

ARCHITECTURE

A tear down wins its buyer’s heart

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“Simplicity is one’s own sense of unity, where pattern is revealed out of apparent disorder,” architect Ron Thom once observed. “The creative mind looks for unexpected likenesses.”

When Mr. Thom penned those thoughts for the March 1962 edition of Canadian Architect, he was speaking of architecture in general. But his observation was particularly apropos for his magnificent Terry S. Forest house that was built that year in West Vancouver.

Working with sidekick Dick Mann, Mr. Thom devised the Forest House to read like a taut geometric abstraction of the knolls and hillocks of the slope on which it stood. From the street below, the house itself is barely visible: The rhythmically pitched roofline seems to hover just above the rock ridge that serves as its plinth. The Forest House won a 1965 Massey Award, Canada’s most prestigious honour for architecture at that time.

The Forest House – now more commonly known as the Eyremount Drive House, after its street address – has changed hands several times in the last few years. Updated and restored, it sold for \$2.6-million in 2011; and then, a scant six months later in a deal that closed earlier this year, for \$3.8-million.

It turns out the latest buyer, Amir Lajevardi, bought it strictly as a view property, with the intention of razing the existing 3,000-square-foot house to build a new 15,000-square-foot luxury home for his family in its place. From the top of the driveway, the lot offers a sublime and unobstructed panoramic view of the lower mainland. “I walked up the driveway, and then when I turned around to look at the view, I just went: ‘Ahhh’ – as though you would show a 25-year-old gentleman the most beautiful girl in the world,” he recalls. The view so enraptured him that he didn’t much care about whatever existing house might happen to be on the property. “I didn’t even look at the inside of the house, to be honest.”



The current owner of the so-named Terry S. Forest house in West Vancouver initially bought it strictly as a view property and intended to tear down the building. He later changed his mind and says he intends to live in the house.



But a funny thing happened on the way to the bulldozer: Mr. Lajevardi began feeling the architectural magic of the house – and then reconsidered his demolition plans.

Once the purchase was finalized and the previous owners and their furniture were out of the house, Mr. Lajevardi strolled around the vacant interior and realized that this was no ordinary house but something powerfully unique – and worth living in.

“When a house is empty, that’s when you really see the architecture,” he says. “As soon as I walked into the house, I said to myself: No way – can’t destroy this!”

Mr. Lajevardi, a native of Iran who lived for many years in the United States and then moved to Vancouver in 2010, had no idea

about the house’s illustrious pedigree. Nor had he heard of Ron Thom, who died in Toronto more than 25 years ago, though realtor Clarence DeBelle had touted the name in his sales literature for the house.

But Mr. Lajevardi didn’t pay much attention to the name-dropping: “I went the other way around: I saw the work and fell in love with it.” Then he began asking around: Just who is this Ron Thom? That’s when he found out that the house he had bought as a throw-in to the property was designed by one of the most important Canadian architects of the 20th century, the designer of Toronto’s Massey College and Trent University in Peterborough.

The 50-year-old house is in excellent condition, and despite

several updating gestures and a small addition, it’s essentially the same masterpiece that Mr. Thom designed at the height of Midcentury Modernism, when West Vancouver was an architectural focal point. The original kitchen has been significantly expanded, fitted with new cabinetry and its wall opened up to the living room – a somewhat awkward-looking opening that is nonetheless useful for bringing light and view deep into the interior.

On the south-facing front facade, the floor-to-ceiling expanse of glass generates spectacular views from the home’s interior; the asymmetric triangular pitch of each window-wall frames each viewpoint in a strategically artful manner.

To access the four bedrooms at

the rear of the house, you ascend a small stairway that follows the rising slope of the site. The bedrooms have clerestory windows on the hallway side, which bring suffused light into the corridor. Each bedroom features a large rectangular with a view of the nearby sloping wall of earth and groundcover.

Throughout the house are Mr. Thom’s trademark gestures, including hand-crafted wooden and metal light fixtures evocative of Frank Lloyd Wright designs. Off the living room you can step down into a cozy den-like space with built-in seating and rock wall with an embedded fireplace. A recessed skylight sheds an ethereal light from above. The carefully crafted oversize wooden doors and detailing are another Ron Thom trademark. “I brought in a builder,” says Mr. Lajevardi, “and he said: ‘Do you know how much work [the architect] did just to make the doors this way?’ ”

Mr. DeBelle, who sold the Eyremount Drive house this last time around, says that it’s unrealistic to expect people who come from other parts of the world to instantly know about West Vancouver’s once-fabled architecture. “It’s the responsibility of the real estate agent to understand the uniqueness of the home, the history and the recognition of the architect, and then to convey that to the potential buyers,” says Mr. DeBelle. “Then it’s up to the buyer whether to embrace it.”

Mr. Lajevardi, for his part, is convinced. “Whoever I’ve brought here to look at it, they’ve fallen in love with it,” says Mr. Lajevardi. “It doesn’t matter if they live in a \$10-million house; they fall in love with this one.”

Yet he has not ruled out eventually building a larger house on the lot at some future date. “I have to get back the value from the land,” he says. “But I’d love to have the enjoyment of living here for two or three years, because I want to appreciate his work.”

Mr. Lajevardi was not surprised to learn that Mr. Thom trained at the Vancouver School of Art rather than at an architecture school. “He was an artist – that is clear.”

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