materials such as the steel used for the frame of the house. Schindler was also known for designing custom furniture made of local redwoods for his projects. Schindler and Neutra’s designs encouraged a sense of harmony between the architecture and the natural setting: “despite [the] use of massive concrete slab walls […] [they] managed—through the imposition of a series of wood-framed sliding doors and outdoor “rooms” complete with fireplaces—to erode the barrier between inside and out”.

56 Ibid., 64.
The residences were constructed to take advantage of the full potential of the landscape and the panoramic vistas.

The use of local materials and the integration of the homes into the Southern California landscape reveal efforts to promote a kind of regionalism. Another example is the reference to car culture in California by way of streamlining. According to Wendy Kaplan, streamlining arose out of research in aviation and ballistics and sought to produce aerodynamic shapes. She suggests that the smooth streamline forms are visual representations that evoke the city’s automobile culture. An example of streamlining in California Modern architecture is Neutra’s Von Sternberg House (Fig. 6) in which Neutra included a streamlined curving aluminum wall to partition the patio from the living room.\(^{57}\) The appreciation for the California landscape and nods to local culture that figure in Neutra and Schindler’s work celebration of contemporary California lifestyle and reveal their optimistic attitudes toward their new home. Though Bahr does not expressly discuss streamlining, he does evoke the idea of “machine modernism”, a sterile filigree steel frame and glass construction.\(^{58}\) The discussion of regional idioms in which glass and steel “machines” either in the form of streamlining evocative of contemporary car culture or the idea houses as machines for living are collapsed with the look of Pueblo or Mayan forms as “native” influences which is really problematic because settler and indigenous cultures are viewed as one and the same. This separation will also be significant when considering the post-war context in Vancouver where indigenous architecture and the post-and-beam structures characteristic of West Coast Modernism developed by settlers are seldom viewed as products of distinct cultures.


\(^{58}\) Bahr, Weimar on the Pacific, 157.
In many ways, Bahr’s argument that these architects expressed an “immigrant” ethos presents a compelling approach for reading the experience in the features of their architectural designs, though there are limits to his assessment including his brief descriptions of the architecture, which is treated with broad strokes and the use of the term “exile”, which is applied with little support. To frame his distinction between the terms immigrant and exile, Bahr references a particular poem by Bertolt Brecht, Concerning the Label Emigrant, in which he rejects the emigrant nomenclature. Forced out of Germany in 1933 when Hitler came to power, Brecht sought refuge in many European capitals including Paris, Zurich and Prague. But as the German military occupation expanded he was obliged to leave for Los Angeles in 1941, where there was a significant German speaking community and Weimar culture was already beginning to flourish. In this poem, Brecht renounces the term emigrant that was used to describe German exiles and because by definition emigration implies a decision to leave one’s country and thus a degree of freedom and choice. He writes:

we Did not
leave, of our own free will
Choosing another land. Nor did we enter
Into a land, to stay there, if possible for ever.
Merely, we fled. We are driven, banned.
Not a home, but an exile, shall the land be that took us in
(Poems 301; GBA 12:81)

Brecht’s verses in “Concerning the Label Emigrant” emphasize the feelings of estrangement and lack of agency that result from the expulsion from one’s country. Bahr cites Brecht’s poem to help him define ‘exile’ and differentiate it from the term emigrant (or immigrant). It serves to highlight the exiles’ experiences of coerced migration as well as their attachment to their homeland and

feelings of alienation and lack of connection to the West Coast. The two last lines of the poem make it clear that they were expelled from Europe and that for this reason Los Angeles is not and never will be their home, but a surrogate land. The poem allows Bahr to support his claim that “most of the exiles had their eyes focus on Europe [while the immigrants] contributed to the building of modern California”. 60 According to Bahr, while Neutra and Schindler were pioneering an avant-garde regionalist architectural aesthetic, the exiles were producing conservative and nostalgic architecture, which will be examined later on.

Brecht’s poem suggests that one significant difference between exiles and immigrants is in their relations to land, both homeland and receiving land. However, Bahr does not provide an analysis of the poem and it remains unclear how the connection to land operates for both groups and how it in turn affects their cultural production. This is significant because it also reveals how little Bahr pays attention to the formal and stylistic dimensions of architecture when formulating his argument. Though his purpose is to examine the differences between exile and immigrant architecture, he provides little analysis of the architectural features that would allow him to investigate and unpack these distinctions. Nevertheless, Banham’s and Bahr’s method, as I’ve suggested, are helpful to consider the relationship between architecture, the land, and its inhabitants that is specific to West Coast modernist ideals.

It is useful, for a moment, to consider Edward Said’s Reflections on Exile, to clarify the connection between forced displacement and the resulting approach to land, which is a central part of the discourse on exile and that is not elaborated upon in either Banham or Bahr’s writing. According to Said, exiles are denied their identity when they are uprooted or “torn from the

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60 Bahr. Weimar on the Pacific, 169.
nourishment of tradition, family and geography”. 61 It is difficult for the exiles to feel at home in the country (or land) that took them in because their connection to their homeland was forcibly arrested. Their alienation from land is twofold, as they feel dissociated from their homeland and their new context. Said evokes this point in his essay when he writes that “the pathos of exile is the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question”. 62 This homecoming could be interpreted in the sense of returning to the homeland or establishing one’s home in their surrogate country. This sudden severance with the land is significant because they are cut off from their roots, the source that sustains their identity, leading them to a “discontinuous state of being”. 63 Consequently, Said suggests that “the unhealed rift forced between a human being and a native place, between itself and true home” translates into an urgent need to reassemble and salvage the pieces of their shattered history and to attempt to rebuild their identity, their sense of belonging and to maintain a connection with their past. 64 This impulse manifests in their desire to connect with other exiles in order to reconstruct their collective experience. It is also articulated in their creative endeavours. Said suggests that the perpetual state of loss and estrangement acts as the fuel for artistic expression that serves to nourish their national identity and preserve their dignity. 65 The exiles cultivate a sense of belonging through art marked by varying degrees of nationalism, thus bringing with them the ethos and aesthetic of their heritage. Said’s analysis of the intersection of identity and land, as well as the effects of dislocation on cultural production, sheds light on the connection between displacement and the melancholy longing that Bahr identifies in the architecture produced by the

62 Ibid., 142.
63 Ibid., 142.
64 Ibid., 137.
65 Ibid., 138.
German-speaking exiles in Los Angeles\textsuperscript{66}. It serves to clarify the exile’s reluctance to establish roots, which Bahr’s account fails to explain.

In attempting to gain an understanding of German-speaking exile culture in Los Angeles, Bahr’s methodology is, an examination of exile architecture \textit{ex negativo}, meaning that he defines the term by considering it’s negation, or what it is not, which in this case is what it is being contrasted with. He thus defines exile architecture via an analysis of immigrant architecture. Though an examination of the designs of Central European immigrants, he provides little information about the architecture produced by the exiles, with the exception of a discussion of Thomas Mann’s house built in Pacific Palisades in 1941 by JR Davidson (Fig. 7). Davidson immigrated voluntary to Los Angeles in 1923 to undertake work for Robert D. Faquhar. However, Mann, an exile according to Bahr’s definition, commissioned the house and heavily directed its style. Mann disliked Neutra’s avant-garde modernism to the point of recording his disdain in his diary. \textsuperscript{67} He wanted something more conservative and opted for a stucco and glass house that Davidson described as “nostalgic German”, or a \textit{gemütlich} (a word that denotes comfort but also implies a petit-bourgeois, unrefined sensibility) “spin on the modern”.\textsuperscript{68} The Mann house thus seems to reveal a yearning for his roots and an attempt at a restoration of German culture on the Pacific. Mann’s experience as an exile appears to be in his choice of a more conservative style contrasting sharply with Neutra and Schindler’s “modernism that was decidedly avant-garde and optimistic”\textsuperscript{69}.

\textsuperscript{66} Bahr, \textit{Weimar on the Pacific}, 165.
\textsuperscript{67} Bahr, \textit{Weimar on the Pacific}, 157.
\textsuperscript{69} Bahr, \textit{Weimar on the Pacific}, 171.
However, the dichotomy that Bahr creates between the exiles and immigrants and their architectural designs seems simplistic given the complexity of the experiences of exile and immigration. This is hinted at when Bahr introduces Reyner Banham’s seminal work *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* in which he stated that though their designs were “Californiated”, Neutra and Schindler’s building nevertheless contain the “nervous feeling of creative angst” of European modernism. This undermines Bahr’s categorization that immigrants necessarily display enthusiasm toward their new environment whereas exiles are afflicted by estrangement and nostalgia. Bahr writes that Banham “claimed to detect” creative angst in their designs. This use of language and the fact that Bahr never mentions any negative associations when describing Neutra and Schindler’s experience of Los Angeles implies he does not agree with Banham’s view. However, Banham’s statement introduces a nuanced position that attributes a broader range of feelings to the immigrants and complicates Bahr’s dichotomy.

Though forced and voluntary migration produce different effects, they cannot simply be categorized as simply as Bahr asserts in *Weimar on the Pacific*, or Banham does in his study of Los Angeles. For instance, though Cornelia and Peter Oberlander were exiles, they also eagerly moved to Vancouver. They carried with them the weight of their dislocation while simultaneously embracing the West Coast landscape, cultures and emerging regional architectural style. These experiences could be read in the architectural features of the Oberlander’s second residence in Vancouver, the Ravine House. The marriage of Bauhaus and West Coast Modernism elements reveal the intricacies of their histories and highlight the diversity of migratory experience, which is further complicated by its location on Coast Salish territory as it draws upon indigenous architectural traditions and their settler appropriations. The form of the building and the
organization of the landscape reveal traces of their experiences of exile from Austria and Germany as well as their voluntary immigration to Vancouver.

Case Study of the Oberlander Ravine House

The Oberlanders relocated to the West Coast when Peter was offered a teaching position at the University of British Columbia’s School of Architecture in 1953. During the postwar years, Vancouver underwent a period of significant transformation. Returning veterans and new waves of immigration prompted a need for affordable housing, improved transportation systems, civic spaces and infrastructure.\(^{70}\) Between 1940 and 1970, Vancouver required forty-five thousand new housing units to accommodate the city’s growing population.\(^{71}\) The Oberlanders embraced the opportunity to participate in the shaping of the city by offering design solutions for its social and economic expansion.

Their decision to move to Vancouver was timely as Cornelia suggested, “Vancouver was a tiny town, with no theatre, no great art gallery, and only two high-rises… I was able to conquer new ground. In the east, I would have never been able to do that”.\(^{72}\) The idea of Vancouver as a \textit{tabula rasa} as well as the language of conquest employed in this passage overlooks the fact that the city sits on the unceded land of the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations as well its history of attempted dispossession\(^{73}\). The landscape and the idea of an architecture “indigenous to British Columbia”\(^{74}\)


\(^{71}\) Herrington, \textit{Making the Modern Landscape}, 57.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 57.

\(^{73}\) It is important to note here that Oberlander is referring to the “conquest” of what she saw as outdated and irrelevant traditional ways of building by modernism. Not that she wanted to conquer the First Nations communities. To the contrary, she very much admires and respects the Indigenous cultures on the West
is central to West Coast Modernism and its discourse, however, the traditional use and occupancy of this land and First Nations land claims are seldom mentioned in the literature. This inadvertence to the land as cultural center of the Coast Salish peoples will be significant in the assessment of the form of the Oberlander residence, which employs an abstracted version of the post-and-beam structure, a traditional Coast Salish method of construction. It undermines the cultural sovereignty of the First Nations peoples, which have inhabited the land since time immemorial, and seemingly frames their cultural production as part of the landscape that could be seamlessly incorporated into West Coast Modernism.

The Oberlanders were stimulated by their new locale and they sought to explore the character of the Pacific Northwest Coast. They were interested in participating in the development of the emerging local idiom,\textsuperscript{75} West Coast Modernism, as well as the Indigenous architecture that it cited. The nascent vernacular promoted sensitive buildings that responded “directly and imaginatively to the omnipresent landscape and weather: the dense, lush and majestic Northwest coast forest fringing the constantly changing waters of the Strait of Georgia, the high rainfall, the remarkably luminous grey light-all encompassed by the sublime profile of the Coastal Mountains”.\textsuperscript{76} The Oberlanders embraced this approach in the Ravine House by prioritizing the natural topography of the site, integrating the building structure with the natural environment as well as maximizing the picturesque views.

\textsuperscript{74} Bellerby, \textit{The West Coast Modern House}, 11.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{76} Windsor-Liscombe, \textit{The New Spirit}, 45.
The Oberlander’s second residence in Vancouver is located on a densely forested plot on
the University Endowment Lands measuring 100 feet in width and 300 feet long.\textsuperscript{77} The house sits on the narrow edge of the site above a steeply sloping ravine. The nearly vertical grade and the “sensitive ecology” of the property posed significant challenges for residential development and originally deterred construction.\textsuperscript{78} A competition was held by the UEL in 1968 for the submission of design proposals for a house that would preserve the erosion-prone ravine and its surrounding trees. The Oberlanders collaborated with Barry Downs and conceived of an elevated structure with a light tread on the site, minimizing its disruption and were awarded the site for the construction of their project which was completed on 29 July, 1970.\textsuperscript{79}

They suspended the building on pilotis, sets of vertical concrete pillars above the ravine and “deep-set, forty-two-inch-wide round reinforced concrete footings under the building’s highest piers [were] secured into the bank with long grade beams”.\textsuperscript{80} The reinforced concrete grade beams bridge the pilotis, connecting them to one another as well as to the hillside. The pilotis support the horizontal “trays” of living space woven around a two-level central circulation spine.\textsuperscript{81} The suspended structure freed up the space that would otherwise be used for the dug foundation and allowed for native shrubbery to grow beneath it. The construction of the house generated zero soil import or export and thus adapted to the existing, albeit rugged, conditions of the site. In his writings on the Ravine House and his second collaboration with the Oberlanders, Barry Downs suggested that the ravine was the driving force for the design, “from the beginning

\textsuperscript{77} Downs, \textit{An Architectural Collaborative}, 27.
\textsuperscript{78} Herrington, \textit{Making the Modern Landscape}, 74.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{80} Downs, \textit{Melding Architecture with Landscape}, 12.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 12.
of design, our site dictated the approach we were to take”. Their imaginative concept drew inspiration from the site for the elaboration of its structural elements, thus connecting the residence to its surroundings. One of the rewards of this approach is the commanding view of the lush ravine that the floating structure provided.

The design for the Ravine House also responds to the aesthetic qualities of its natural surroundings through the extensive use of glass. The walls facing the ravine are almost entirely glazed and capture the vistas of the rainforest in the back yard (Fig.8) featuring firs, western maples, alder and native shrubbery. Large south-facing ribbon windows grant views of the three gardens designed by Cornelia composed of planted and wild areas that frame the house, “an upper garden, once a thriving orchard, has been enveloped by a meadow of wildflowers that are clipped only once a year. Finally, at the edge of the forest, rhododendrons, some twenty-five feet tall, meld with native woodland trees” This points to another way in which Cornelia addressed the topography and the ecology of the site mindfully. She preserved the landscape’s natural features through a very light-handed approach guided by the site. She privileged low maintenance plants native to the area through a process she refers to as “wilding”, meaning planting only what you see or working with the naturally occurring flora. The windows draw natural light into the living space and onto the white walls, which serve as a canvas for the play of light and the shadows of foliage, providing texture to the space. The interior of the house responds to the seasonal changes and the rhythms of the day, effects that are accentuated by the presence of an overhead skylight that traverses the house. The light flows dynamically through the house because of the open floor

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82 Ibid., 12.
83 Downs, An Architectural Collaborative, 27.
84 Downs, Melding Architecture with Landscape, 14.
85 Cornelia Oberlander, e-mail message to author, July 2015.
plan and connected galleries. While the windows invite the outdoors into the house they also give
the illusion that the living quarters extend outward among the trees. The distinction is blurred
between the interior and exterior spaces, a key feature of West Coast Modernism.

The use of floor-to-ceiling glass windows in the house is enabled by its post-and-beam
structure.\(^{86}\) The use of vertical wood clad piers and horizontal spandrel, creating a frame to
support the glazing,\(^{87}\) frees the walls from their load-bearing function and so its skeletal form
produces the illusion of a lightweight, even weightless, structure. Mid-century modern architects
on the West Coast used post-and-beam structures for their designs. The availability of locally
sourced cedar facilitated their experimentations with timber frames. The post-and-beam method of
construction allowed them to build on the precipices of West Vancouver and Point Grey as it gave
architects the flexibility to build on the steep and rocky slopes because it only required shallow
footings rather than a dug foundation. The post-and-beam system also allowed the structures to be
cantilevered over the hillsides and secured with piers. Optimal use of the site was achieved by
“stepping building levels down the slope”.\(^{88}\) Arthur Erickson designed Graham House (1962) and
Gordon Smith’s current residence (1964), both located in West Vancouver using this technique
(Fig. 9).

Though architects in Vancouver in the post-war period privileged post-and-beam
structures to articulate the design of the house according to its site specificity, they were first
introduced in the area by the Coast Salish nations in the building of plank houses and longhouses.
The plank house is a residential dwelling composed of a post and beam system encased in long
horizontal planks of cedar, a weather resistant and sturdy material found in abundance on the

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\(^{86}\) Bellerby, The West Coast Modern House, 32.
\(^{87}\) Downs, Melding Architecture with Landscape, 12.
\(^{88}\) Bellerby, The West Coast Modern House, 32.
Northwest Coast lashed to with cedar bark ropes, and a slanted mono-pitched roof. The structure of a Salish house consists of “two rows of posts, 2-3 feet wide and 6-8 inches thick. These posts were placed 12-14 feet apart, with the shorter ones at the rear of the house”. They are used in the construction of longhouses to accommodate the elaborate ceremonial events of potlatches including feasting, dancing and gift-giving. Moreover, they express the social standing of their owners through painted façades, screens, and carved posts featuring totemic imagery. This history and symbolism is estranged from modernist post-and-beam structures that forgo ornamentation in favour of minimalism to increase harmony with the landscape.

They embraced simplicity and privileged natural materials as well as large expanses of glass, allowing for nature to become the ornament. The texture and grain of the cedar wood, the reflection of the landscape in the glazing as well as the shadow light and shadow play on the interior walls are examples of the ornamental quality of nature’s offerings in West Coast modern architecture. The inclination toward “simplicity, truth to materials, and harmony with nature” serves to further accentuate the relationship between the structures and their site and draws its influence from a western understanding of Japanese aesthetic as well as Frank Lloyd Wright’s principles of organic modernism. B.C. Binning and Arthur Erickson, the founding figures of West Coast Modernism traveled extensively through Japan and were drawn to wabi-sabi, an
elusive concept in traditional Japanese aesthetics embracing the flux and imperfection of the natural world.\textsuperscript{94}

They introduced the characteristics of wabi-sabi including simplicity, rusticity, asymmetry as well as a dedication to the integrity of earthy materials into the architecture and landscapes of Vancouver.\textsuperscript{95} Arthur Erickson’s house and gardens, where he lived from 1957 until his death his 2009 and conceived of his notable projects including Simon Fraser University and the Museum of Anthropology, features wabi-sabi elements. The unassuming house is situated in a dense garden overgrown with bamboo, zebra grass and local arbutus trees lining a pond with a concrete moon-viewing platform, merging “the rough and the smooth, the wild and the refined”.\textsuperscript{96} The Oberlander residence also incorporates elements of the Japanese aesthetic such as a stepping stone path leading to the house, a reflecting pool and pivoting wooden front door. The contrast between the unrestrained growth of the ravine and the smooth glazed façade is suggestive of the wabi-sabi contradistinction.

The lack of architectural ornamentation and the use of local materials in the construction of the West Coast modern house was also a response to Frank Lloyd Wright’s principles of organic modernism.\textsuperscript{97} The design ethos integrated Wright’s approach, rooted in the belief that a “building should serve as a foil to nature, and nature should serve a building as ornament”,\textsuperscript{98} namely that the particularities of the regional climate and topography operate as the driving forces

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{97} Bellerby, \textit{The West Coast Modern Home}, 13.
\textsuperscript{98} Hoffman, \textit{Frank Lloyd Wright}, 19.
for modern architectural design. Organic modernism promotes the connection between the structure and the site, as well as the harmony between the built and natural environment by conceiving of them as a unified composition.\textsuperscript{99} The patterns and textures of the natural material palette used in construction of the mid-century post-and-beam house are privileged over the totemic imagery that customarily adorns Coast Salish structures. West Coast Modernism draws upon an abstracted version of the indigenous vernacular by adapting it with the inclusion of the “modern design vocabulary”.\textsuperscript{100} Though the form remains recognizably post-and-beam, with wooden vertical piers and horizontal spandrels creating a skeletal frame to support the glazed walls, it is distilled from its original appearance. The lack of references and glosses over the cultural significance that plank and longhouses hold for Coast Salish peoples, an issue which will be returned to and elucidated further on.

Though the post-and-beam form adopted in the design of the Oberlander residence is a regional expression, the house is also organized according to the Bauhaus principles of design imported by way of the Oberlanders’ training at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GDS) in addition to their Central European roots. The house is composed of highly functional spaces accommodated by cubic pavilions ordered in a modular arrangement. The tenets of the Bauhaus School in Germany as well the Bauhaus leaning curriculum implemented by Walter Gropius at the GSD, where he was appointed chair of the Department of Architecture in 1938, were galvanized


\textsuperscript{100} Herrington, Making the Modern Landscape, 4.
and integrated into a new locale and the developing architectural style on the Canadian West Coast. The emphasis on structural function was central to the conception of the house.¹⁰¹

At the GSD, the Oberlanders were introduced to the theories and practices of social housing, a “cornerstone of Bauhaus ideology”.¹⁰² During the Gropius era, the curriculum emphasized the issues of low-cost housing and explored functional designs and the potential of prefabrication to improve life of the working class. Martin Wagner, the architect responsible for directing the modernist housing projects in Berlin in the 1920s, also began teaching at Harvard in 1938 and offered design courses in which students were assigned to design public residential units marked by economy, flexibility and utility.¹⁰³ The functional approach to housing was prompted by social ends such as the conviction that standardization would lead to more affordable housing. The uniformity granted by systems of prefabrication reduces costs due to the simplified building methods and the use of industrially processed standardized parts.¹⁰⁴ In addition, it offers flexibility ensuring that homes could be arranged to suit the needs of each specific family. One way in which the standardization and the systematic arrangement of functional space is achieved is by way of modules, separate units of building which can be connected together to form an integrated whole. The module allows for infinite arrangements or, according to Gropius, seemingly paradoxically yields “maximum standardization and maximum variety”.¹⁰⁵ The modules vary in dimensions and provide a multiplicity of assembly options.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 167.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 30.
At the GSD, Peter Oberlander obtained his Master of Urban Planning and his Ph.D in Urban and Regional Planning. Many of his notable undertakings were large-scale urbanization projects including the planning of Kitimat, B.C., in which subsidized housing played an important role. He incorporated elements of functionality that he implemented in his planning into the private residences he designed for his family. The “finely modulated field” of the planning grid influenced the spatial organization the Ravine House as well as their first house on the University Endowment Lands, the Tic-Tac-Toe House (1958) subdivided into nine square modules organized in a pattern according to the grid of its namesake.\(^{106}\)

Oberlander also employed space modulation in the Ravine House in order to create zones of purposeful space while maintaining spatial fluidity. Barry Downs, whose firm collaborated on the project, describes “like the exploratory ‘space modulators’ of our Bauhaus training, we wove functional rooms, open spaces, terraces and connecting bridges through and around a defined central spine”.\(^{107}\) The centrality of the module for the Bauhaus as well as its interest in geometric massing has roots in Cubism, Constructivism and De Stijl, though the tracing of this genealogy is beyond the scope of this paper.\(^{108}\) The purity of the geometric form put forth by these movements is observable in the “the planar interpenetrations and projections, cuts and grand openings”\(^{109}\) that make up the modules of the house (Fig.10).

Downs cites Theo van Doesburg’s drawings of the interaction between horizontal and vertical planes such as *Colour design for ceiling and three walls, Small Ballroom, Conversion of l’Aubetter Interior* (1926/27) as the influence for the planar arrangements. Van Doesburg’s

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\(^{107}\) Barry Downs, notes, 27.

\(^{108}\) Meeting between Barry Downs and the author, July 2016.

\(^{109}\) Barry Downs, notes, 27.
architectural drawings depict planer surfaces hovering over one, creating a dynamic space (Fig.11). This interstice between the planes makes the space appear like it is expanding and interacting with the exterior environment. The composition of the walls by perpendicular seemingly floating planes that capture the light from the skylight above (Fig.12). The planar cuts and the modular organization of the Ravine House draw in the natural environment, unifying the building with the landscape and are thus complementary to goals of West Coast Modernism.

The Bauhaus methodology also influenced the conception of the design plans for the landscape of the residence. Cornelia’s approach to design was deeply marked by the Basic Design course taught at the GSD, a foundational studio course for incoming students that sought to foster investigative engagement with materials and forms. It was introduced by Marcel Brauer, a graduate and teacher at the department of architecture at the Bauhaus, when he joined the faculty at Harvard in 1938. The Basic Design course followed the tradition of the Bauhaus Vorkurs, a compulsory course forming the cornerstone of the basic curriculum, introducing the basic principles of design as well as the properties of materials and methods for their “the creative and economic handling”.

The Vorkurs was rooted in Froebel’s ideas of creative investigation. Friedrich Froebel, a German pedagogue credited with the creation of Kindergarten, was interested in “self-directed exploration through the manipulation of physical materials, and the discovery of visual patterns.


111 The colours in the foyer are also notable as they are from the primary colour palette favoured by van Doesburg as well as the Bauhaus. The walls are painted white with the exception of the bright yellow accent wall upon which the staircase rests (Fig.13). In addition, on clear days, the skylight provides the illusion of a blue ceiling.

112 Magdalena Droste, Bauhaus 1919-1933 (Cologne: Taschen, 2002), 14.
The Vorkurs’ elementary study of form and promotion of creative recreation and instinctive construction with shapes echoed the objectives of Froebel’s gifts, an educational toy popularized in Central Europe at the turn of the century. The gifts are made of various types of material (Spielgabe), including balls of yarn, wooden objects such as spheres and blocks, as well as clay (Fig.14). They are presented to children in a certain order in order to promote early childhood development through imaginative play.

Cornelia Oberlander was also familiar with the benefits of a Froebel method of instruction in her youth in Weimar Germany. Her mother, Beate Hahn was a professional horticulturist with an interest in the educational benefits of gardening for children. She published books on the subject including, *Hurra, wir säen und ernten!* (Hooray, we sow and harvest!) in 1935, to which Cornelia attributed her approach to drawing garden plans. Beate Hahn studied the role of the garden in Froebel’s kindergarten as a serene space where children could express their creativity, and introduced his theories to her daughter. According to Cornelia’s biographer Susan Herrington, this left an impression on her methodology as a landscape architect as she frequently uses square construction-paper cut-outs in the beginning stages of her design plans based on the Bauhaus design methods that she acquired from the Harvard curriculum and Froebel’s seventh gift, paper cut-outs. Herrington describes this practice as process of abstraction by which Oberlander experiments with square cut-outs that represent landscape elements such as trees or planters, allowing her to produce modular studies of the space.

Though it is unclear whether the cut-out method was directly used during the conception of the Ravine House and its landscape, the drafts and plans of the residence reflect the influence

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113 Herrington, *Making the Modern Landscape*, 16.
114 Ibid., 13.
115 Ibid., 207.
of Froebelian geometric forms. The rectangular shapes of the stone path and the circular patterns representing shrubbery depicted in the Main Floor plan appears indicative of the use of basic shapes in the planning of the design of the garden. The use of rectangles and circles is reminiscent of the second of Froebel’s gifts containing a cube and a sphere shaped wooden blocks meant to inspire the observation of the differences between the primary shapes.116 A more compelling example is Barry Downs’ preliminary sketch of the living room (Fig.15). The drawing is iterated from the perspective of a viewer situated in the foyer and represents the entrance of the living room as well as the large walls of windows offering views of the ravine which can be seen in this photograph by Downs of the living room once the house was completed (Fig.16). In addition, it shows the overhead galleries connecting the second floor of the house, where Peter and Cornelia shared a workspace with adjacent desks. The geometric composition is achieved entirely with block shapes from the Froebel’s gift set including cubes and rectangular and triangular shapes. The post-and-beam structure is expressed with large perpendicular rectangles representing the overhead horizontal gallery trays and the floor is composed of squares. The shapes on the balustrade, reminiscent of an arrangement of blocks “represent a decorative carpet accent or weaving that the Oberlanders collected, all to contrast with and soften the severe modernist setting” (Fig.17).117 The connecting galleries echo the bridge structure of the house, an elevated construction connecting two parts of the ravine. The red shapes that are used to represent a sculpture from the Oberlanders’ collection are also customarily found in the blocks set.

In Making the Modern Landscape, Susan Herrington suggests that Froebel’s understanding of garden culture and the kindergarten as “an idealized world distinct from real-world Prussian

117 Barry Downs Phone Conversation with the author, February 2017.
oppression”\textsuperscript{118} may have resonated with Beate Hahn, a Jewish woman living in Nazi Germany. The aspirational place of refuge also informed the Oberlanders’ desire to create in Vancouver for themselves as well as for its community. As previously noted, when they arrived in the early 1950s, the city was transforming due to its growing population and was undergoing “a creative upsurge” in the art and design community.\textsuperscript{119} They saw this as an opportunity to effect change with their work and aspired to improve civic living with affordable housing as well as ameliorated infrastructure and transport systems. They championed modern architecture, planning and landscape architecture to achieve their goals, concurrent with the burgeoning the modernist ethos in Vancouver stemming from the founding of the School of Architecture at UBC as well as the Design for Living exhibition presented by the Art in Living Group at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1949.\textsuperscript{120} During this time, West Coast Modernism of architecture developed as an expression of “progressive architectural culture” and modern optimism, drawing upon Indigenous architecture to produce sensitive buildings embracing the regional particularities of British Columbia.\textsuperscript{121}

However, though the architecture and landscape architecture of the Ravine House were designed to respect the topology and ecology of the landscape, a key concern of West Coast Modernism, the building’s use of modular techniques and its precarious situation on pilotis in the Ravine seem to indicate qualities of exile. In addition to the significant presence of Bauhaus-inspired features that appear to suggest an unresolved relationship with their homeland resulting from their coerced displacement, the space modulators present in the house and that structure the

\textsuperscript{118} Herrington, \textit{Making the Modern Landscape}, 14.


\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 13.

garden in the front yard can also be read this way. Though the plants that were selected are indigenous to the area, the grid that results from the modular design techniques that upon the space seemingly reflects a reluctance being fully integrated into the natural landscape. Rather than letting the landscape solely express the form of the garden, the European modular model is imposed upon the space. According to Said, because exiles are uprooted from their homeland and its cultural and social anchors that it offers, they often feel a degree of alienation that results in establishing themselves fully and connecting to their new land\textsuperscript{122}.

This can be further examined in the construction of the house on pilotis over an erosion prone ravine in an earthquake zone. The house, which appears fragile and mostly made of glass from the perspective of the ravine, is suspended with very few contact points with the ground compared to a dug foundation. It looks as though it could fall at any moment given its placement and the area is disposed to to seismic activity. The seeming precariousness of the building could be read as a marker of the pathos of exile that is reluctant to establish roots.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, the Oberlander residence presents a rich intersection of influences, most notably a Bauhaus-inspired aesthetic and features from West Coast Modernism, and thus the Indigenous architectural traditions that it cites. The examination of this surprising union provides a useful enquiry into the distinction between the architecture produced by immigrants and exiles that has been presented in the literature on West Coast modernism, such as in the seminal works considered above by Reyner Banham and Erhard Bahr. Though Banham and Bahr’s distinction between the architecture of immigrants and exiles is useful as a general theory, it is limiting and

\textsuperscript{122} Said, *Reflections on exile and other essays*, 139.
does not reflect the intricacy of the experiences of migration. The idea that exiles produce
nostalgic architecture because they were suddenly expelled from their homelands and that
immigrants are more optimistic toward their new environments, though perhaps generally true is
too simplistic because migrations often non-linear and involve multiple stop overs and varying
degrees of free-will.

Through the examination of the Ravine House including a formal analysis of the
architectural features of the building in tandem with the subjective conditions characterizing the
Oberlanders’ departures from Central Europe and settlement in Vancouver via biographical
sketches, this thesis sought to problematize the distinction between exile and immigrant
architecture that exists in the discourse of West Coast modernism. The architectural features of the
residence reveals traces of both forced displacement and cultural breakage as well as the desire for
assimilation and integration into the new context that is typical of the architecture produced by
immigrants.

The Ravine House in many ways exhibit features of West Coast modernism, typical of
homes built in the post-war period in Vancouver. Its wooden post-and-beam construction was
mindfully set on piers to protect the sensitive ecology of the site and to take advantage of the
vistas of the surrounding ravine. The large floor-to-ceiling windows draw in light and the
surrounding indigenous foliage creates shadow patterns on the walls, blurring the separation
between the interior and exterior of the house. The Oberlanders embraced the West Coast
modernism when they arrived and became significant figures in its development. They were very
optimistic about its potential for fostering an improved way of life through closeness to nature and
functional spaces tailored to the inhabitants of homes built in the style.
However, the residence’s cubic pavilions and highly rational modular organization that the Oberlanders transferred onto the Vancouver landscape were influenced by their exposure to the teachings of the Bauhaus both in their youth in Central Europe as well as at the Harvard GSD. The purity of form and off-white façade distinguishes the house from the typical cedarwood mid-century modern residences on the Canadian Pacific coast. The integration of Bauhaus-inspired elements seems to reflect a degree of attachment to their homeland and desire to maintain their cultural heritage following resulting from their forced displacement. It thus appears that both the Oberlanders’ experience of exile and voluntary immigration can be read in the architectural features of the Ravine House and challenges the dichotomy of immigrant and exile architecture.
Figures

(Fig.1) Oberlander Residence II exterior, 1970. Photograph by Selwyn Pullan. Courtesy of the West Vancouver Museum.
(Fig. 2) Anton Residence, 1967. Photograph by Fred Schiffer. Courtesy of the Jewish Museum and Archives of BC (L.22671).

(Fig. 3) VDL House, 1932. Photograph by Julius Schulman
(Fig. 4) Strathmore Apartments, 1937. Photographer Unknown

(Fig. 5) Courtyard of Laguna Pueblo New Mexico, 1893. Photographer Unknown.
(Fig. 6) Von Sternberg House, 1936. Photograph by Julius Shulman
(Fig.7) Mann in front of his Pacific Palisades home, 1941. Photographer Unknown.

(Fig.8) Interior of the Ravine House (Office), 2015. Photograph by the author.

(Fig.9) Cornelia Oberlander in her office, 2015. Photograph by the author.
(Fig.10) Smith House II. Photograph by Simon Scott.
(Fig. 11) Ravine House Exterior. Photograph by Barry Downs.

(Fig. 12) Relation of Horizontal and Vertical Planes, 1920. Theo van Doesburg.
(Fig.13) Ravine House Hallway, 2015. Photograph by the author.
(Fig. 14) Ravine House Staircase, 2015. Photograph by the author.

(Fig.15) Froebel’s Gift Set.
(Fig.16) Ravine House Drawing of Living Room Entrance, 1969. Barry Downs.

(Fig.17) Ravine House Living Room, 2015. Photograph by the author.
(Fig.18) Ravine House Mezzanine, 2016. Photograph by the author.
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Oberlander, Cornelia. E-mail message to author, July 2015.


