

Home

MID-CENTURY MODERN

The trick to updating middle-aged homes

HADANI DITMARS

Mid-century modern architecture is revered by a whole new generation of design lovers. But half a century on, many of these classic, clean-lined homes are showing their age. And increasingly, their owners are having to navigate the fine line between museumizing and contemporizing.

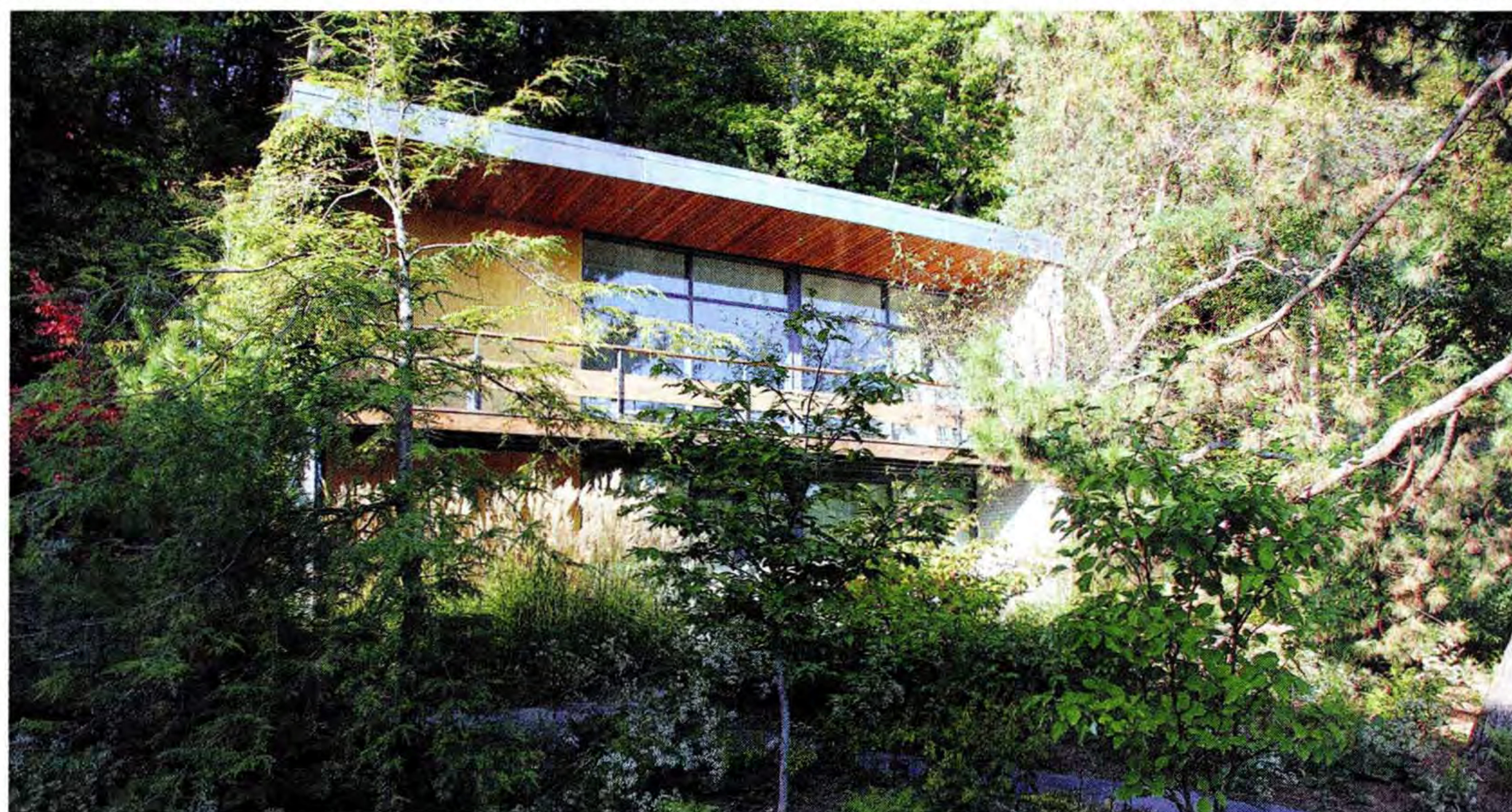
When dealing with “boomer” houses, how does one balance comfort with conformity to the architect’s original vision? While tricky issues around heritage and renovations have long plagued owners of, say, Victorian homes in Toronto, or Arts and Crafts-style houses in Vancouver, now residents of mid-century classics are facing new challenges.

Challenges like sourcing 1950s fawn beige bathroom fixtures from a shop halfway across the continent, or visiting dozens of stores to find the right replacement for a dappled glass window – just two examples of Vancouver homeowner Francesca Patterson’s efforts to preserve the integrity of her 1953 bungalow.

The house, designed by celebrated West Coast architect Fred Hollingsworth, features large overhanging eaves, expansive windows, Japanese-inspired landscaping and a true indoor/outdoor aesthetic. After buying it in 2001, Patterson and her husband made the decision to “respect the Hollingsworth vision and enjoy what that brings.”

That meant that when the original Japanese-style wooden bridge needed replacing, it was done with great care. Rather than running perpendicular to the rails, its slats had to be angled parallel to the house’s east-west axes, in keeping with its cruciform symmetry.

“We wanted to maintain the architectural integrity of the house and garden,” Patterson says.



Toronto firm Agathom renovated this 1954 Irving Grossman gem by peeling back the siding to expose its ‘purity.’

Even with a household of teenagers, she notes, “We accepted the house and the experience of living in it ... [so] it was not difficult to resist ideas about contemporizing it.”

While exceptions were made for modern technology such as a big-screen TV, the house otherwise retains its period feel with of-the-era furniture, lighting fixtures and colour palette. And there was a real aesthetic payoff to such design dedication: enjoying the intimate scale of the open-plan house, the joys of a mature Japanese garden and exquisite siting amid tall cedars. Details “like noticing the way the cathedral ceiling is illuminated above the valances, or the way the trees catch the light” continue to delight.

“It never feels like living in a museum here,” Patterson says. “The house feels contemporary because of the success of the design.”

For Adam Thom, son of the great mid-century Canadian architect Ron Thom, “Successful buildings in their DNA must be

adaptive to reuse.” Still, he acknowledges that people’s requirements of a home can “change dramatically in a generation. Issues like how closed off is the kitchen? How formal is the entranceway?”

Thom’s firm Agathom recently updated a 1954 Irving Grossman house in Toronto’s Hoggs Hollow. “My client bought it from the second owner and it was in a bad state of decay. But he didn’t want to replicate it – he wanted to respectfully renovate it.”

The solution was to peel back the aluminum siding and clear out some of the rot to reveal the home’s mid-century “purity” and sense of “optimism.” Original brick was exposed, old plywood soffits replaced by clear cedar, and Grossman’s original white-on-white palette given some colour. The existing pool was resurfaced and updated with a playful ribbon pattern.

“We carefully sought out a new language for the building,” Thom explains, “but in keeping with the original era and vernacular.”

While he believes the key to renovating older homes is to find a harmonious marriage between original architectural intent and current necessity, he acknowledges it can be tough. Especially in the case of some of his own father’s originals – like the Fraser house in a Toronto ravine (renovated by Altius) and the Frum house (revamped by Brigitte Shim of Shim-Sutcliffe Architects).

“My dad designed these deep very West Coast houses with low lighting – very sensual, gorgeous spaces full of natural cedar – but if you tried to read a newspaper or do regular domestic stuff – it was challenging.”

In both cases, with new owners and new architects, he notes that “the challenge was ‘how do you make them more livable – and better lit?’”

Thom commends the architects’ work, but admits that since his father’s designs were so complete – “everything was programmed down to the last detail” – he would have preferred them “to

remain truly magical and unchanged.”

Vancouver actor/screenwriter Chip Mitchell bought the last of the Arthur Erickson-designed Monteverdi Estates – 18 homes nestled into West Vancouver rainforest overlooking the water – in 2007. For him, renovating is all about respecting the architect’s original intent.

Designed in 1979, the house features sheer glass walls and flying buttresses that recall elements of Erickson’s impressive Museum of Anthropology. As part of an integrated community, the renovated home would have to respect siting in terms of both the natural world and the neighbours.

Mitchell’s own update followed a 1994 reno (which received Erickson’s blessing after the fact) that saw the house gutted and liberated from its dated early eighties interiors. The kitchen area was opened up and joined to the family room, and the melamine with oak strip panelling on cabinets was replaced with maple. A large Brazilian U-shaped granite slab that seats 12 people was built at the centre of the new space.

When it came time to replace the cedar stairs in 2012, says Mitchell, he added rimless ¾-inch glass – and floating stainless steel handrails – and did the same on exterior decks. Like method-acting architecture, Mitchell says he had to “get into the head of the architect and ask myself what would Arthur have done?” Based on nineties-era building materials Erickson employed in other houses, Mitchell decided his solution was architecturally correct.

But he draws the line at a neighbour’s addition of another storey on one of the houses, all of which were sited not only to maximize views of water and forest, but also to avoid having to view another’s roof line. “Some things are sacred,” he says.

Special to The Globe and Mail