

T H E

V A N C O U V E R

S P E C I A L

C O M P E T I T I O N

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Architecture and the Environment

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we shall learn that styles
no longer exist for us**

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**Catherine Alkenbrack
for The Vancouver
League for Studies
in Architecture and the
Environment**

The Vancouver League for Studies in Architecture and the Environment was formed in 1979 with the mandate of bringing renowned Canadian and international figures involved with design to speak to Vancouver architects and interested public. The architectural community had long felt the need for the stimulation and dialogue promoted by the lectures of these leading practitioners and theoreticians.

While the Alcan Series heightened our awareness of and familiarity with major international influences, many sought a similar forum which would present the work of local architects and provoke discussion of topical Vancouver design issues. In 1981, the Local Series convened at Emily Carr College of Art.

The Vancouver Special Competition sprang from the League's interest in further focus at the local level — this time in an applied sense. This competition was an attempt to challenge architects with the design of a Vancouver-specific housing typology that few had seriously considered.

The Vancouver Special Competition also addressed an acknowledgement of “change” — change in the economics of housing, change in the architectural profession and the architect's role, change in society and family structure, and change in urban design.

Many homeowners seek the perceived sense of “newness” and “modernity”, as well as the spatial flexibility at budget cost, which the existing builder-designed prototype provides. No alternatives have previously existed.

Enter the architect. In a profession where work has become increasingly scarce, where practitioners have been forced to diversify and where more and more potential projects are community-needs based, why not consider the affordable, single-family dwelling?

Architects are becoming increasingly aware of the hypocrisy of RS-1 zoning. There are presently many functioning alternative models to the nuclear family requiring housing in our neighbourhoods. Residents who, for various reasons remain single longer and cannot obtain mortgages, band together and buy houses jointly. Many single parents who cannot afford to be sole homeowners buy with friends in a similar position and subdivide the house, or buy alone and build a rental suite to help with mortgage payments. Many two-parent families need two incomes, many mothers now prefer to work. One parent may decide to set up an office at home — necessitating an adjoining studio or work suite. The dilemma of the “illegal” suite has arisen of social necessity and it is time we recognized that RS-1 zoning is obsolete.

Vancouver neighbourhoods have a new street-face. The proliferation of the existing Vancouver Special has brought us to a street facade of flat housefronts and boxy roofless shapes, a longing for materials and details evoking the historical character and context of neighbourhood, and a need for usable, friendly yards connected to living spaces. When densification and the two-family possibility are acknowledged, an opportunity is gained for more diverse and complex siting, articulated massing, and more detailed, less monolithic elevations.

More than imagination and creativity were required on the designers' part to solve the problems of the existing Vancouver Special. Implicit in the programme for the New Vancouver Special Competition was the necessity for competitors to come to grips with the planning and sociological implications in their design solutions.

Anna Buchan

Ms. Buchan has written numerous articles on architecture and has been published in the *Architects Forum*, the *Globe & Mail*, *Section A*, *Trace* and *Vanguard*. She is currently living in Toronto working as a communications consultant.

The architect has never had much to do with the design of the lower-to-middle-income North American house. Neglected even in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the comparatively few architects of those decades, it has remained, since the American Civil War, within the domain of the speculative builder.¹ For the last twenty years in Vancouver, the most dominant single-family detached house on the market has been a builders' specialty commonly known as the "Vancouver Special". Although Vancouver architects have, since World War II, demonstrated a consistent quality of design in their residential work (Arthur Erickson and Ron Thom amongst others) and, more recently, received recognition for successful urban condominium projects, their expertise has benefitted only a very narrow segment of the population. Now, this competition for a new Vancouver Special creates the opportunity for the ordinary house in Vancouver to be more than just a commodity.

The predicament of the ordinary house has not been without controversy. Frank Lloyd Wright, who built over a hundred "Usonian Houses", believed that the architect could best solve "America's major architectural problem" — the moderately-priced house: "a home like this is an architect's creation, it is not a builder's nor an amateur's effort."² Many critics, including architect/planner Dolores Hayden, have pointed out the social, economic and environmental shortcomings of the mass-produced housing that has dominated American cities since the 1940's.³ Yet Hayden, in her book *Redesigning the American Dream*, questions the role of the architect as well as the developer in the lower- and medium-priced housing market: "most architects loved to design large single-family houses, one at a time, and this predilection shaped the profession's acquiescence."⁴

The Vancouver Special has its successes as well as its failures. An increasing number appear every year and are gradually spreading beyond the largely working class neighbourhoods where they began, to Vancouver's more prosperous West Side; yet they consistently receive considerable criticism. Why are they so successful and where do they fail? The answers to these questions provide the issues upon which the competition submissions can be assessed.

The Vancouver Special is a feat of spatial economics. Its genesis is clearly described in a report prepared in 1981 by the Vancouver City Planning Department:

"Several general design features of the Vancouver Special may be attributed to RS-1

*Zoning regulations to the extent that the Special represents a direct result of quantitatively maximizing what is built under the zoning limitations."*⁵

The two features of the RS-1 (Single-Family) Zoning Schedule — the Floor Space Ratio and the Site Coverage — accommodate the house-to-lot ratio of the Vancouver Special. The Floor Space Ratio (F.S.R.), defined as the figure obtained when the area of the floors of the building on a site is divided by the area of the site, allows a maximum of 0.60 in the RS-1 zoning. Effectively, this allows a single-family dwelling of up to 2376 square feet on a 33' x 120' lot (the dominant small-lot size in Vancouver). The City's report points out that the Vancouver Special is one of the few house types to take advantage of the allowable F.S.R. (The average house design for a similarly-sized lot provides less than 1400 square feet).⁶

The maximum allowable site coverage of a detached single-family dwelling in RS-1 zoned areas is 45% of the site area, or 1782 square feet on a 33' x 120' lot. The typical Vancouver Special, 25 feet wide and 55 feet long with a rear sundeck 10 feet long, approaches the maximum with a site coverage of approximately 1750 square feet. Site coverage is maximized by taking full advantage of the side yard requirements as well. The Zoning By-law requires not less than 10 percent of the width of the site, to a maximum of 5 feet, but the National Building Code requirement of a minimum 4 foot side yard where side windows are present takes precedence over Vancouver's by-law. Thus, 4 feet are required for each side yard of a house on a 33' lot.

The house that results from maximizing Vancouver's RS-1 zoning provides spacious and liveable accommodation on two levels. An average 1400 square feet on the upper level contains living room, dining area, kitchen, three bedrooms, and two bathrooms. The 1000 square feet on the ground level contains the furnace, water heater, laundry facilities, "roughed-in" plumbing for an additional bathroom, and unfinished space which often provides for an illegal accessory suite or "in-law suite".

The economic success of the Vancouver Special cannot be denied: it provides the most house for the least money. While a 35-year-old Vancouver bungalow of 900 square feet could be bought in 1985 for \$99,000⁷, \$120,000 would buy a Vancouver Special with three large bedrooms, three baths, and an accessory suite. For the prospective home buyer, the house is an unparalleled bargain.

It is doubtful that the Vancouver Special would



have proliferated to such an extent were it not as attractive to the builder as to the home buyer. Because its familiar design formula is well understood by the City's Planning Department, both development and building permits can be obtained usually within two to three days, and very seldom does the City exercise its right to request design changes. With the many cost-efficient and time saving features — prefabricated truss roof with tar-and-gravel finish, concrete slab, low-cost finishing materials (stucco), and standardized aluminum-frame windows — builders who specialize in the Vancouver Special can, with "assembly-line" construction techniques, erect a house in two to three months. The comparatively small initial capital outlay and the opportunity to hire casual labour rather than full-time employees encourage especially the small-scale builder.

In spite of its economical and spatial success, however, the Vancouver special does not enjoy universal admiration. In order to better understand its impact, the City of Vancouver conducted in 1980 a survey amongst residents of two working-class neighbourhoods, Marpole and Hastings-Sunrise, where Vancouver Specials were most common.⁸ Fifty-eight percent of the respondents disliked the Vancouver Special, citing uniformity of design as its most unappealing characteristic, along with external appearance and large size. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents agreed that the City should improve and increase the variety of new house designs. While those people who live in Vancouver Specials felt more favourably towards them than non-residents, forty-one percent agreed that they are too uniform in appearance.

The survey sought opinion on people's feelings towards their neighbourhoods as well. Sixty-six percent of the survey respondents wanted some upgrading of their neighbourhoods but only forty-six percent favoured some replacement of old housing by new. The City inferred from this response that residents generally prefer a variety of new house styles as long as it is not too excessive. As one resident noted: "I liked the first Vancouver Special that I saw but there are now so many of them I hate them; they are a joke."⁹

The concept of standardized housing is not new to Vancouver: much of the housing built between 1889 and 1910 came in "kit-set" prefabricated form.¹⁰ Yet Vancouver's tradition of detached single-family houses, rooted in the house-type known as bungalow,¹¹ displays a rich visual variety that is missing from the Vancouver Specials.

This variety, generated by the stylistic evolution of the bungalow, is reflected throughout Vancouver's residential neighbourhoods: the

houses on Fairview Slopes with their verticality and small porticoes; Strathcona's "gingerbread" houses with their decorated gables, porches, and bay windows; the Shaughnessy mansions boasting the eclectic Queen Anne-style with strongly contrasting materials, gabled and hipped roofs, and projecting porches; along King Edward Boulevard, the romantic cottages whose Gropius-like corner windows disclose more recent origins; the Craftsmen-style houses in Point Grey which exhibit the best of the bungalow type as it was developed in California by the Greene brothers.¹² The charm of these earlier standardized "catalogue" houses does not extend, however, to the Vancouver Specials.

Speculation on the formal origins of the Vancouver Special provokes interesting comparisons. The same low-sloping mid-peaked roof can be found in the plank houses of the Kwakiutl people on Vancouver Island and in the California stucco apartment building of the 1950's.¹³ But in the Vancouver Special, it is less likely a regional response to rainfall conditions than an economic choice based on the maximum allowable slope for the least expensive roof finish (tar and gravel).

The description offered by John Beach and John Chase in *Home Sweet Home* of the stucco-surfaced speculative apartment house in 1950 Los Angeles applies at least partially to the Vancouver Special: "Ruthlessly expedient, made out of the cheapest materials, by the simplest construction methods. . . . At the same time, these buildings were glamorously packaged consumer objects that often merited more contact with the outdoors, easier access to the auto."¹⁴ But "glamorously packaged" the Vancouver Special is not. Although residents personalize their home, often with statutory representative of their cultural origins, the intervention is minimal. An array of 1950's ornament broke up the surface of the California stucco building with texture and colour. In contrast, the Vancouver Special might have come from the drawing board of someone following Frank Lloyd Wright's elimination list: no roofs, garages (only carports were necessary), basements, interior trim, radiators, painting or furniture.¹⁵ This is not to imply that any of Frank Lloyd Wright's houses look like Vancouver Specials. But, with homologous individual elements such as windows or roofs, sides and rear treated in the most pragmatic and economical manner possible, materials which lack both weight and plasticity, the Vancouver Special does exhibit those modernist tendencies which tended to condense the building into a bland envelope.

The organization of interior space shares simi-

larities with the postwar suburban bungalow of which the most famous is the Levitt house.¹⁶ The Levitt's features became commonplace in homes across North America: concrete slabs replaced basements, sliding doors and windows in aluminum frames opened onto patios, a relatively open floor plan provided maximum space for storage, minimum space for non-utilitarian uses such as corridors and foyers. These features supported the "dream life" of the perfect family. At the rear of the house, the kitchen with large windows allowed mothers to watch their children playing outside, bedrooms were large enough to accommodate indoor play space, and sliding glass provided access to the back yard. While expansion was possible either through the development of attic space or by additions to the bungalow, like the Vancouver Special, the Levitt House generally accommodated all the functions of living on one storey. Unlike the Vancouver Specials, the Levitt-town houses employed stylistic devices to appeal to the widest range of public taste. Worried by the criticism directed at the monotony of the Levitt-town, Andrew Levitt sought advice from a group of architects but their suggestions would have made the houses prohibitively expensive. Levitt sought his own solution by mixing architectural styles (one Levittown was Cape Cod in style, another Colonial).

In his book *The Levittowners*, Hervert Gans writes: "Levitt also used a highly variegated colour scheme to increase diversity, so that only every 150th house was alike." (Gans goes on to say that "the critics never noticed his innovation, . . . and the purchasers also paid little attention to it.")¹⁷

Conformity is not the only target for criticism aimed at the Vancouver Special. The City's survey found that the illegal accessory suites often found on the ground level of the Vancouver Special are a particular source of grievance for neighbours who fear a decrease in property values and undesirable changes in the structure of the neighbourhood. Yet for many residents of Vancouver Specials, these suites do provide a solution, though far from ideal, to changing housing needs.

These changes, both socio-economic and demographic, are not yet reflected in most current housing. While there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of both singles and single-parent families, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation report in December 1984 that over half of the country's housing starts were single-family detached houses. Many married couples are choosing to remain childless; many young people in their twenties are moving back to their parents' homes to economize while unemployed or

returning to school for retraining; many senior citizens (projected to comprise 15% of the population in twenty years) have difficulty retaining ownership of their homes. As Dolores Hayden points out, the Levittown model, rooted in traditional family patterns, is now an anachronism.¹⁸ Indeed, the definition of "family" is no longer limited to mother, father, and two children, but may now include unmarried couples living together with or without children, a single adult with a single child, or a group of related or unrelated persons.¹⁹ The detached house, still desirable to many people, could be more responsive to these changes in the family cycle and increasing economic pressures.

Flexibility to better accommodate newly-defined contemporary user-groups was, in fact, one of the criteria outlined in the competition programme and used by the jury in evaluating the submissions of the New Vancouver Special Competition. The other criteria were sensitivity to the scale and profile of Vancouver's existing vernacular housing stock (the jury referred to this as "neighbourliness"), economy, and liveability. The latter two were acknowledged to be characteristics of the existing Specials, thus providing points of comparison. The house that emerges from the New Vancouver Special Competition exhibits a certain dualism. On the one hand, it looks to the future and anticipates change in life styles and financial situations. On the other hand, it refers to the past by fitting into the existing context. While almost all sixty-seven entries to the competition address, to varying degrees, all these issues, the consistent effort to introduce flexibility is remarkable. One of the most common approaches incorporates an accessory building to the rear of the house. This "coach house" can accommodate an office/studio, extended living space for family members, or rental space generating additional revenue for the homeowner. Adult children would find the "coach house" solution particularly attractive because it provides physical proximity without internal communication. Accessory buildings and rooms satisfy the functions of an attic or basement of an older home but their ground-level location takes greater advantage of natural light and makes it more possible to extend living space to the outdoors (an important feature in Vancouver's mild climate).

Third Prize winner Robert Grant proposes an accessory building with the option to develop it into a full two and one-half storey house. Patricia Baldwin's two-car garage can be converted into a one-bedroom self-contained apartment. Other variations on the theme are presented by Sebastian

Butler and Robert Lemon.

With "Cubix", Second Prize winner Barry Griblin provides a transportation of the coach house theme. His "geometry for assembling building elements" can be flipped or rotated depending upon the owner's preference, site conditions, and orientation of surrounding existing buildings. The accessory building can be located to the front, side (on a corner lot), or rear. Connection to the main house is by an interior courtyard, a situation that with ingenuity can be exploited to fulfill many differing requirements. Griblin's proposal is less likely to provide accommodation for non-family (whether traditional or non-traditional) members because of its more intimate connectedness, but it could successfully extend the living space of the family by providing a separate master suite or children's zone.

First Prize winner Stuart Howard takes an unusual approach with a "New Vancouver Special Room". The square 20' x 20' with a loft above connects to the kitchen by a corridor-gallery. The room serves as studio/office or hobby room. Metz/Moore/Villegas propose a similar design with a covered exterior walkway connecting a room with an adjoining bathroom. This scheme allows more privacy than does Howard's, which lacks convenient access to bathroom facilities, and could provide a "bed-sitting" room for an older child, live-in nanny, or elderly parent.

Although Howard's "room" is a separate component connected to the house by a corridor, its status is minimized on the exterior. The vernacular treatment of accessory rooms or buildings, shared by all the winning and honourable mention schemes, serves the quality of neighbourliness which is crucial to wider acceptance of the accessory building. Although the addition of accessory units would require changes to the Zoning By-law in terms of height restrictions and F.S.R., those changes are likely to be more acceptable if new units are simple, unselfconscious, and tending towards the vernacular. Other proposals seek to intensify and diversify the space already available within the infrastructure of the typical single-family house. This approach minimizes the impact on the character of surrounding houses and arouses less opposition from neighbours than does the accessory building. Within a traditional house form that requires no changes to the Zoning By-law, the Honourable Mention scheme of Michael Ernest/Mark Pesner closely approximates the spatial and economic advantages of the Vancouver Special with 2030 square feet on three storeys. A relatively small footprint maximizes garden space and minimizes cost. (The expense of partial excavation is

offset by few exterior walls). Similarly, entrant Herwig Pemiskern achieves 1700 square feet of liveable space on two storeys and 625 square feet in unfinished basement. By optimizing vertical space, a large floor area can be created that does not disrupt the existing scale of the neighbourhood. Yet Pemiskern's house is equivalent in height to a usual two-storey-with-attic Vancouver house. Moreover, basements only partially below grade (Terris, Merrick, Pemiskern, and Ernest/Pesner, amongst others) admit more light and greater accessibility to the outdoors than do Vancouver's more typical houses with full basements.

It is difficult to achieve the maximum allowable space without either partial basement excavation or a larger footprint. Sebastian Butler's Honourable Mention design provides maximum space on two storeys above grade, with a dormered attic storey. But the large mass of this house is incongruous with neighbourhoods where Vancouver Specials are found.

As is typical of the existing Vancouver Special, most of the accessory apartments contained within the New Vancouver Specials are intended to be left unfinished by speculative builders so that the homeowner can complete the available space when and how he/she chooses. Thus the house can be more responsive to changes in the family cycle and budget. Baker/McGarva provide an envelope within which one, two, or three storeys can be developed according to need and financial ability. Building only one storey would require a high initial outlay for the amount of space provided; however, the two-storey option is a reasonable "starter home". Similarly, Paul Merrick's design provides three size transformations ranging from a 865 square foot two-bedroom unit on one storey to 2376 square feet on three storeys. Several schemes provide unfinished space on the upper storey (Lemon and Baldwin) which would function much as an attic.

In Vancouver, the idea of equal "sharing" is a less common solution to intensifying land use than is the accessory apartment. A design approach marketed in Manhattan condominiums, "sharing" enables people as homeowners to live in dwellings which might otherwise be beyond their financial means. Ken Terris proposes two completely separate bedrooms with adjoining bathrooms, each connected by its own staircase to a study on the first storey below. The dining, living and kitchen areas are shared. This scheme could accommodate single parents as well as childless couples or singles, with a child in the bedroom upstairs and the parent using the downstairs study as a bedroom. Denis Arseneau's Honourable Mention

scheme approaches the issues of flexibility from a different direction with a simple, rather austere floor plan. A central service core allows the plan to be flipped back to front or sideways to allow for different site orientation and owners' preferences. The kitchen might be situated at the front or the back of the house, as might the master bedroom. Undeveloped space under the eaves might provide extra storage space. Corridors and other under-used spaces are minimized. Essentially this house is a small elegant shell that resists defining the activities that should take place within its walls. Paul Merrick and Metz/Moore/Villegas offer, to a lesser degree, plans whose simplicity allows flexibility for furniture arrangement and activity zoning.

This ease in establishing a simple liveable floor plan is noticeably missing from many of the entries to the competition. Those entries which attempt to articulate spaces for specific activities or to create architecturally interesting interior space more often produce problematic results. Space for dining is often inadequate (Baker/McGarva); easily accessible bathrooms are not always provided for second bedrooms (Grant); rigidly defined spaces make the placement of furniture difficult (Terris); flexibility is sometimes at odds with the need for privacy (Baldwin).

As noteworthy as any solution to the competition programme is the departure from the dictation of style. These designers who provide a wide range of options for the homeowner differ from Frank Lloyd Wright who prescribed a rigid set of design elements for the medium-priced house. Some approaches are less radical: Howard offers a choice of colours to provide visual variety and illusion of depth on identical facades (as at Levittown). Others are more forceful: Merrick poses four different style possibilities — postmodern, international, west coast, or cottage vernacular; Lemon presents a variety of roof and porch combinations under the labels of Voysey, MacIntosh, Greene & Greene and Maclure; Kerr proposes a choice of Post-mod, Tudor, or Craftsman. Although Griblin takes a modular approach, he is unconcerned with the expression of structure of joints which often accompanies this mode: his plywood sheathing can accommodate any facade, any style, any ornament. Options exist for site orientation as well, both on single lots (Merrick) or on larger land parcels (Griblin).

Some submissions do make stylistic statements. Thomas Zimmerman's elegant low-key sophistication seeks to "dress-up the standards of the new city while maintaining its basic forms and efficiencies". Twin-peak false gables offer stylish

witticism without being overbearing or disruptive. Herwig Pemiskern's "Primitive Hut" pushes architectural metaphor to an extreme: castle, cottage, palace, shrine, hut, and grove are all subject for allusion. Yet this house, with its seemingly tongue-in-cheek approach, with its spacious open floor plans, generous glazing, and bright California colours, with its personality and wit, provides a refreshing recess. The challenge to design a New Vancouver Special, to provide flexibility with economy, to defer to both neighbourhood and occupant, has been met successfully by many of the submitting architects and designers. At the same time, homage has been paid to the ordinary, medium-priced house. Charles Moore's description of the process which the ordinary house has lately been undergoing is particularly well-suited to the meaning of the competition for a New Vancouver Special:

*"Certainly, for most of history, ordinary or vernacular houses have been passed over or slid by; like the common crockery in them, they have been ignored by historians, and everybody else. In very recent times, though, this historic neglect has given way to avid competition between groups, cultural anthropologists on the one hand and designers on the other, to snatch the vernacular into their respective realms. . . . One of the pleasures in viewing vernacular architecture as a homely vessel becoming a prize, snatched back and forth by cultural anthropologists organizing studies, and architects and designers discovering a rich source of inspiration, is the prospect of this new found treasure, its value enhanced, being returned to the public realm it came from."*²⁰

Footnotes

1. John B. Jackson, "Craftsman Style and Technostyle", *Ornament, VIA 3* (The Journal of the Graduate School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania, 1977), p. 57.
2. Frank Lloyd Wright, "The Natural House" (New York: Mentor Books, Horizon Press, 1954), p. 80.
3. Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: the future of housing, work, and family life* (New York: Norton & Co., 1984), pp. 39-62.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
5. *The Vancouver Special* (Vancouver: Vancouver City Planning Department, 1981), p. 13.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
7. Ann Rhodes, "Housing Coast to Coast", *Your Money* (April/May, 1985), p. 58.
8. *The Vancouver Special*, p. 25.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
10. Graeme Chalmers and Frances Moorcroft, *British Columbia Houses*.
11. John C. Poppeliers, *What Style Is It?* (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1983), p. 76. See also Robert Winter, "The Common American Bungalow", in *Home Sweet Home* (New York: Rizzoli and Los Angeles: Craft and Folk Art Museum, 1983), p. 98. The term bungalow came from Bengal where the native dwelling consisted of a single-storey building, raised slightly off the ground, with a central family space surrounded by smaller rooms for sleeping and utilities, and with a porch or porches. As this house type evolved, initially throughout the British Empire and then America, many various elements were borrowed and added to it. By the late 1800's the bungalow was closely related to the small scale, one-storey Queen Anne-style cottage, which often provided for extra sleeping space in the attic.
12. Poppeliers, p. 76.
13. *Home Sweet Home*, pp. 95 and 119.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
15. Frank Lloyd Wright, p. 73.
16. Levitt and Sons Inc. was the largest builder in the eastern United States. The first two Levittowns, in New York and Pennsylvania, were prototypes of postwar suburbia. The firm offered relatively inexpensive houses in not just subdivisions but communities with an entire range of institutions and facilities. The third Levittown in New Jersey had 12,000 houses.
17. Herbert Gans, *The Levittowners* (New York: Pantheon Books, Random House, 1967), p. 282.
18. Dolores Hayden, p. 43.
19. "Family Redefined in Modern Terms", *The Gazette*, Montreal 23 April 1985, p. A-4.
20. *Home Sweet Home*, p. 20.

**Richard Henriquez
Henriquez & Partners
Architects and Urban
Designers**

All the evidence is not yet in as to the success or failure of the Vancouver Special Competition but, as an attempt to get the architectural community in Vancouver involved with "builder housing", it seems to have been worthwhile and does raise some interesting questions.

For example, to what extent is the present design of the Vancouver Special a result of public taste and will the altering of the "look" of the buildings make them unacceptable to the public?

Is economy a perceived or real attribute of a building design and, despite the fact that the entrants and jury agreed that the competition winners could be built for the same cost as the present stereotype, will builders agree and start to alter their product in line with some of these new options?

Are architects able to think of their designs as prototypes which can be widely used and altered rather than individual pieces which should be designed for a specific time and place and which should be executed "as drawn and detailed" or not at all?

There is no doubt that the competitors proposed a number of designs which were vastly

more liveable than the present Vancouver Special. The most notable improvement was to have parking detached from the house in order to leave a part of the rear yard usable.

In so far as the winning scheme is concerned, Stuart Howard's house proposed a number of features which could be mentioned — for instance, the so called "Vancouver Special Room" — a semi-detached multi-purpose space attached to the house by an enclosed link — seems a much more attractive alternative to the unfinished basement on grade which present Vancouver Specials have. I would have preferred that this design were not so "trendy" in its fenestration and details, but as a generic plan it certainly has considerable merit.

The marketing of these alternative approaches to the design of the Vancouver Special still remains to be done. One hopes that even if the present Vancouver Special is not replaced by another prototype — and perhaps it shouldn't be — at least the competition would have made the public aware of some of the alternatives.

JUROR'S STATEMENT

**Ray Spaxman
Director of Planning
City of Vancouver**

The big question remains: will the new design catch on and replace what we know as the Vancouver Special?

None of the schemes presented solve enough of the challenges to appear as obvious replacements.

The winning design is excellent on its own site. The plan achieves a high level of efficiency, liveability and flexibility, and, on the street, presents a much improved aesthetic over the present Vancouver Special.

It does, however, present severe constraints on its neighbours with its long walls. The back yard is replaced with a small enclosed garden which will appeal to certain tastes. The plan arrangements can still be utilized with as much good or poor taste

exhibited in its external design as with current house design.

While it is important to provide examples of good design, to write our by-laws creatively and to give guidance where we can, it is the resources, values and tastes of the community which produce the visual sense of place in our neighbourhoods.

Barry Downs
Downs/Archambault
Architects

The Vancouver Special was spawned as an affordable modern day alternative to the traditional family home — the picture window, the symbolic front and rear gardens and elevated main floor and carport roof deck its most noteworthy features. A split level or two level plan maximized floor separations and provided room flexibility for a growing family and ultimately a large home for two empty nesters. Today, with the ever increasing life expectancy of the elderly and the return to the nest of adult children after unsuccessful marriages or those suddenly unemployed, there is even greater need for a housing type which will satisfy the requirements of a three generation family.

Many of the competition's entrants addressed this challenge, most re-creating a more up-to-date version of the old model, a few able to tap the innovative environmental and aesthetic opportunities of the new Special. Those that did utilized a building language which was contextually more appealing and aptly symbolized home. Of interest were the floor plans which zoned activity and private places

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School of Architecture
U.B.C.

The Competition, it seemed to me, was a marvellous opportunity for architects and aspiring architects to show what they could do as designers to broaden the range of alternatives to the so called "Vancouver Special".

"Within the limitations of the existing structure of the RS-1 City Zoning schedule we have seen evolve a house of banal appearance; it has occurred without the benefit of the architects' skills and service. Combined with the economic factors governing development, the city is building up its housing stock with prototypical solutions of the most rudimentary kind. The effect it is having on the urban environment when seen scattered throughout the city and particularly grouped in and around the East Side Neighbourhoods — is dismal. On the other hand, it has provided affordable housing, particularly because the market has realized its potential to provide the (illegal) second suit for extended-family or rent within a 'single family house' neighbourhood, I am sure that people who live in these houses, love them as homes and wouldn't share my concern for their appearance, but there just had to be some better solutions for siting house planning and for the disposition and use of private outside space..."

and expressed territorial needs. Other contributors celebrated the special rooms that are still so important to group interaction in the home — the living room, dining room and family kitchen. Often these spaces were oriented to a rear and private garden considered so essential today in western living. Roof gardens were utilized in some proposals offering a privacy zone alternative to shared ground level open spaces. Most noteworthy were those schemes where space separations, either vertically in a 3½ storey main house or horizontally in an extended plan or studio-carriage house addition, skillfully provided maximum liveability for their occupants. This was the singular most important contribution of the Vancouver Special competitors, for the degree and the quality of separated living space is the one aspect of home environment which will most encourage family members to want to live and grow together again as in the past. With appropriate and necessary zoning revisions, the return of the extended family dwelling could well be just around the corner.

So what did the competition show us? At one level it was disappointing that so many architects did not understand the real issues of the "Special", nor could many of them even design a decent home that equaled the "Specials" unimaginative room arrangements. But having said this, there were others with refreshing ideas, imaginatively developed within the modest constraints of the problem. It was illustrated that there were a number of generic alternatives to what we have seen to date. These alternatives, admirably thought out by the winning entrants, showed that it was possible to build good domestic architecture in Vancouver for a similar cost, to meet developer and market needs with houses that could respond to different neighbourhood contexts. The houses themselves solved the problems of siting and appearance, providing enclosed private outside space and better side yard configurations. The houses were brought "down to earth" again with immediate access to garden spaces, a better scale and house plan was achieved and above all, the extended family and (illegal) second suite could be better handled in an adjoining small building on the lane side.

Congratulations to the winners and the runners up.

Gary Hiscox
Manager of
Special Projects
Canada Mortgage
& Housing Corporation

The much maligned Vancouver Special is an ingenious and affordable housing solution which satisfies a range of differing family needs. This characteristic can be attributed to the undeveloped space at the lower level which may be modified to accommodate a range of home activities, to house the extended family or provide a separate suite bringing revenue to the owner and a more intensive use of the city infrastructure. The provision of this undeveloped space however poses its own set of problems such as concerns with fire and noise transmission when the space is used as an illegal suite to a generally poor environment for some activities which are undertaken either inside or outside of the building.

It is however of interest to note that the research which has been undertaken on the Special, although brief, suggests that dissatisfaction with the housing form emanates not from people living there but from neighbours and passersby.

This may suggest that the quality of the Special, the degree to which residents may undertake normal day to day activities, the durability of materials and building systems, the appearance of housing and the association it has for residents and others, the building context both natural and man-made, or concerns of managing and maintaining space are readily traded off by residents in order to obtain a large yet ambiguous and affordable space which can be modified to suit their needs. The value created by the Special in dollar and other

terms has been made possible by a supportive development process comprising merchant builders, plans services, zoning and building by-laws, review processes and lending institutions in response to an obvious market demand.

The New Vancouver Special Competition therefore represents a significant challenge to the profession. Surprisingly, few solutions offered by the participants explored the demographic changes that are occurring across the city, the implication this has for family formation or the need for and use of ambiguous space of the type associated with the Special. Concomitantly, there appeared to be few solutions flowing from such analysis in the form of alternative dwelling configurations. However, the competition does suggest the genesis of a new generic solution to the Special based on the re-emergent form loosely associated with the Smithson's "pavilion and route" or more familiarly the "coach house" or "garden cottage" joined to the main dwelling. A reordering of space can therefore be inferred from the four room deep bungalow and on to the narrow lot over an undeveloped space toward that of 1½, 2 or 2½ storey dwelling with a universal plan and an undeveloped ancillary building at the rear or the lot.

The validity of this New Vancouver Special now becomes the challenge to those other actors of the development process who have so readily embraced its antecedent. Its value remains to be tested.

Entrant
Stuart Howard
California Polytech,
San Luis Obispo, 1973

Team
Dimas Craveiro

The concepts used to generate this design address the following concerns: massing and the relationship between new housing and the existing stock that it may adjoin, the need for more private open space in a dense urban setting, the desire to

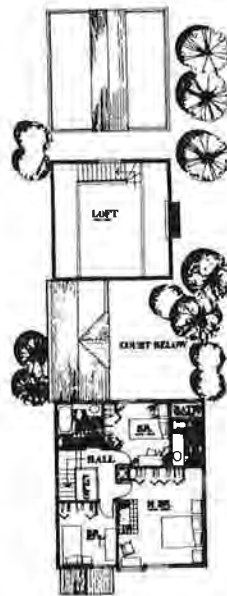
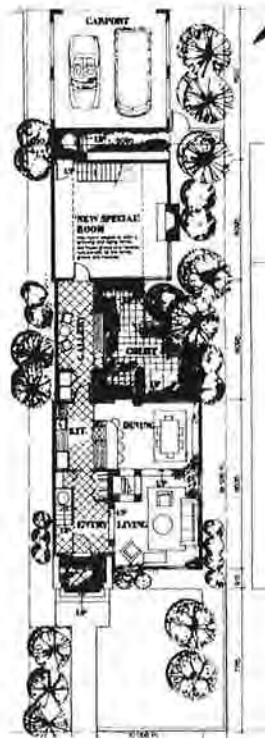
add more variety to the appearance of the housing while setting a street rhythm, and allowing for the dynamics of a changing family.

Reflecting traditional housing in Vancouver, the design has vertical massing with steep roof

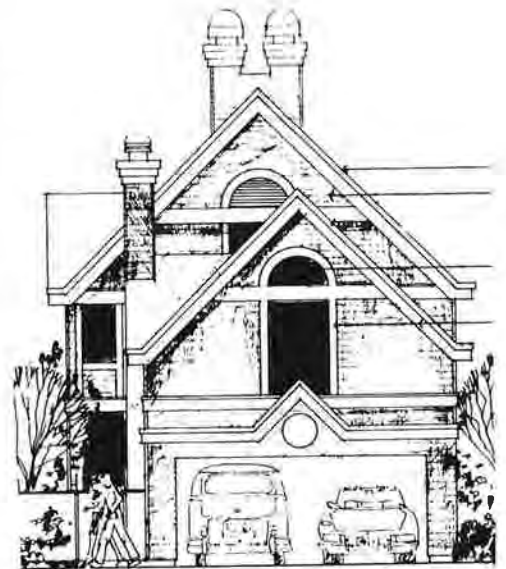
slopes, and the materials used are in keeping with the materials of older Vancouver houses — lap siding, corner boards, divided window lites, and wide window casings.

By delegating the carport to the rear of the site and using the “New

Special Room” as an edge, a private court is created off the rear of the “main” house with direct access from the dining room. This open space treatment in turn encourages a zero lot-line type of interlocking open spaces for repeating or side-by-

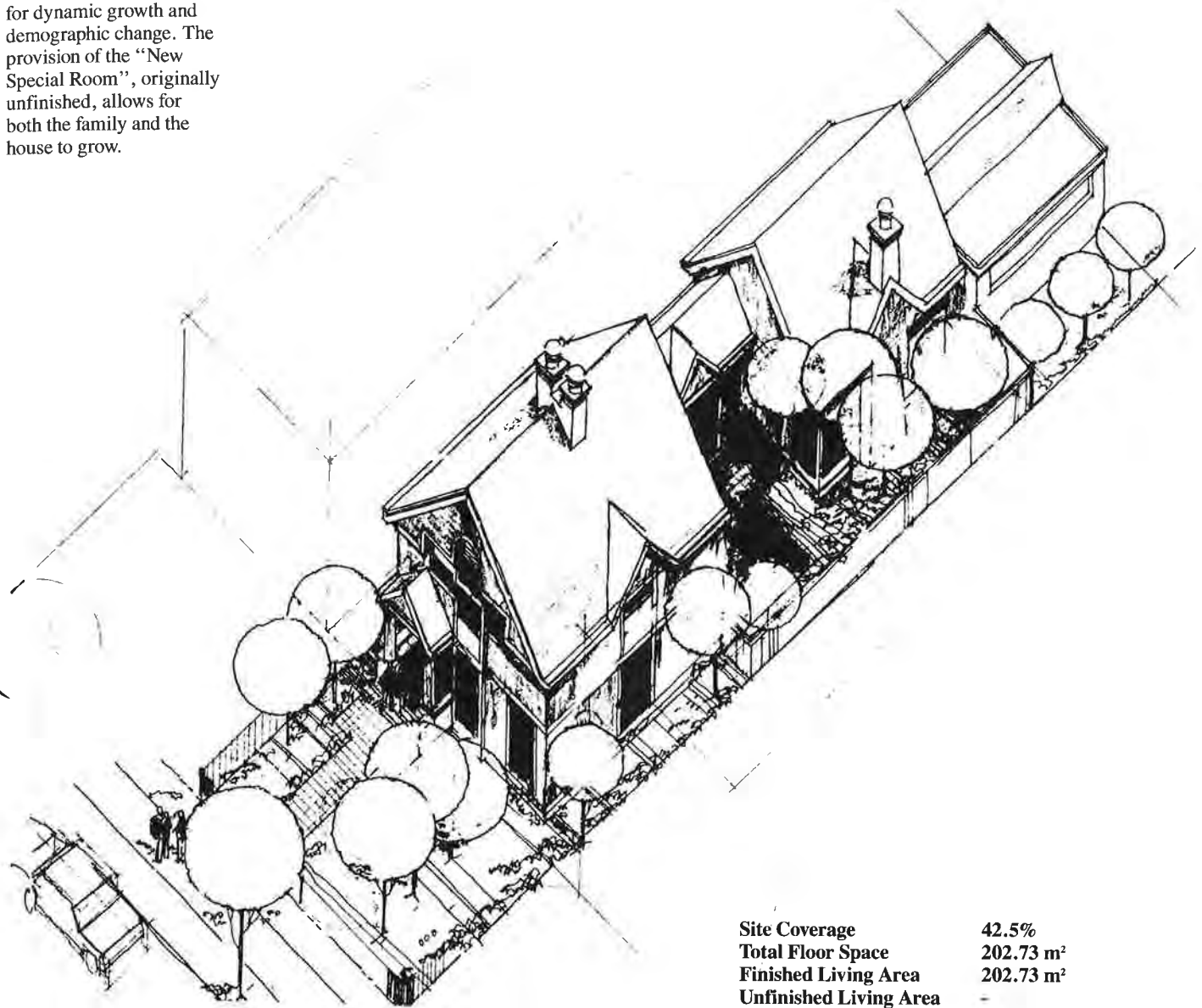


UPPER FLOOR
SCALE 1/4"



side developments.

The proposed New Vancouver Special allows for dynamic growth and demographic change. The provision of the "New Special Room", originally unfinished, allows for both the family and the house to grow.



Site Coverage	42.5%
Total Floor Space	202.73 m ²
Finished Living Area	202.73 m ²
Unfinished Living Area	-
F.S.R.	.55
Total Building Cost	\$66,548 (1984\$)
Cost per Square Metre	\$328.26
Parking	2 cars (garage not included in total building cost)

Entrant
Barry Griblin
University of
British Columbia,
1965

Rather than propose a single repetitive house-plan, this submission establishes a geometry for assembling building elements. This geometry gives homeowners a chance to create personal and private accommodation, to builders a "stick

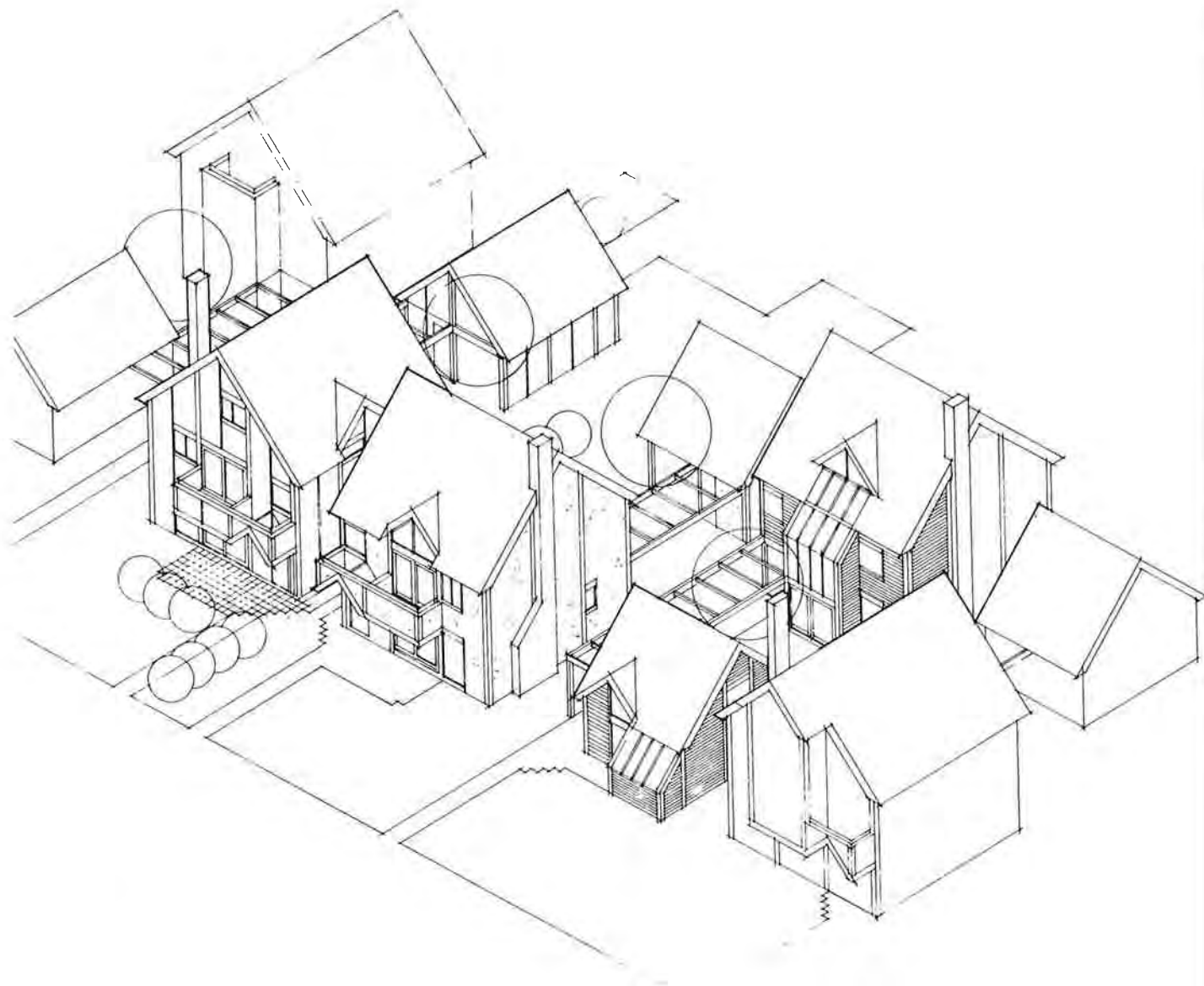
built" and marketable product, and to the community a variety and scale of housing that respects local heritage.

"Cubix — a housing geometry" is based on a simple "cube" element containing compact living quarters connected to a

separate structure serving initially as a carport. Between these two is created a distinct "inner" yard linked with either the front or rear yards. The square plan of the cube allows it to be rotated, inverted, or interchanged to suit planning require-

ments. A number of optional components can be added at different times throughout the lifetime of the house.

The size and shape of these two parts allows them to be placed in different arrangements on a standard 10.05 m x

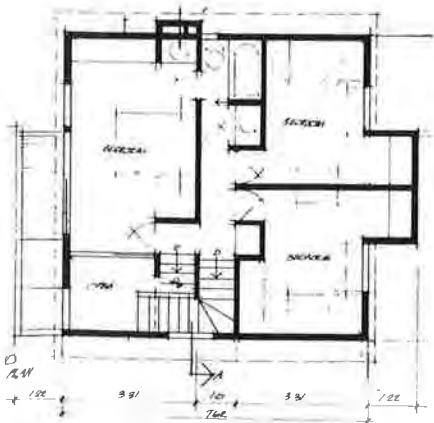
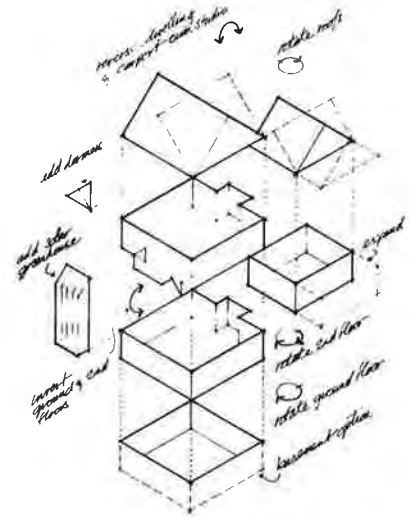
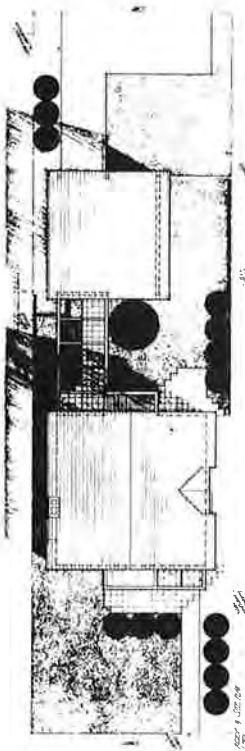
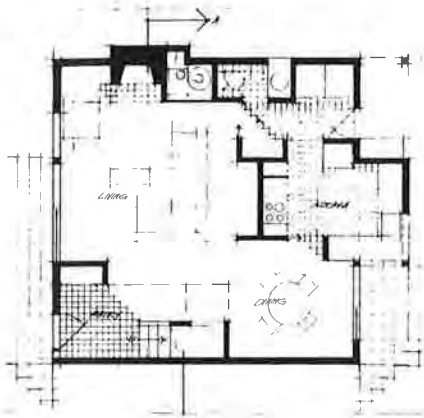
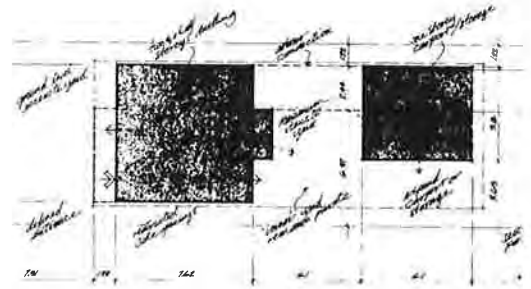


36.57 m lot. This is determined from such basic siting factors as owner requirements, direction of sun and views, proximity to adjacent structures, and frontage opportunities or restrictions.

The Cubix prototype conforms to present

zoning regulations. Nevertheless, recommended changes would include: (a) reduce site coverage to 30-35% of site areas, and/or (b) lower F.S.R., but tied to a formula which would increase it to a maximum, as site coverage is

reduced. Excluding below grade floor areas in F.S.R., computations would also bring back useful basements at minimal cost.



Site Coverage	29%
Total Floor Space	264.31 m²
Total Basement Space	117.66 m²
Finished Living Area	117.66 m²
Unfinished Living Area	146.65 m²
F.S.R.	.40
Total Building Cost	\$67,000 (1984\$ including carport)
Cost per Square Metre	\$569.44
Parking	2 cars (in carport or rear of site)

Entrant
Robert Grant
University of
British Columbia,
1978

Vancouver Specials, as developed over the past ten years, conflict with the traditional tandem arrangement of house and accessory building. Encroaching into rear yards, daylight and privacy become problems for adjacent dwellings.

Carports attached to the rear of the house, along with requisite paving destroy usable outdoor space and upset the character of the lanes.

The character of Vancouver streets is being eroded as banal facades supplant houses with

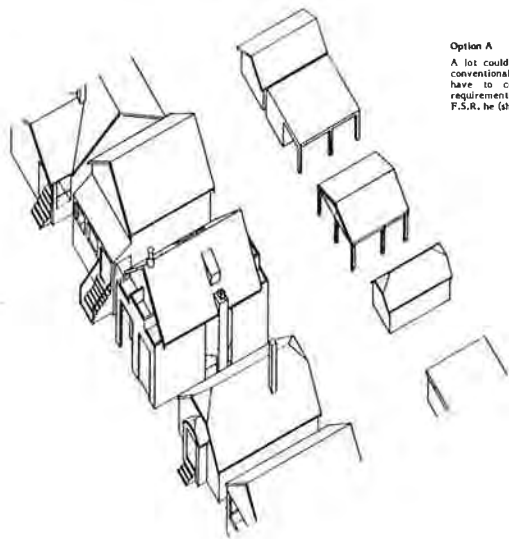
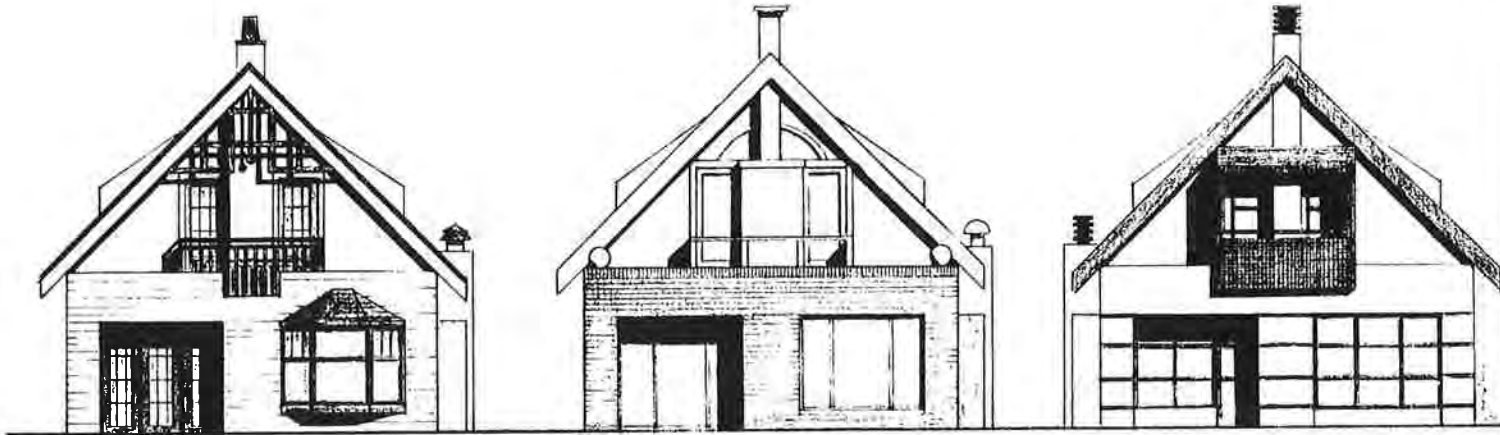
historic texture.

Second suites, while not desirable to some people, are the reality of today's economics and varied lifestyles.

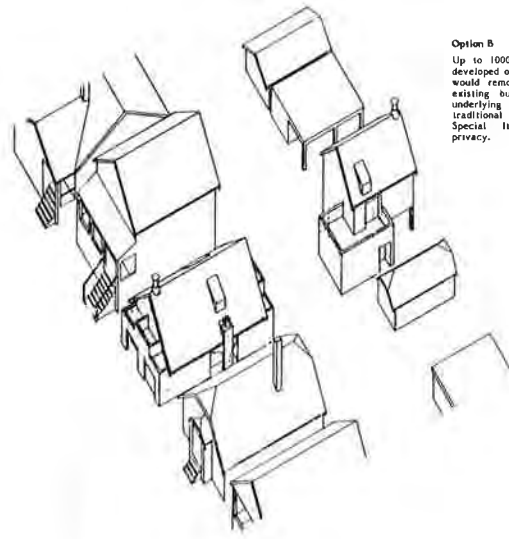
Meaningful changes to the Vancouver Special are dependent on changes to the RS-1 Zoning

Schedule. The following changes are proposed:

2.2.A Accessory buildings and accessory uses customarily ancillary to any of the uses listed in the section, including residential floor space, provided that:



Option A
 A lot could be developed conventional accessory build have to comply with requirements. If an owner F.S.R. he (she) would have



Option B
 Up to 1000 square feet of allowable F.S.R. could be developed over and around an accessory building. This would remove much of the pressure to demolish an existing building in good condition. The pattern underlying this option is more compatible with the traditional tandem pattern than that of the Vancouver Special. It is also superior in regards to daylight and privacy.

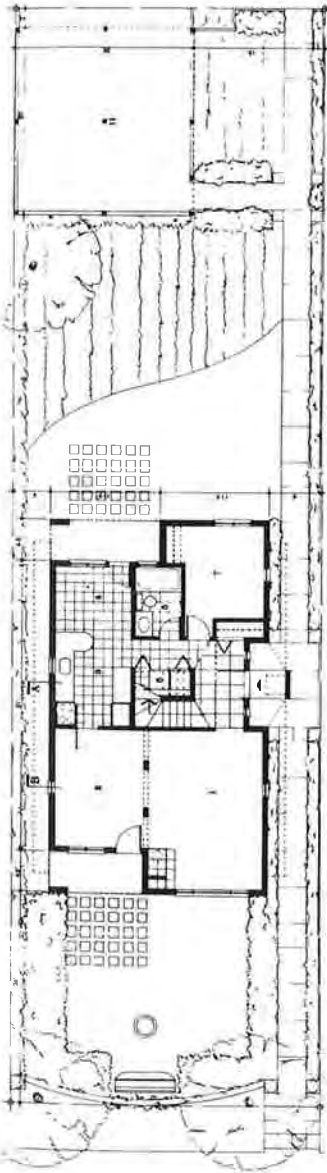
a) no accessory building exceeds 24 feet in height for the designated upper section and 15 feet for the designated lower section.
 c) the total area of all accessory buildings shall not be greater than 1520 sq. ft., of which 520 sq. ft. shall be exempt from floor

space calculations.
 e) the upper section shall not project further than 24 feet from the rear property line, nor shall it occupy more than 60% of the width of the site.
 f) the lower section shall not project further than 36 feet from the rear property

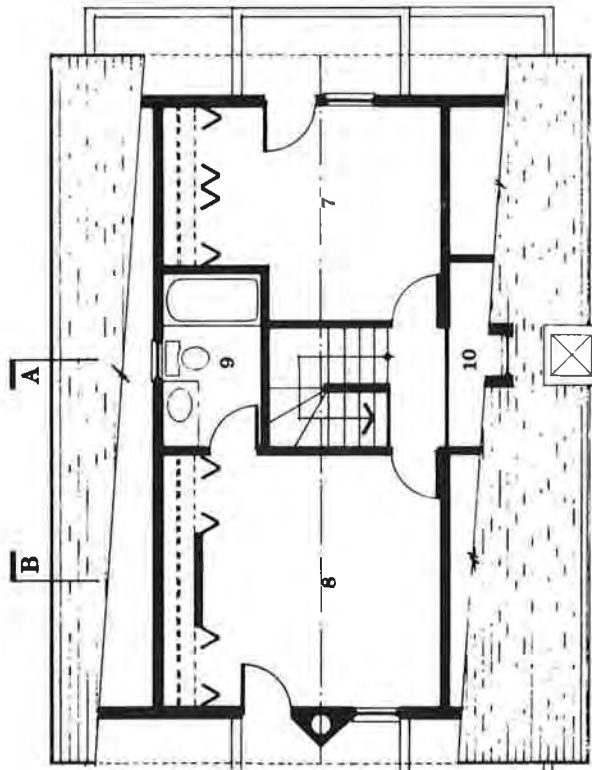
line, nor shall it occupy more than 80% of the width of the site.
 g) the accessory building shall be no closer than 25 feet from the primary building

4.6.1 The minimum depth of 35 feet will now read as 65 feet except that floor areas under 10 feet in height shall have a setback of 55 feet.

Rear Elevation



Upper Floor Plan



Upper Floor Plan

Site Coverage	34%
Total Floor Space	165.8 m ²
Finished Living Area	128.7 m ²
Unfinished Living Area	37.1 m ²
E.S.R.	.35
Total Building Cost	\$51,515 (1984\$ including 2 carports)
Cost per Square Metre	\$400.27

Entrant
Denis Arsenau
Laval, 1984

This New Vancouver Special is a simple solution to the problems brought about by the classic local house plan: known in this competition as the Vancouver Special.

The volume of this house, in its entirety, is simple. The symmetrical

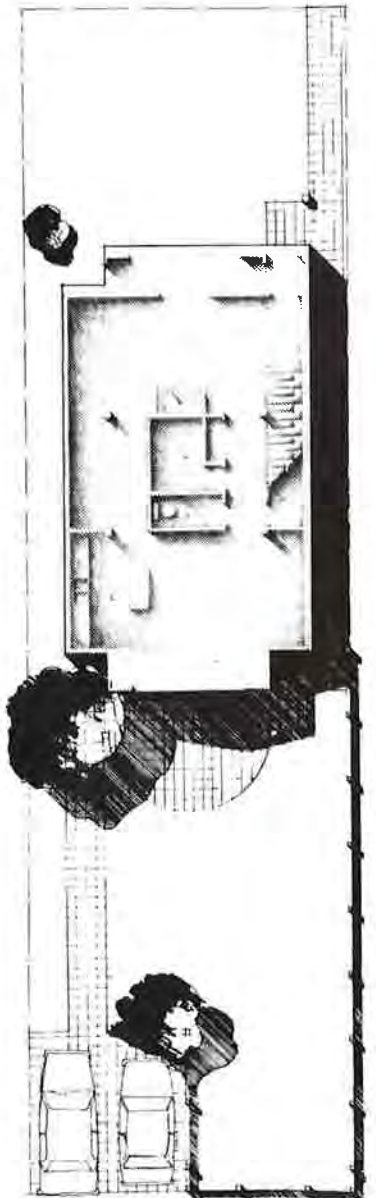
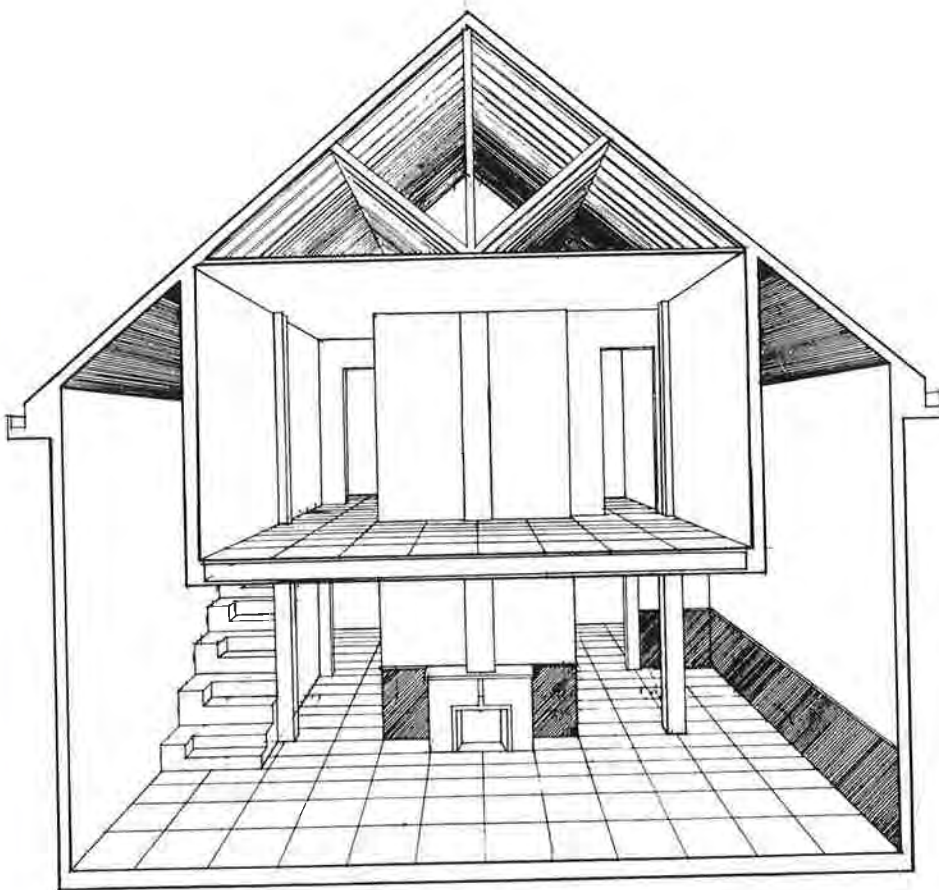
development of the plan, on a grid organization, permits it to be realized more easily and keeps construction costs down.

The intervention on the ground floor, taking the program into account, is minimal. A single, central room regroups services

(mechanical, laundry, w.c.) and divides the space. Living room, dining room, kitchen, family room pivot around this nucleus. Four structural columns reaffirm the division of the diverse spaces on the ground floor.

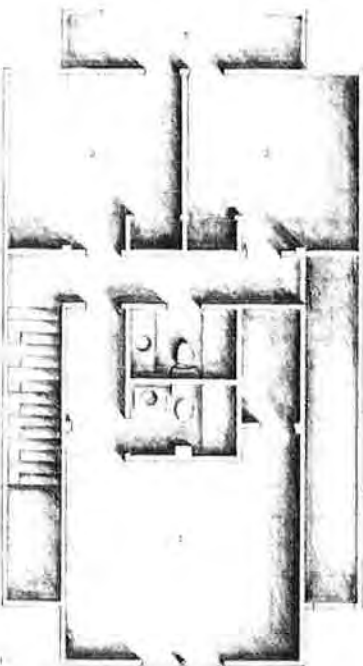
On the second floor, three bedrooms revolve, once again, around a nucleus. This central area is superimposed on that of the ground floor.

Equally noticeable, are two prolongations of space, one on each side of the master bedroom,



which continue up from the ground floor. These extensions, as well as containing the vertical circulation, give a more formal character to the entrance area, the living room, and dining room. They also modulate and enrich the space.

This house can easily be integrated into the designated area as the elevations recapture the proportions and dimensions of the neighbouring buildings.



Site Coverage	24% (including carport)
Total Floor Space	156 m²
Finished Living Area	156 m²
Unfinished Living Area	-
F.S.R.	.42
Total Building Cost	\$59,360 (1984\$)
Cost per Square Metre	\$380.51
Parking	2 cars (in carport)

Entrant
Sebastian Butler
University of
Nova Scotia, 1980

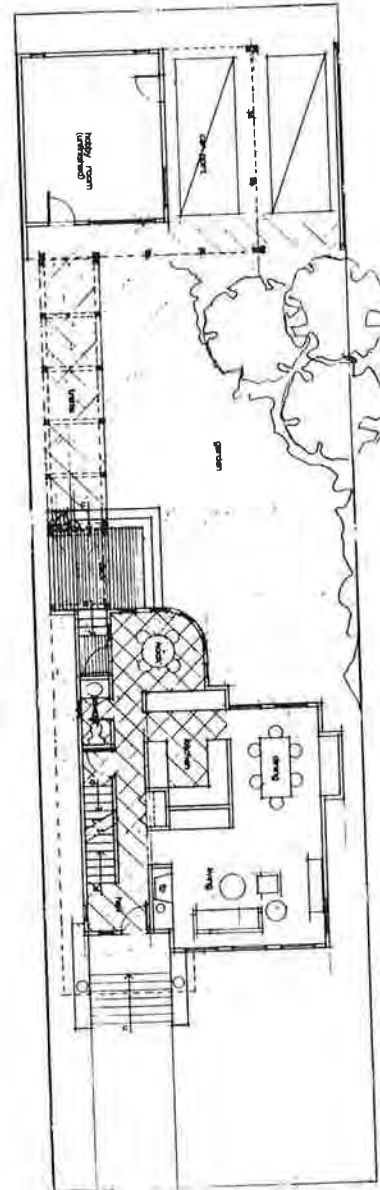
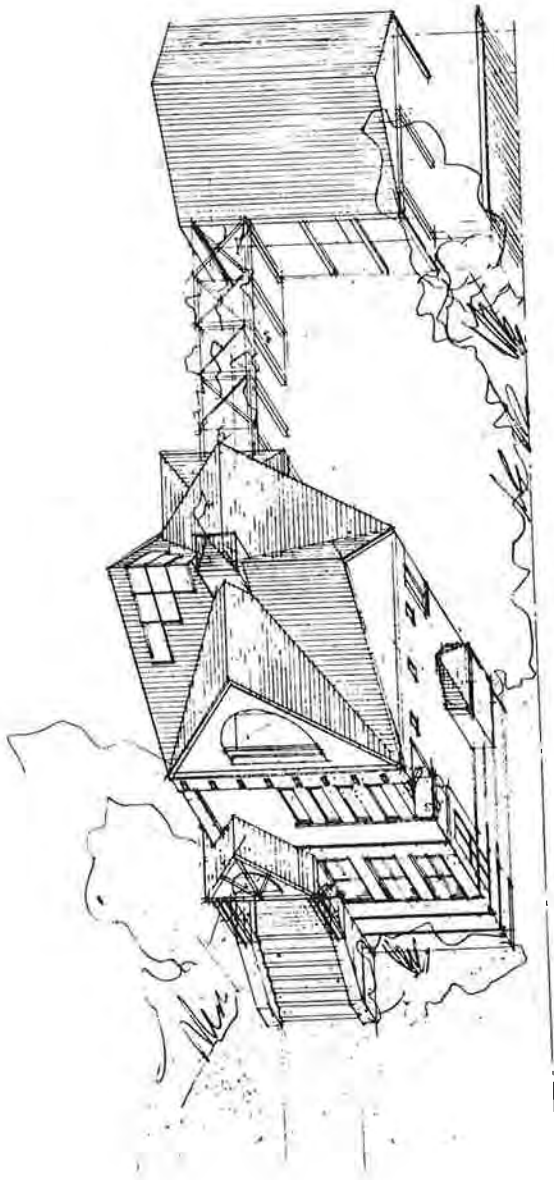
The New Vancouver Special coincides with a cultural transition in living. Today greater emphasis must be placed upon accommodation for non-traditional professional households, single-parent families, renting singles and others, all demanding measures of

privacy.

An effort has been made in this scheme to maximize both the rear yard, garden area and the use of an accessory building to house recreational and professional studio functions. This was achieved by building up rather than out; consequently engen-

dering a more urban prototype reminiscent of San Franciscan and European row housing. An elegant undulating roofscape is a contextual response that, combined with vernacular references, blends into a sophisticated yet economical solution.

The privacy feature in the scheme, a large cloister-style courtyard surrounded by a split parti and connected by pergola, adds a lively new dimension of living. The design intent was thus to minimize site coverage, maximize building envelope and then, through



inflecting articulation, create a fluid and functional split parti prototype.

Exterior materials for the scheme are stucco and painted wood trim. Interior finishes are painted drywall, carpet and vinyl tile.

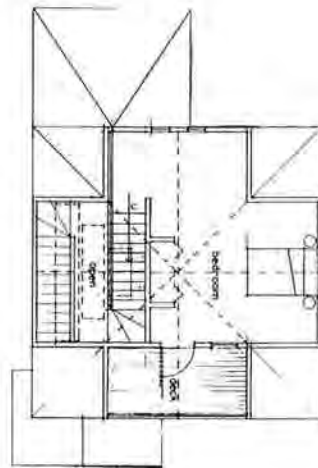
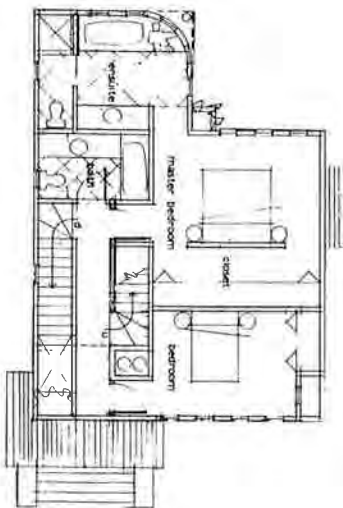
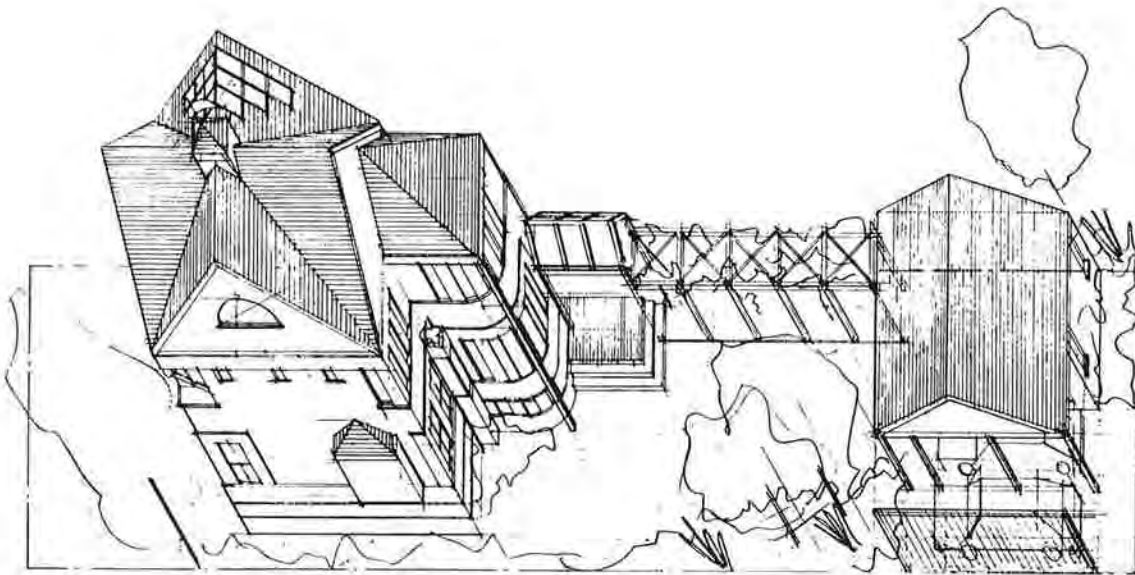
The proposed modification of the zoning by-law is:

Section 2. Definition
"Half Storey" means the uppermost level of a building where the floor area existing or proposed and having a maximum ceiling height of 5'0" does not exceed 50% of the storey below.

This aspect of the by-law is restricting the

owners' freedom of use of F.S.R. The City is policing would-be by-law violators at the expense of liveability. Accommodating this rule often has gymnastic and unsightly consequences on the exterior of the building as one attempts to jog up from 4'0" to 6'8"

(National Building Code requirement Article 9.5.2.1).



Site Coverage	30%
Total Built Area	258 m² (including garage, decks and basement)
Total Floor Space	221.25 m²
Finished Living Area	158 m²
Unfinished Living Area	63.25 m²
E.S.R.	.54
Total Building Cost	\$70,270 (1984\$)
Cost per Square Metre	\$444.75
Parking	2 cars (1 carport, 1 uncovered space adjacent lane)

Entrant
Michael A. Ernest
McGill, 1968

Team
Dorothy Currie
Cal Meiklejohn
Donal O'Callegan
Mark Pesner

The key is to beat the "Special" at its own game: make better use of precious land within current by-laws and stop using the zoning requirements as an excuse for inferior housing.

The City of Vancouver has issued a building permit to our prototype,

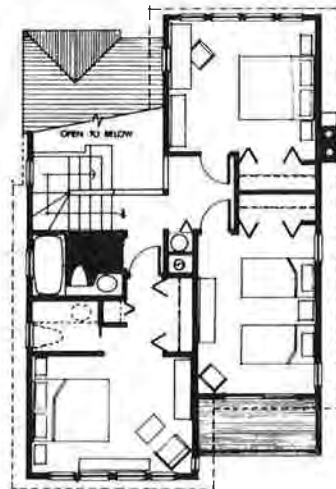
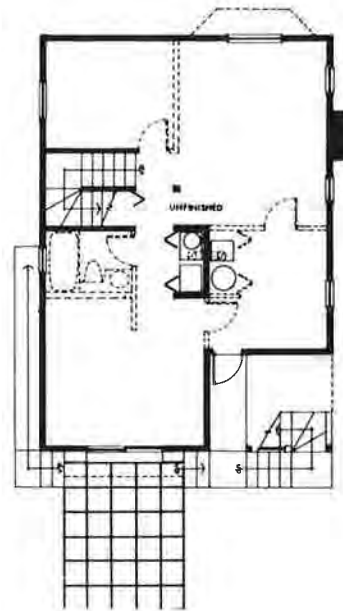
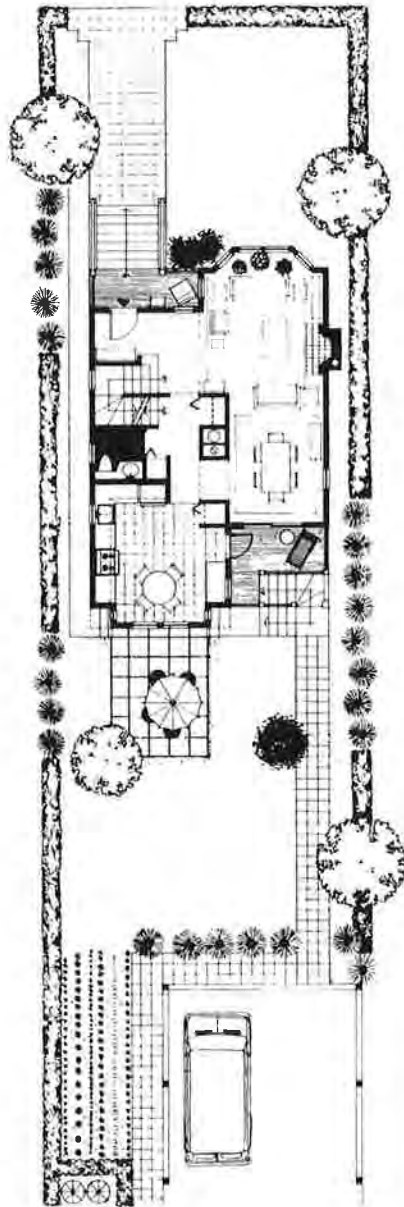
through normal approval process and in a cooperative spirit.

Major costs are determined by a building's basic shape. Our governing concept is to make this house as compact as feasible, for an equivalent amount of contained space. A

smaller footprint translates to less roof, less perimeter and less surface area (with downstream operating savings), shorter service and drainage runs, shorter spans and less site intrusion and other direct results.

The smaller footprint leaves more free ground,

more unshaded yard, more siting flexibility and more amenity potential. The smaller house width allows larger side yards, more light penetration, easier access, greater safety and more side windows. The three levels bring back the front walk-up, respecting the tradi-



UPPER

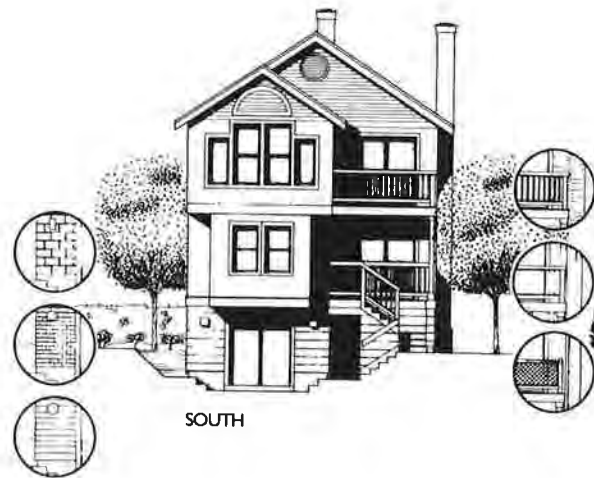
HONOURABLE MENTION

tional sense of entry and scale in harmony with the familiar streetscape. Siting the house forward on the lot enhances that rhythm while maximizing controlled use of a large back garden.

The tri-level house has superior internal zoning for privacy and circula-

tion. Energy consumption is reduced. More opportunity is provided (with larger front and back facades) for customizing options. The basic prototype is expandable to the back at all levels. It features stacked plumbing, heating and utility cores (including laundry chute);

cathedral entry; shingled roof; and, with its acceptance by authorities under existing by-laws, no unusual front-end development costs.



Site Coverage	28.3%
Total Floor Space	188.6 m ²
Finished Living Area	129.5 m ²
Unfinished Living Area	59.1 m ²
F.S.R.	.51
Total Building Cost	\$66,555 (1984\$)
Cost per Square Metre	\$513.94
Parking	2 cars (carport)

Entrant
Patricia Baldwin
Universite de Montreal,
1975

Team
Suzanne Carter

Key concepts of this submission include:

1. The provision of major and minor independent residences on the same site.
2. A compact, efficient floor plan (158 m²) with unfinished space (21 m²) for the residents to

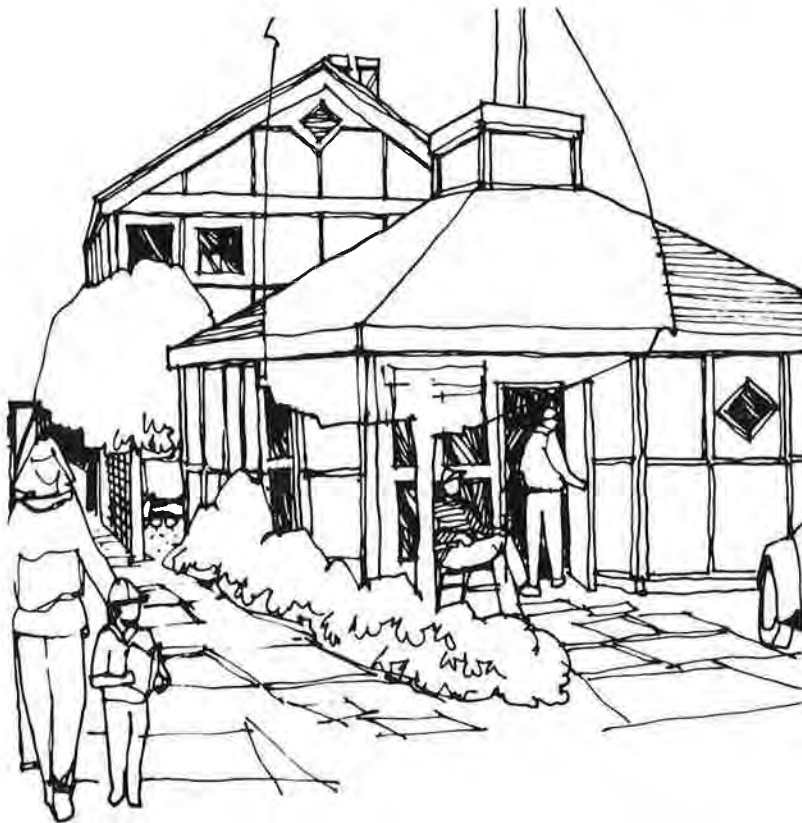
- complete at will as living or recreational space.
3. An exterior low cost skin structure that easily adapts to accept many styles and finishes.
 4. The inherent flexibility of the building's "fabric", and the potential of the carport/cottage to accommodate changing life

styles, allow for the introduction of this new house without disruption of a neighbourhood's established framework.

Two proposed RS-1 amendments are:

1. Ancillary buildings proposed for conversion to residential use be

- permitted a minimum of 1.5m setback from a flanking street.
2. Ancillary buildings be permitted to a height of 4.9m (to allow for the development to two storeys).



Site Coverage	25%
Total Floor Space	80.50 m ²
Finished Living Area	54.20 m ²
Unfinished Living Area	26.30 m ²
F.S.R.	.30
Total Building Cost	\$43,875 (1984\$)
Cost per Square Metre	\$809.50
Parking	1 (garage — 36 m ²)

Entrant
James Kerr
University of Oregon, 1982

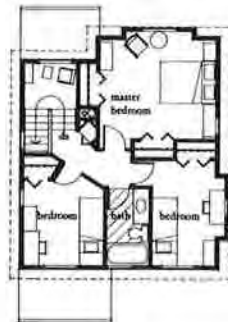
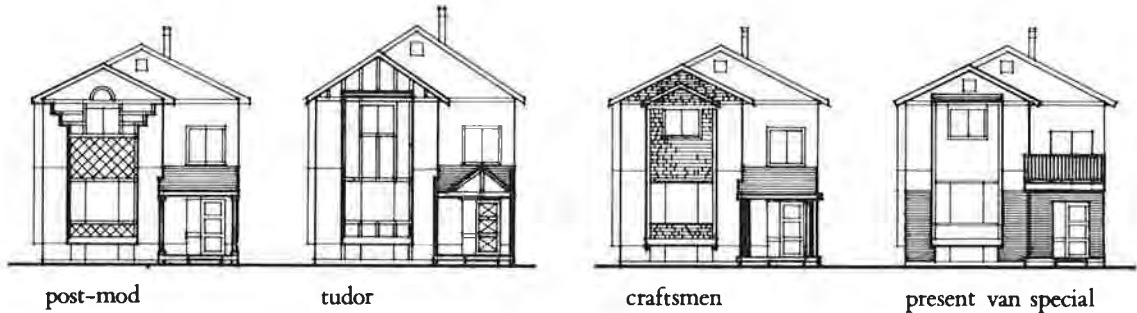
The design is in conformance with the existing RS-1 district schedule.

The design does not maximize the allowable F.S.R. but, by featuring two storeys plus a full basement, provides spaciousness and choices like the present Vancouver Special with better quality and a much reduced site coverage. (Future additions of up to 30m² to the

rear of the house remain possible). It should be noted that the design could be placed on a lot on the north or south side of a typical Vancouver street (most do run east-west). By locating the house virtually at the front setback, a large rear yard is created, some of which will receive sunshine even if the house is on the north side of the street.

The massing of the house is intended to be simple yet varied. The use of small cantilevers and shed-like additions breaks up the economic stucco planes. Of course, in plan, there would be right and left versions to take advantage of particular site features such as sun angles and views. There is enough money budgeted for integrally coloured

thermostucco which can make a great deal of difference in achieving neighbourhood compatibility. The roof pitch of 6:12 allows for a more normal roofline and the asphalt shingles can again provide colour. The front plan facing the street is akin to a "bow-tie" where attention to other materials and details is lavished.



Site Coverage	31%
Total Built Area	243.6 m ²
Total Floor Space	190.3 m ²
Finished Living Area	112.16 m ²
Unfinished Living Area	78.2 m ²
F.S.R.	.52
Total Building Cost	\$70,000 (1984\$ including carport)
Cost per Square Metre	\$624.44
Parking	2 cars (carport)

Entrant
Robert Lemon
Carleton, 1979

Team
William Reed

The more traditional house form than the boxy "Special" has been achieved by two means: by removing the car parking from the house mass and by creating a partial basement area which produced a raised entry level similar to that of older houses. The front porch and steps

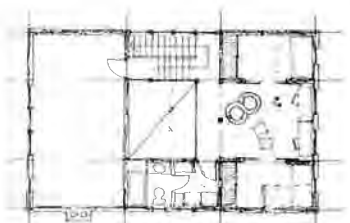
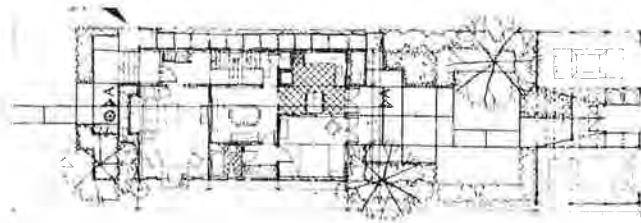
thus become important elements of the facade and streetscape. The image of the neighbourhood is considered especially by recognizing the distinctive look of early 20th century Vancouver houses. A variety of elevational "styles" are possible with specific references to those

architects whose work was influential on the look of domestic architecture in Vancouver.

While maintaining the front yard setback for the mass of the house, it is proposed to allow covered porches, chimneys and cantilevered bay windows, to encroach on the setback

by 3% of the allowable F.S.R. (Zoning By-law 4.4).

Future additional space in or above the garage or carport could be developed to accommodate studios, workshops, storage, guest space or a legal suite in the tradition of the coach house.



Site Coverage	25%
Total Floor Space	208.07 m²
Finished Living Area	139.35 m²
Unfinished Living Area	68.86 m²
F.S.R.	.56
Total Building Cost	\$69,394.25 (1984\$)
Cost per Square Metre	\$497.99
Parking	2 cars (carport)

SELECTED ENTRY

Entrant
Paul Merrick
University of
British Columbia,
1964

Team
Roger Bayley
Phil Burrows
Mike Huggins
Peter Ng

The design (like the current Special) envisages building the maximum potential floor area, but only finishing that required. Some options include:

- *Finish first floor only*
 2 bedrooms, 1, 1½ or 2 bathrooms, or 1 bathroom plus laundry.
- *Finish ½ of second floor*
 3 bedrooms with or without bathroom.

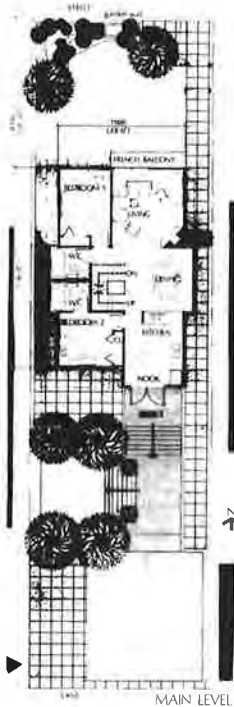
- *Finish ground floor*
 options range from 4 more bedrooms and bathroom to a 2 bedroom “in-law suite”.
- Minor partition variations on first floor permit family room off kitchen; study, or den or library off living space.
- Third bedroom on first floor with kitchen incorporating dining.

The design can be built with no changes to zoning but some are proposed to increase siting alternatives in response to existing neighbours and to increase liveability of the developed site:

- To allow projections of bays and alcoves into sideyards.
- To eliminate front yard restrictions and to accept proximity to street on

discretionary basis with respect to the neighbourhood context.

- To relax restriction on deck areas to better accommodate site conditions and owners’ criteria.
- To relax absolute restriction of the top floor on a 2½ storey house to ½ the footprint.



Site Coverage	21.8%
Total Floor Space	221 m ²
Finished Living Area	140 m ²
Unfinished at grade basement	81 m ²
F.S.R.	.60
Total Building Cost	\$66,800 (1984\$)
Cost per Square Metre	\$477.14
Parking	2 cars (carport)

SELECTED ENTRY

Entrant
Herwig Pemiskern
University of Toronto,
1965,
and University of
British Columbia,
1967

"Folk say, a wizard to a northern King at Christmas — tide such wonderous thing did show, that through one window men beheld the spring..."

William Morris

Objectives of this proposed "New Vancouver Special" include:

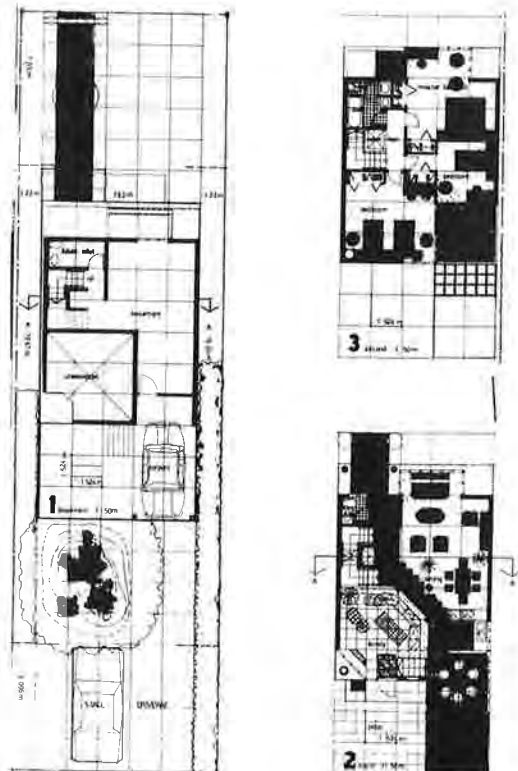
1. To minimize site coverage and maximize economy.
2. To provide a plan geometry more sympathetic to the house form

than to the apartment form.

3. To provide a larger and more efficient volume which is more economic in both construction and life cycle costing terms.
4. To incorporate imagery representative of the castle, cottage, palace,

shrine, hut and grove.

5. To relate the traditional, existing and proposed Special within the neighbourhood in terms of massing, proportion, height and imagery.



Site Coverage	25.48%
Total Floor Space	215.99 m²
Finished Living Area	157.92 m²
Unfinished Living Area	58.07 m²
E.S.R.	.58
Total Building Cost	\$80,350 (1984\$)
Cost per Square Metre	\$508.77
Parking	1 carport, 2 surface parking

Entrant
Kenneth Terriss
Massachusetts Institute
of Technology, 1958

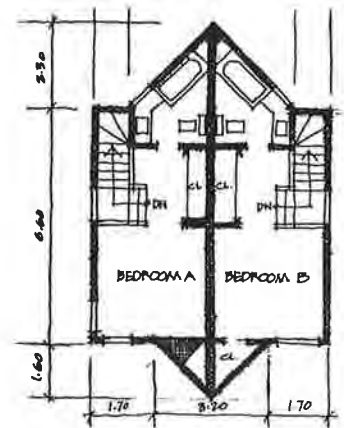
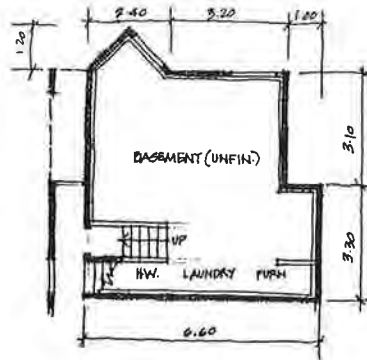
The existing special optimizes construction economics, conforms to existing zoning and building by-laws and provides cheap owner-built or finished, large flexible living space. A New Special should accept the economy of current construction materials and techniques, and should

avoid the complex issues which would result in challenging the present by-laws. The New Special should, however, challenge the short-comings of the existing Special's design (lack of usable exterior space, lack of separation of sleeping and living areas, rooms with windows onto narrow side

yards, and the "box-car" appearance), as well as provide for changes to the typical nuclear family.

One growing situation exemplified in this design is that in which two people or two couples share a single residence. Features of this arrangement are separate private spaces (bedrooms and bath-

rooms) and common living-dining-kitchen areas. Typical of this situation would be business or professional people without children, although one child such as with a single parent could be accommodated by developing the study as a second bedroom.



Site Coverage	24%
Total Floor Space	169.9 m ²
Finished Living Area	129.36 m ²
Unfinished Living Area	40.5 m ² (basement)
F.S.R.	.46
Total Building Cost	\$69,750 (1984\$)
Cost per Square Metre	\$539.44
Parking	2 cars (surface parking)

Entrant
UBC School
of Architecture

Team
Jacqui Metz
Dennis Moore
Louis Villegas

Stylistically, the image appropriates and relates to pre-1960's Vancouver Specials as context, and maintains the existing neighbourhood morphology. However, the front yard is reclaimed from its single role of public display, and made

usable through new relationships to interior spaces.

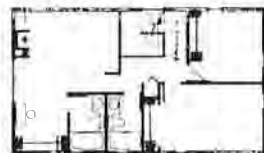
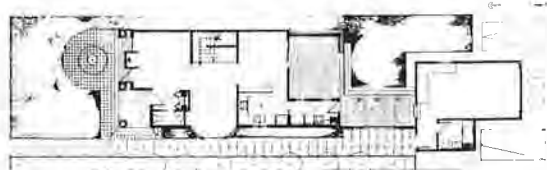
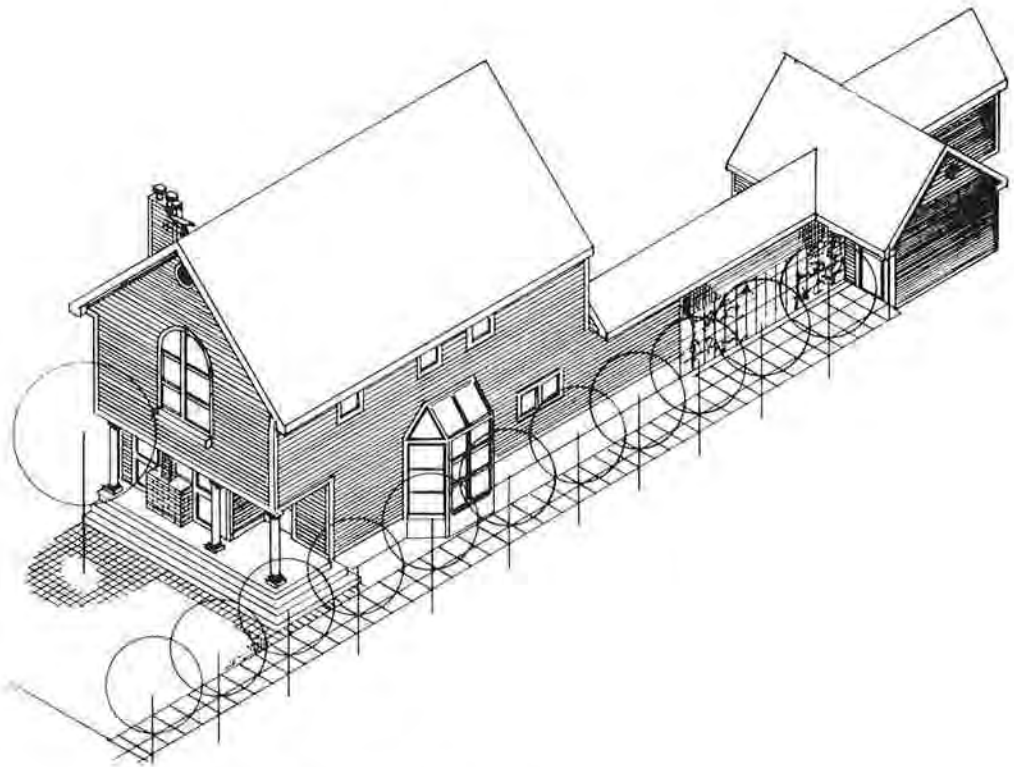
The traditional garage is reintroduced on the back lane, and it provides the unfinished and flexible space.

One amendment to the zoning by-law is proposed:

Change Section 2.2.A(a) to read: *no accessory building shall exceed 12 feet in height, measured from a line drawn half-way up the slope of the roof.*

The resulting change is seen in having a positive effect on the landscape by

encouraging the use of steep pitched roofs, lending a "cottage" quality to the buildings. The owner is rewarded with a more useful interior volume in the accessory building that can incorporate storage lofts without restricting headroom.



Site Coverage	36%
Total Floor Space	240 m ²
Finished Living Area	140 m ²
Unfinished Living Area	35 m ²

F.S.R. .38

Total Building Cost \$65,990 (1984\$)

Cost per Square Metre \$471.36

Parking 3 cars (1 garage, 2 surface parking)

Entrant
Thomas Zimmerman
Carleton, 1977

Team
Trevor Boddy
John Patkau
Patricia Patkau

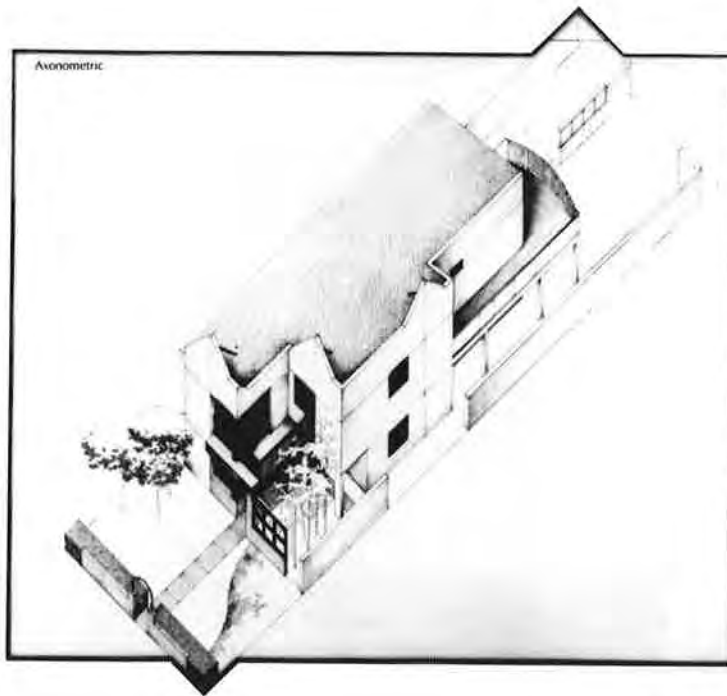
It is felt that the Vancouver Special can pass from the realm of "building" into that of "architecture" without compromising its efficiency, popularity or value. Furthermore, a contemporary look can be found that will be neither literal historicism nor formy modernism, but a

sensitive and low key elegance. This scheme has been directed towards adding sophistication, permanence and neighbourliness to the more prosaic qualities of the Special.

A number of design devices have been employed to add an archi-

tectural and urbanistic richness to the basic typology. A faceted street facade, a play of volumes, an L-shaped plan, side window treatment and an optional additional peak guard have been combined with modest and carefully located ornament and detail. The sensibility

which has prompted all the details — an overscale corner column, the memory of gable roofs, and brightly coloured wooden windows — is one of abstracted historicism, the implication rather than the replication of traditional approaches to housing in Vancouver.



Site Coverage	38.6%
Total Floor Space	215.67 m²
Finished Living Area	128.52 m²
Unfinished Living Area	87.15 m²
F.S.R.	.59
Total Building Cost	\$66,935 (1984\$ including carport)
Cost per Square Metre	\$520.81
Parking	2 cars (in carport or rear of site)

ALPHABETICAL LIST OF ENTRANTS

Denis Arseneau	Jack Hanna	Felizardo Reyno Hernando Cortez
Baker/McGarva Architecture	Heuft/Kaspar/Oye UBC School of Architecture,	Roger Romses
Patricia Baldwin	Stuart Howard	Scott Romses
Richard Balfour	R. E. Hulbert	O. Ernest Roth
Gerry Blonski	Robert Johnson	Robert Sandilands
Drew Bourne	Richard Kadulski	Sue Ann Sargent
Patricia Bourque	James Kerr	Schmitt/Griffin
Sebastian Butler	Jin Kim	Carl Selden
Arthur Boyed R. Mikulik	Romses Kwan & Associates	Arie Smits
Bruno Castellan	Kiss/Hewitt	Roxy Paul Sun
Foot-Weng Chan	John Hillifield	Vlad Syrovatka
James Cheng	Yuen Ming May Lee	Kenneth Terriss
Marco Ciriello	Robert G. Lemon	Ron Valuck
Clar/Daniels/Morgan, UBC School of Architecture	James MacDonald	Joe Wai Architects
John Clarke	Robert McGilvary	Montgomery Wood
Dalla-Lana Griffin Architects	Gordon McQueen	Eric Wormsbecker
Davidson/Johnson Architects	William Melville, Robert Boyle Associates	Thomas Zimmerman
Barton Drake	Paul Merrick Architects	
Michael Ernest & Associates	Metz/Moore/Villegas, UBC School of Architecture	
Bryce Ferguson	Terence Mott	
Karen Fleischmann Colin Fraser	R. Ben Ostrander	
Michael Geary	Stuart Piets	
Katherine Gerson Brenda Cha	Herwig Pemiskern	
Robert Grant	Earl Pont Architect	
Barry Griblin	Donovan Reeves	

306-1956 Haro Street
Vancouver, B.C. V6G 1H6

12 February 1985

Ray Spaxman, Director of Planning
City of Vancouver Planning Department
453 West 12th Avenue
Vancouver, B.C.
V5Y 1V4

Dear Mr. Spaxman:

As third prize winner of last autumn's New Vancouver Special Competition and as author of one of the few winning schemes which was based on zoning changes as an integral part of the "solution" to the Vancouver Special "problem", I have taken it upon myself to review all the zoning changes proposed by other entrants and to reflect further upon the efficiency of such proposals.

Of approximately 67 schemes submitted in the competition, 23 entrants suggested 56 changes to the RS-1 District Schedule. Certainly this does not indicate any great clamour for change. Indeed, the author of one scheme made a point of saying that he felt that changes in the by-laws were not necessary for good housing design, and he was supported in this statement by the fact that there were a number of good designs that fitted into existing zoning constraints. However, I feel he missed an important point. A good designer will usually be able to design something of value no matter what the rules are, but when 9 buildings out of 10 actually produced within those rules are widely felt to be of inferior quality, I think we have to seriously reassess those rules. It's not just a matter of the by-laws allowing the freedom to do something good, but of encouraging people to do something good, and controlling the freedom to do something bad.

Of all by-law changes suggested, there were three areas that were most frequently cited for change. They were relaxations of front and side yards and allowing for an extra suite in some type of coach house.

The coach house proposal is obviously the most controversial with the most political ramifications. However, it is the one idea that has the potential to solve many of the housing problems in the city. First of all, it has the potential to remove the pressure to demolish many perfectly good but undersized houses built between the 1920's and 1950's and replace them with Vancouver Specials. It is a pattern that is much more responsive to changing demographics, in that it accommodates extended families of diverse cultural backgrounds,

as well as people of limited economic means such as the elderly and single parent families who are forced into inappropriate apartment living.

Finally, as land prices again start to rise and as Vancouver matures as a city, it is a way for a denser more distinct urban form to emerge that incorporates the amenities of detached houses. While I don't advocate the immediate introduction of coach houses into all RS-1 areas, I think there are many areas, particularly those adjacent to busy thoroughfares and commercial streets, where the immediate impact would not be so great and where it would allow people to get used to the idea. We already have the RS-1B District Schedule as a model for such a proposition.

There also seemed to be a desire on the part of many competitors to reduce the size of front yards; this space being seen as a wasteful formal gesture. Proposals varied from reducing the required setback by four feet to ten feet, to allowing projections such as bay windows and porches to encroach into the setback. There does seem to be some merit in reducing this setback provided the overall streetscape is not seriously disrupted. Changes should be made so that a recent episode I happened to observe does not repeat itself. A friend of mine lives on a street where all of the houses have about fourteen foot front yards. One of these houses was recently demolished and replaced with a Vancouver Special with a twenty-four foot front yard. The usual negative impact of the Vancouver Special was even more extreme. Clearly, in situations like this, new houses should have to conform to the established precedent.

The issue of side yards seemed to preoccupy a number of entrants, with the major thrust being to make them more "usable". Most proposals were variations of zero lot line configurations. My feeling is that this essentially is a response to long buildings with rooms with only side yard prospects. It is a pattern that does not fit in comfortably with the existing context. Better to have rooms with a view of the front or rear yard and leave the side yard as a narrow path.

A by-law change that was brought up by only a couple of entrants was the rear yard setback requirements. However, the biggest problem that two different families I know have with the Vancouver Specials next to their houses, is that they project so deeply into the rear yards, thus decreasing the sunlight and privacy of their yards. Increasing the rear yard setback requirement would ensure that new buildings would respect the existing context, and make it less necessary for some rooms to have only a side yard view. The shortened envelope would force builders to put

these rooms on a third half storey if they wanted to maximize their F.S.R.

This change could be combined with a proposal made in the Baker/McGarva scheme and later by the author of the winning entry to restrict carports from being any further than twenty-five feet from the rear property line. This would have the effect of saving the devastated rear yards typical of Vancouver Specials and maintaining the scale and character of the lanes.

Other suggested changes to the by-laws included new height restrictions — generally to encourage more steeply pitched roofs (if one visual image seemed to dominate in the competition, it was the desire to find an alternative to the roof line of the Vancouver Special), new floor space and site coverage proposals and some minor changes to parking restrictions. There were also isolated suggestions calling for relaxations to fence heights, roof overhangs and deck areas.

It appears to me that if there is to be an improvement in the quality of houses built in this city, there has to be, as you point out, changes in the values and tastes of the community. However, as planners and architects, we have minimal impact on those matters. They are the composite of individual choices. Where we do have some impact, is in establishing building envelopes that: respect the traditional patterns found in the city, respond to changing cultural and socio-economic conditions of its citizens, and allow for a fair degree of individual choice within a collective framework.

While I am aware of the difficulty in coming to a consensus on what should be done about what is a very serious problem, I don't feel any significant change will come from the people who build them until they are forced to by changes in the zoning by-laws. I am interested in finding out what strategies the Planning Department might be considering, and I would be eager to share and expand on the ideas I have.

Sincerely,

Rob Grant

c.c. Vancouver League for Studies in Architecture
and the Environment