

Photographer captures the character of B.C. architecture

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Selwyn Pullan isn't as well known as west coast modern architects like Arthur Erickson, Ron Thom or Ned Pratt. But his photographs of their buildings played a big part in exposing their work to the world in the 1950s and '60s, when their careers were taking off.

Many of the photos were published in magazines like *Western Homes and Living*, *Canadian Homes and Interiors*. Others were done for the architectural firms themselves. He even took photos for the *Vancouver Sun*, for \$15 a pop.

Pullan is now 86, and has been living in quiet retirement for two decades.

But that's about to change. This week, the West Vancouver Museum unveiled Selwyn Pullan: *Positioning the New*, an exhibition featuring more than 70 of Pullan's vintage architectural photographs.

Pullan's work is as cool as the buildings he shot. He captured the imagination of the era, the playfulness, the beauty. And he had a real knack for finding the angle which showed the architecture in its best light.

His shot of Ron Thom's Forrest residence in West Vancouver makes it look like a living creature about to spring into the sky. His photo of the recently demolished Graham house by Horseshoe Bay is a study in how Arthur Erickson's design blended into the steep site.

As a body of work, his photos of Vancouver's modern architectural movement are a one-of-a-kind treasure trove, the primary photographic history of the heyday of Vancouver modernism.

"Without question, he is about the most important architectural photographer we've had in this part of the world," says heritage expert Don Luxton.

"He had a great eye for determining the character of buildings. They really capture the essence of the era. Many, many, many of his photographs were published in magazines of the era -- his style really characterized what was happening in the modern movement."

Pullan was born and raised in Vancouver. He joined the navy during the Second World War, and got a veteran's grant to attend school when he left the service. He chose to study photography at the Art Center in Los Angeles, "one of the most prominent art [schools] in the world."

L.A. was a pretty happening place in the late 1940s, but after graduating in 1950, he returned to Canada.

"I was one of the ones who had to come back, because they paid the tuition [for me] to go down there," explains Pullan. "Catch 22."

As luck would have it, he caught on with *Western Homes and Living* magazine shortly after it launched, and it became his entrée to the modern world. But he was also a working commercial photographer who did all sorts of stuff.

"My main bag was photographic illustration," he recounts.

"I did a lot of work for advertising agencies, BC Tel, lumber companies, annual reports, all that kind of stuff. I never did people. Mostly illustrations for ads. The building stuff was basically photographing for Western Homes, and photographing for the architects."

Commercial photography wasn't particularly lucrative, so he was careful about what he shot.

"I shot very few [frames], really. Because we were shooting on four by five film and packing 36 holders around was a lot of weight. You don't just go bang, bang, bang. You looked at the place, you knew what you wanted, and you took a picture."

He's a man of few words, Selwyn Pullan, and not one given to blowing his own horn.

"I just did it," he states. "It was a way of making a living, and I enjoyed it."

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ONLINE: See a photo gallery of Selwyn Pullan's work at vancouver.sun.com

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