

A home so special they're selling tickets to get a glimpse



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Tickets to get a rare glimpse inside Arthur Erickson's Smith House II in West Vancouver were snapped up so quickly that the organizers had to add extra tours.

JESSE LAVER PHOTOGRAPHY

When \$500 tickets went on sale to get a rare glimpse inside Arthur Erickson's Smith House II in West Vancouver, they were snapped up so quickly that the organizers had to add extra tours. Those tickets have also been snapped up, part of a fundraiser for the Arthur Erickson Foundation.

Erickson, who died in 2009, is Canada's most famous architect, the designer of Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology, Simon Fraser University, the Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto, the San Diego Convention Center and other international landmarks. But early on in his career, the Vancouver architect designed many homes too, including Smith House II, the second home he designed for celebrated artist Gordon Smith and his artist wife, Marion, in 1964. Mr. Smith died three years ago, at 100, but the prolific artist had continued to paint in his studio building on the property almost until the end.

The event this weekend is one of the rare times that some of the public will get to see inside the home, which recently underwent a sensitive restoration by Vancouver architect Clinton Cuddington, an Arthur Erickson Foundation board member.

"It's a special chance to get a glimpse of this building, because it's the epicentre of a lot of contemporary thought for architects, and an essential house that communicates the importance of the blur between a building and nature," says Mr. Cuddington, standing at the entrance to the house one drizzly morning last week, while doing a dry run of the tour. Artist and author Doug Coupland, who lives nearby, and was a long-time friend of Mr. Smith's, has offered up a side tour of his own Ron Thom house as part of the fundraiser.

“Erickson is a national and international architect and this building proves his residential propositions were no way local provincialism,” says Mr. Cuddington, who worked on the project with architect Piers Cunningham. “They were serious propositions to help feed the world in the same way that [Richard] Neutra did, or Frank Lloyd Wright. This house is the pinnacle.”

The desire to see inside the house is strong. At another fundraising event for the separate Gordon and Marion Smith Foundation, which offers youth programs in the arts, someone bid \$12,000 for a private tour of the home.

“It just shows there is a demand to see the house,” says former Vancouver Art Gallery chief curator Daina Augaitis, who, along with partner Andy Sylvester, Equinox Galleries owner, became stewards of the house after Mr. Smith left it to them. Gordon and Marion, a textile artist, never had children and Ms. Augaitis and Mr. Sylvester were close friends. Because Mr. Smith died during COVID, and didn’t have a funeral, these fundraisers act like a celebration of life for the popular West Vancouver resident, she says.

The house is off Marine Drive, near Lighthouse Park, on an acre of land, with a view of the ocean through a mature forest. The new owners have only lived in the house for a year, after they spent the previous year doing needed repairs to the roof, the floors and some updates to the kitchen and laundry room. Ms. Augaitis declined to say how much they’ve spent.



Smith House II, by Arthur Erickson. West Vancouver, B.C.
EMA PETER PHOTOGRAPHY

Mr. Cuddington knows it’s a formidable task, doing updates to one of Erickson’s most famous houses.

He was, he says, “absolutely terrified” at the undertaking.

But technology has advanced, and building systems have improved. To continue to use outmoded techniques would be a disservice to the building, which is a home – not a museum, he says.

And Mr. Smith did adjustments to the house to suit his needs over the years. Mr. Erickson had designed an art studio inside the house with beautiful, but impractical, white floors, which didn't make sense for a painter. So Mr. Smith installed brown tiles instead. (Later, he had a separate studio building built by the driveway).

But when he painted the cedar-clad house a deep forest green, Mr. Erickson was so upset that he didn't speak to him for a couple of years. To this day, Erickson purists are irritated by the change. The house has substantial exposed wood beams and trims throughout its interior, but the exterior wood took constant work to preserve. As he got older, Mr. Smith simply didn't want to deal with it. Neither do the new owners, and Mr. Cuddington respects that. They've also kept the grab rails that were placed around the house, a practical homage to Mr. Smith.

"To lock it in time is undermining these buildings," Mr. Cuddington says. "Everything needs to carry on. We can't let things sit as hollow monuments."

Ms. Augaitis concurs. She didn't want to become a "slave to the house," especially if she's living in it. While it's still filled with Mr. Smith's furniture and collectibles, eventually they will introduce more of their own pieces, she says. Being a curator, she's carefully curated the house to fit the context, including an Indigenous artwork near the entrance and a large piece by Mr. Smith in the corridor.

"If people don't live in them then the leaks will come and nobody will notice it for two weeks and then the damage really starts happening," she says, standing in the living room, which still has Mr. Smith's worn leather couch. "So you have to live, and you have to live in the 21st century, and what accommodations do you make for that?"

That said, she went to some trouble to find the right burlap to match the walls, which are covered throughout in burlap that has been painted white. The lightly renovated kitchen is only slightly larger, and the grey counters and green cabinets are in keeping with the overall mood. They barely touched the large white tiled bathroom, except to paint the cabinets. As for the garden, she's cleared out the overgrown laurels and overhauled it, with the help of architect Liana Sipelis. Mr. Smith, who was in a wheelchair in his last years, wasn't able to keep on top of the landscaping.

The house is a series of flat-roofed pavilions stacked on a rocky outcropping, positioned around a courtyard, with a nod to Japanese minimalism. It's a small house, about 2,300 square feet, but because of the extensive glazing throughout, and the landscape that surrounds it, it feels large.

The pond used to be filled with koi fish until sea otters kept feeding on them. But Ms. Augaitis has seen a bear come by for a drink.

The Erickson-designed landscape is as much a part of the design as the house, which was the guiding principle for midcentury modern houses especially on the West Coast.

West Vancouver was a draw for architects of that era for a reason: land was still affordable and offered up nature at its most idyllic. The hills and rocky outcroppings just pushed them to get more creative with their designs. It was common for artists such as the Smiths to commission architect friends to design their homes.

Sadly, a lot of the houses have been lost due to redevelopment, and nobody knows the number of Ericksons that have come down.

The Smith House is surviving because the owners understand its provenance, says Mr. Cuddington. Without that understanding, there'd be little chance of survival because homebuyers tend to value square footage over design and landscape.

Three years ago, one of Mr. Erickson's very first house designs, the Filberg House in Comox, on Vancouver Island, sold for around \$2.75-million. Surprisingly, the house, originally one bedroom but later expanded to four, with spectacular waterfront views has survived, but fans have concerns about its future. Like a lot of the Erickson homes, it's small.

But small was the idea, and it's something that needs to be celebrated again, says Mr. Cuddington. Mr. Erickson himself lived in a 500-sq.-ft. home, he says.

“There’s a lot to learn here about how to make small,” says Mr. Cuddington, who says he takes lessons from unique projects and applies them to smaller scale projects on the east side of Vancouver.

“I’m working on projects where we’re trying to figure out how to break a single site into three sites to put in 2,000 square foot and under duplexes, so we can keep people living in their communities and not in cars commuting to work. We are looking at the lessons of these places,” he says.

“I’ve never been one to think of these houses as curiosities that are separate from the way people live their daily lives. Our firm is built on the idea of working with cost-per-square-foot bandwidth.”

Adds Ms. Augaitis: “I’m glad you talk about the duplex you’re working on in East Vancouver because these houses weren’t built for the wealthy.

“These were middle-class people, and they were able to use fundamental, rudimentary local materials to build these houses for not an extraordinary amount of money. They have a modesty about them.”

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