

Renfrew-Collingwood's Humble Historic Landmark

by John Mendoza

Located at the northwest corner of Kingsway and Rupert Street, the Collingwood branch of the Vancouver Public Library is a colourful hub of activity. However, this humble library branch holds a secret pedigree that elevates it above the 22 other branch libraries in Vancouver.

Unknown to most citizens of Vancouver, the architectural design of the Collingwood branch was designed by two celebrated British Columbian architects and could be the most important example of Modernist architecture found in East Vancouver.

Opened in July 1951, Collingwood Library's design influenced its community in profound ways. Designed by local architects Harold Semmens and Douglas Simpson, the new building presented a friendly face to the neighbourhood. In contrast to the imposing, old world bulk of the Carnegie branch at Hastings and Main, the design of Collingwood branch was firmly contemporary.

The design reflects the spirit and work of famous Modernist architects: the glass expanse at the front alluded to Mies van der Rohe, the use of stone a reference to Marcel Breuer,

the low ceiling entrance an influence of Frank Lloyd Wright. (According to Douglas Simpson's son, Gregg Simpson, the architect studied under Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin West in Arizona.) Yet due to its "effective scaling and proportioning," the building presented a welcoming and accessible face to the local community.

According to one source, shortly after its grand opening, Collingwood branch recorded the highest circulation of materials for kids of any branch library in the Vancouver library system. If the architects wanted to create an open and approachable civic building, they succeeded.

The impact of Semmens and Simpson's branch library design was far-reaching; it influenced the local and even regional architectural scene. The new design quickly attracted the curious, and it soon turned into the most visited Modernist building in Vancouver. Its influence can even be felt in successive library projects such as M. E. Uttley's Okanagan Regional Library (1955) and Kenneth Sandbrook's New Westminster Library (1958).

Because of their work on the Collingwood branch library,

Semmens and Simpson were commissioned to design the new central branch of Vancouver Public Library in 1954. Debuting in 1957, their new Modernist library building at Robson and Burrard Street earned praise for its design, winning the 1958 Massey Medal for excellence in Canadian architecture.

Despite this illustrious



An extraordinary photo of Vancouver Public Library's Collingwood branch as it appeared before its opening in early July 1951. The glass expanse at the front of the building has since been covered up in a subsequent renovation. (Source: Vancouver Public Library, Special Collections, VPL 8856)

history, there are no guarantees for this Modernist landmark in East Vancouver. Due to budgetary constraints, the library itself almost closed during the 1990s. Moreover, the history of preserving heritage buildings and Modernist architecture in Vancouver has not been positive. (Ironically, Semmens and Simpson's award-winning 1957 central library design has lost much of its Modernist features due to a renovation in the last decade.)

In a recent conversation, Gregg Simpson complained about the lurid blue paint that has been slapped on the exterior of Collingwood branch library. Ideally, the original colour of the building should be retained. As Gregg emphatically states, "To restore it to the original colour would be a great service to his legacy." Early photos of the building contrasted with the current condition of the building suggest that successive renovations have not been respectful of its architectural status.

The Collingwood branch therefore deserves consideration for its significance in the architectural design history of Vancouver. It exists as an east side example of local Modernist architecture designed by two acclaimed architects. If it meets the criteria, the building should immediately be added to the Vancouver Heritage Registry as a rare example of Modernist architecture in East Vancouver.

As the library approaches its 60th anniversary in 2011, recognition is overdue. It would be nice if the library's building design, layout and interior furnishings could be spruced up in the Modernist spirit, sensitive of course to the library staff and patron

needs and to budgetary constraints. Certainly the original colour should be restored and the signage could echo that of 1950s typography. At the very least, proper maintenance should be enforced. For example, during Vancouver's general civic strike of 2007, a vehicle crashed into the building, causing damage to the brick work. As of late August 2010, the brick-work damage remains and can still be seen just right of the main entrance.

The library and city should set an example for celebrating the city's heritage architecture and design, especially in a humble neighbourhood like Renfrew-Collingwood. Refurbishing this building and many other heritage landmarks in our area is an important step in the preservation of our shared history and the first step of cultivating an identity for Renfrew-Collingwood. However, it will only occur if the whole community shares this aspiration and does its best to discuss this with others who can help in this goal.

How can you get involved in preserving Collingwood branch library?

- Find information about Vancouver's Modernist architectural legacy in *The New Spirit Modern Architecture in Vancouver 1938-1963* by R. W. Liscombe (available in Vancouver Public Library)
- Share your ideas concerning Collingwood branch library by emailing Ms. Joan Andersen, Library Board Chair at board@vpl.ca
- Voice your support for Collingwood branch library's inclusion in Vancouver's Heritage Registry by sending correspondence to both the mayor and city council at mayorandcouncil@vancouver.ca – messages will be forwarded to the mayor and all council members



A rare photo of the interior of the Collingwood branch library as it appeared in 1951. Note the spacious quality of the interior and open glass front that looks out onto Kingsway. The circulation desk area as it was in 1951 is in the same area as it is today. (Source: Vancouver Public Library, Special Collections, VPL 28573)



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• To see more of Douglas Simpson's architectural legacy in photos on the internet, visit Douglas Simpson's website for more information www.greggsimpson.com/DCSimpson.htm

John Mendoza has lived in Collingwood for almost 30 years. He is a teacher and aspiring writer. His interests include travel, reading, art and architecture. This is his second article for Renfrew-Collingwood Community News.

About Modernist Architecture

Modernist architecture may be difficult to love for the average person. Unlike the ornately decorated buildings of the early 20th century, Modernist buildings are characterized by its cubic shapes, clean lines and unembellished exteriors.

Confounding the argument for preserving Modernist buildings is the fact that some have not aged very well; the superficial response is an insensitive renovation or even demolition. However, when designed with an architect's discerning eye, Modernist buildings have become important heritage structures in their own right.

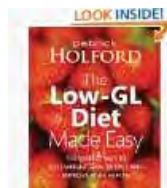
Some local examples of Modernist buildings include the Electra condominiums on Burrard Street (formerly the BC Hydro headquarters) and the Guinness Tower on West Hastings Street in downtown Vancouver.

—JM

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Reviews by Anne Kyler, Renfrew Branch, Vancouver Public Library



The Holford Low-GL Diet Made Easy by Patrick Holford

Recipes and menus that are designed to fill you up, not fatten you, keep your blood sugar balanced, and you eating healthy. Straightforward advice on how to handle restaurant meals.



Winging It: A memoir of caring for a vengeful parrot who's determined to kill me by Jenny Gardiner

Parrots live a very long time, so the gift of a baby parrot complicates the lives of Jenny and Scott Gardiner. Later the arrival of their own babies brings more upsets, chaos and medical emergencies, yet somehow despite provocation (Graycie would be considered a grumpy parrot), they love her.



Complete Guide to Women's Heart Health: The Go Red for women way to well being and vitality by the American Heart Association

There are risk factors, but then there ARE things you can do about them. This book is organized by decades, the challenges and how realistically you can modify their effect on your heart and your life.



The Male Brain: A breakthrough understanding of how men and boys think by Louann Brizendine

Here at last is the companion book to the author's *The Female Brain*. In the introduction is a list of 10 physical parts of the brain that are different from a female brain. Most of this highly readable book looks at the different kinds of behaviour that result from these biological differences, and the problems it creates for couples.



Alice I have Been by Melanie Benjamin

Alice Liddell Hargreaves was the little girl that Alice in Wonderland was written to amuse. This novel is a glimpse of her life, growing up, not allowed to marry her love because of rumours of her childhood relationship with Lewis Carroll, marrying another, having sons, watching them go off to WWI but not returning, struggling to survive hard times. The story is fascinating.

"Anyone who says he can see through women is missing a lot."
—Groucho Marx.

And we have a Reading Club winner!

Nancy Wong was the lucky recipient of the 2010 Adult Summer Reading Club grand prize of a Kobo eReader at the Collingwood Branch of the Vancouver Public Library.

The reading program ran from July 2 thru to August 13, 2010. Each participant who wrote a review on a reading of their choice could also enter the six weekly draws during the summer.



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頌恩社區中心

- **家居電器安全** 10/7(週四)10am
唐世勳先生(醫療器材部高級技師)
北美洲的房屋都以木為主要建材,對電器的安裝和使用特別要求嚴格,以免發生火警。透過這講座,希望聽眾能加深對家電的認識,並知道如何處理家電的安裝和維修。
- **天然食療法** 10/14(週四)10am
Mr. Joe Ho
介紹保養身體健康的五個重點,透過日常基本食物,增加食療作用,為身體排毒,改善身體健康。
- **為肥辛苦為瘦忙** 10/21(週四)10am
林坤中藥師(註冊中藥師)
從中西醫角度探討肥胖原因及併發症,提供最新各種意料之外至胖原因,分析民間各種減肥處理方式及減肥區區。
- **電影欣賞** 10/28(週四)10am
- **Amazing Grace Carnival** 10/31(日)5:30pm
歡迎家長攜同3-12歲兒童參加,提供免費熱狗, Pizza, 攤位遊戲, 故事及獎品。
- **福音查經班** 逢週一 1:30pm
- **男仕小組** 逢每月第四週六 7pm

歡迎致電查詢報名 | 基督教頌恩堂
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pgmbc.com 604-255-6199 請按內線 4

Local Artisan's
Winter Craft Fair

Dec 4th 11-5pm
Collingwood Neighbourhood House
5288 Joyce Street, Vancouver

Tables available: \$20

To reserve a table, contact:
Alexis Seto -- alexisseto@shaw.ca
or Yoko Tomita -- yokogeo@shaw.ca