
Bellevue Modernism Tour

Over the Bridge to Gracious Living



**GREATER
BELLEVUE**
Washington

A self-guided driving tour of

Presented by *Modernist architecture*
DoCoMoMo. WeWa

September 13, 2003



Thanks to:

This event was made possible by a Special Projects Grant from the Cultural Development Authority of King County. Special thanks also go to the following individuals and organizations:

Emily Anderson
Bellevue 50Fest
Bellevue Botanical Garden
Bellevue School District
Alison Walker Brems
Cascade Bank
Neal Christiansen and Neil Hansen,
Church of Latter-day Saints
East Shore Unitarian Church
Eastside Heritage Center
First Mutual Bank
Grace Lutheran Church
Shelley Hall
Hilltop Community
Jim Stamateou
Emil King and Steve Cohn,
City of Bellevue Planning Department
Russ Meltzer
Overlake Clinics
Phil and Vicky Oxley
Puget Sound Regional Archives
Connie Reed
Susan Thorbrogger
Jennifer Delacruz
Mark Wheeler
Paul Wu, Puget Sound Energy

cultural
development authority
King County Hotel / Motel Tax Fund



Welcome to a new appreciation of Bellevue

Members of DoCoMoMo.WeWa (DOcumentation and COnservation of buildings, sites and neighborhoods of the MOdern MOvement), invite you to participate in a new appreciation of Bellevue as the city celebrates its 50th year in 2003. Two years after incorporation, in 1955, Bellevue was named an "All America City" by the National Municipal League and *Look* Magazine. At that time, the city was billed as a community for "gracious living."

The tour will focus on the influence of the automobile, new post-war services, and middle-class suburban housing. The day includes an overview slide presentation of Modernism and a self-guided driving tour to key sites of architectural interest.

DoCoMoMo.WeWa volunteers will serve as docents for many of the buildings on the tour. Several buildings will be open for interior access including the Brown House, several Hilltop Community homes and Grace Lutheran Church.

Specifics

The map on the back provides locations of properties on the tour. A more detailed map of the Hilltop Community is on page 15. While driving, look for the Bellevue Modernism Tour signs to help guide you. Please respect the interiors of properties you visit—do not touch anything, open closed doors, or enter rooms that are closed to view.

Please note that baby strollers are not allowed inside tour buildings. Young children will be admitted only if carried by an adult. Also, you may be requested to remove your shoes dependent on the weather.

We hope you enjoy this tour and leave with a greater appreciation of the Modern Movement in Bellevue.

Graphics on cover, pg 2 & 3: 1957 Greater Bellevue Chamber of Commerce, courtesy Washington State Library

A brief history...

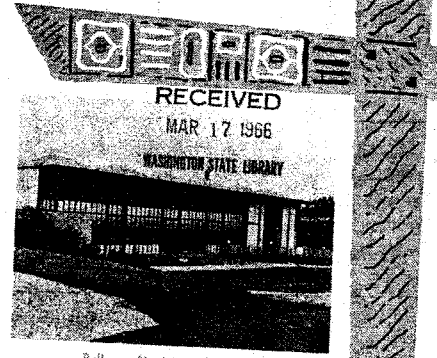
For thousands of years before white settlement, the area now called the Eastside was inhabited by Salish tribes such as the Snohomish, Snoqualmie, and Sammamish River people. The frontier settlement of Bellevue began in 1889 when Seattle pioneers and newly arrived immigrants established summer homes along the eastern shore of Lake Washington. Others established homesteads, and cleared areas of heavily forested land for farming. In the decades before World War II, Bellevue was farm country. Its fertile lands, in what is now downtown Bellevue, were ideal for fruit, vegetable, and bulb farming. Barns, family homesteads, woodframed churches and schoolhouses, small-scale commercial buildings, and dirt roads dotted the landscape throughout Eastside towns.

Initially, ferry service and private boats connected residents of Eastside communities to Seattle. Development in the area was slow. However, when the Lacey V. Murrow Memorial Bridge opened in 1940, connecting Seattle to Mercer Island, new development opportunities opened, forever changing the landscape of the Eastside. Ferry ridership gradually decreased and, in 1950, the ferry made its final run.

In the late 1940s, downtown Bellevue was little more than a cluster of shops on Main Street. But a hint of things to come came in the form of the construction of one of the nation's first planned suburban shopping centers—Bellevue Square in 1946. The new comprehensive plan called for a downtown that would cater more to automobiles, than pedestrian foot traffic. Super-blocks that ran along a grid of four and six lane streets became the street pattern. Buildings were set back from the road and were fronted by landscaping or parking lots.

By the early 1950s, the population of Bellevue had increased significantly and control on community growth became necessary. The citizens voted to incorporate in 1953 and the new City of Bellevue quickly established a Planning Commission with architect Fred Herman appointed as the first Planning Director. By 1954, the City had passed its first comprehensive development plan and people across the county were beginning to talk about the new "gracious living" just east of Seattle. In 1955, Bellevue was named one of eleven "All America" cities.

Welcome!



to Beautiful BELLEVUE

The Northwest's Finest Suburban Community



Published By
GREATER BELLEVUE
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



Neighborhoods were characterized by massive subdivisions of ranch and contemporary homes. Curved streets, natural landscaping and wide lots gave the occupants of Surrey Downs, Vuecrest, and Norwood Village the feeling of being in a rural landscape, yet with the automobile, they were just minutes from downtown.

With the opening of the second floating bridge, the Evergreen Point Bridge in 1963, the Eastside became even more accessible to Seattleites who flocked away from the city. Gradually, other unincorporated areas on the Eastside were annexed to Bellevue.

Today, Bellevue is a modern city that embraced the automobile and was, and still is, designed for it. The architecture reflects the era of growth and optimism. A contemporary style for modern living was the ideal for which Bellevue planned. On this tour, you will see representative examples of commercial, institutional, and residential buildings from this era of gracious living.



11. Hilltop Community: An Overview

During the post-war era, residential development in the Puget Sound, following national trends, exhibited a distinctively anti-urban path. The low-density subdivisions that rapidly developed in some areas of Seattle and on the Eastside were often custom-designed and sited on wooded lots with rural appeal with carefully oriented mountain and cityscape views. The Hilltop Community, initially planned between 1947 and 1950, is not only exemplary of this siting and design approach, but was a successful progressive experiment in social community planning emphasizing space, form and detail in design to serve the ultimate goal of livability and efficiency.

Located southeast of downtown Bellevue, the houses are sited away from the street and surrounded by natural landscaping, causing them to disappear amongst the trees. To take full advantage of views, streets follow a curvilinear alignment along the natural topography and lots were carefully planned and divided individually for development. The sixty-acre subdivision was divided into forty individual lots of approximately three-quarters to one acre in size and privacy was enhanced in the design of the houses and the natural landscaping. A natural greenbelt was retained along the perimeter of the subdivision and, along with a central community green, serves as neighborhood parklands equaling seventeen acres.

The architecture, while typical in many ways of the ubiquitous "ranch" houses of the era, is distinctively Northwest Modern reflecting their "natural" settings. All houses were custom-designed by some of Seattle's best known architects, including Perry B. Johanson (of NBBJ), John Morse, Fred Bassetti, Paul Hayden Kirk, Wendell Lovett, Lionel Pries, Tucker & Shields, John Van Home & Edward Cushman, and Lee McRae; as well as prominent landscape architects including Rich Haag, Glen Hunt, Robert Chittock and the San Francisco firm of Eckbo, Royston and Dean.

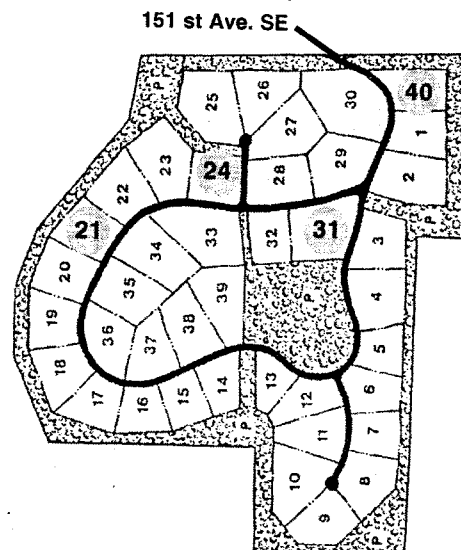
Founding members of the community included Johanson, Bassetti and Morse. They were mostly artists, architects, builders, engineers and faculty members in the sciences and humanities at the University of Washington. All were interested in creating a co-operative community that valued modern planning

and architectural design principles, the natural beauty of the landscape and a democratic process. All planning, including both policy and design, was done by committee.

Contemporary residential architecture of the 1950s was typically influenced by the "ranch" house type that had emerged in California. Such modern "ranch" houses in the Western tradition are characterized by their small size, informal spatial arrangement, low-pitched or broadly spreading gable, flat or shed roofs with wide overhangs supported by a wood frame, typically of post-and-beam structure. The exposed structure enhances the expression of the materials such as plywood combined with exotic woods, natural stone and extensive glass in window walls that open directly onto decks and patios. The patios and decks are always expressed as an extension of the adjacent interior spaces, a characteristic fusion of landscape and building in Modernist residential design.

Hilltop was published nationally in several journals, including the *Journal of Housing and Progressive Architecture*. In an article in the *Architectural Record* entitled "Houses that Typify Northwest Architecture," a Hilltop house designed by Bassetti and Morse is featured, along with several other residences in Portland and the Seattle area. This article suggests that Northwest houses are typified by the cottage form, the use of wood timber, a willingness to experiment, adaptation of contemporary international style, and siting to take advantage of the natural topography, vegetation and views. All of the Hilltop houses conform to these ideals.

**Map of Tour's Hilltop Residences
(identified by lot number)**



11. Reed Residence

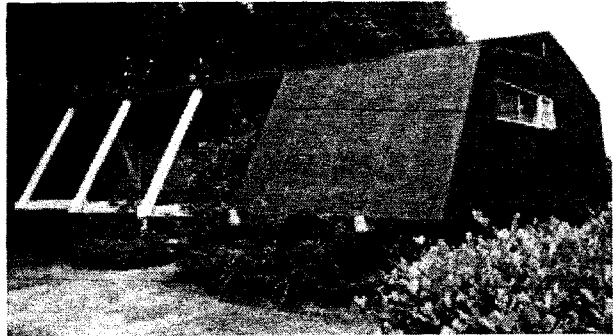
Lot 21 Hilltop Community
Architect: Wendell H. Lovett
Date of Construction: 1957

After several years of working for and in collaboration with Bassetti and Morse, Wendell Lovett started his own architectural practice in 1952. The Reed house is a good example of his early work. Unlike the ground hugging platforms of the Scheffer and Birnbaum houses, the Reed house is a split-level concept elevating the primary living floor distinctly above the ground. This is articulated on the exterior with a dynamic sectional form that extends beyond the dimension of the lower floor and seems to hover over the sloping landscape. Later designs by Lovett (such as the addition to his own house) would explore further this expression of an aerodynamic form suspended over the land.

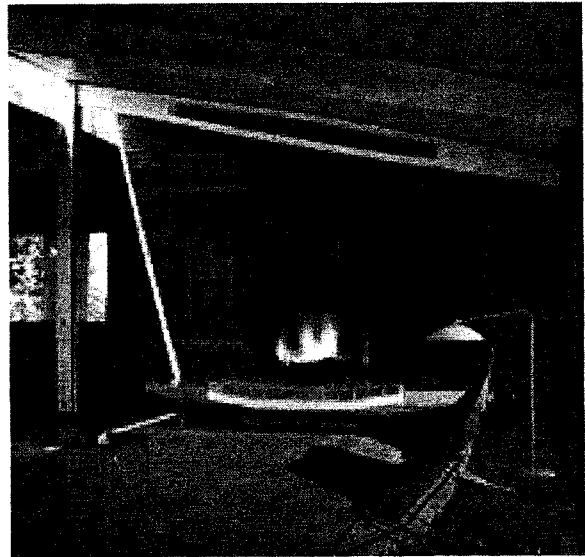
Site built trusses demonstrate Lovett's affection for using structure as a design feature in a sculptural and dynamic way. There is a range of inexpensive parts and materials throughout the house utilized in interesting details. Cabinets, stairs, fireplace and furniture also reflect the same innovative qualities as the house frame.

On the exterior the skin of the house peels away to reveal the frame and to allow openings for windows and doors. From the inside the ceiling seems to peel up to let light stream in the clerestory windows.

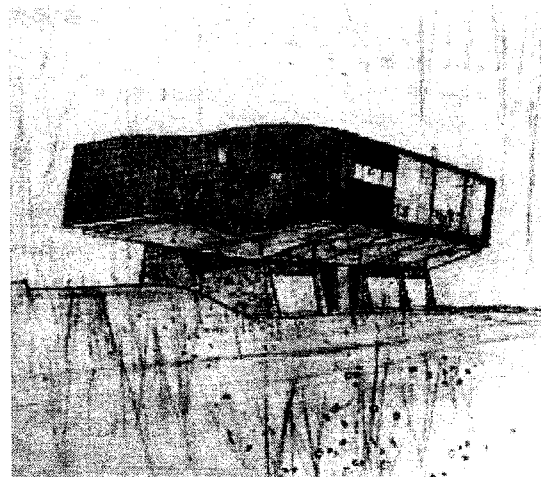
Like the Scheffer and Birnbaum homes, this house was built with a modest budget and demonstrates an admirable efficiency of design. Rooms are very small by today's standards, but families with two and three children were raised in these compact homes.



Current southeast exterior



1957 interior (Wendell Lovett)



Preliminary exterior (Wendell Lovett)

11. Scheffer Residence

Lot 24 Hilltop Community

Architect: John M. Morse (Bassetti and Morse)

Date of Construction: 1951

This modest home was designed and built for Victor and Beth Scheffer, some of the founders of Hilltop Community, along with their architect and next door neighbor John Morse.

The Scheffer home exemplifies an economy and efficiency of design that utilizes the site and views to establish a greater whole. The house is small, but provides multiple views to the garden and horizon from any vantage point on the main floor, thus pushing the perception of space beyond the actual enclosure. One unique aspect of the house is its placement along the top of the hill providing views north to Mt. Baker as well as south to Mt. Rainier.

The main floor of the structure is less than 1,000 square feet and is essentially a level wooden platform that has been conceptually shifted upon an "L" shaped retaining wall. The board formed concrete wall carves out a partial basement, but also establishes the original entry sequence to the house which was subsequently blocked by a garage addition in 1964. The entry wall leads into the structure at the lower level and is left exposed as it moves from outside to inside. Upon entering along this wall one faces a short stair leading up to the primary living platform.

Detailing of the house is simple and unself-conscious. Paths from the house wander through the garden and connect to outdoor spaces such as a picnic area or a vegetable garden. All this contributes to an informal "cabin in the woods" feel that is common to many of the Hilltop homes.

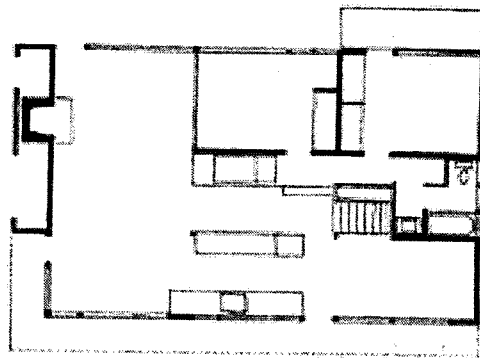
In his book on the history of Hilltop Community, Vic Scheffer described the architecture that characterizes the "contemporary" houses of the community: "If I may speak for the founders, I suggest that 'contemporary' is functional, designed more for comfort, utility, and internal beauty than for display. As though to acknowledge humankind's primal link to the planet, it favors the use of natural materials.... complemented by the lightness of space... It stands for honest construction...It expresses the richness of simplicity."



Exterior view



Exterior corner detail



Floor plan

11. Birnbaum Residence

Lot 31 Hilltop Community

Architect: John M. Morse (Bassetti and Morse)

Date of Construction: 1954

John Morse designed the Birnbaum house three years after the Scheffer house. It also employs the concept of a simple platform in the landscape, but this time using a concrete slab on grade rather than a wooden platform. The overall structure is unified by a square roof plan that consists of a carport at the leading northeast corner and an opposing "L" shaped dwelling that fills out the remaining three corners of the square.

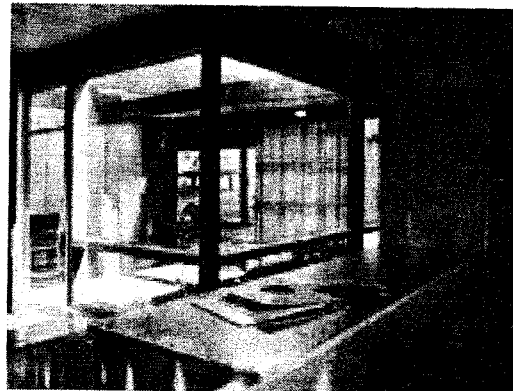
The house structure is a post and beam system using split posts and a panel infill wall system. (The original infill panels have been replaced with insulated walls.) This delicate structure supports the horizontal roof plane and allows sections of roof to be cut away to create a layering of enclosure and light as one moves past the carport and into the living space.

The interior originally consisted of stained and waxed concrete floors. The simplicity of the architecture acted as a foil, but accommodated, to the Birnbaum's furnishings such as several family heirloom antiques and many oriental rugs.

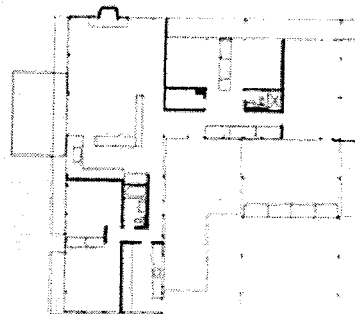
As in the Scheffer house the landscape around the Birnbaum house is a key component of the architecture. The main living space opens onto the garden and there is essentially no change in level when moving from inside to outside. The plane of the roof hovers low above the sight while the garden offers open space and the trails lead to the community pool and playfield.



Current entry view



Vintage interior view



Floor plan

11. Denman Residence

Lot 40 Hilltop Community
Architect: Tucker and Shields
Date of Construction: 1957

Beginning in 1951, the firm of Tucker and Shields designed several houses at Hilltop. The last of these projects was the Denman home of 1957.

In contrast to more modest and cabin-like dwellings in the neighborhood, this house uses a more formal language of Modern architecture. The influence of the Bauhaus architect Mies van der Rohe is evident in the balanced proportions and gracious symmetrical central space. This is further reinforced by the crisp orthogonal juxtaposition of walls and roofs and a rational structural rhythm of wood posts and beams on an eight-foot module.

The use of wood structure stained dark, in contrast to the wall and roof planes, alludes to classic Japanese architecture. This connection is further reinforced by the raked gravel court/garden that is viewed along the entrance walkway and from the living room.

The main floor of the house is organized about a central living room space with its eleven-foot ceilings, full height glass walls and grand southern views to the lower garden and Mt. Rainier beyond. This space is flanked to the east and west by side bays with 8 1/2 foot ceilings. These supporting volumes contain the master bedroom to the west and the kitchen/utility rooms to the east.

Details consist of simply resolved connections between posts, beams and window mullions, creating elegant modern spaces. An interesting contrast to this precise detailing is the primary interior walls which are built of lightly stained rough tongue and groove cedar. These walls provide a connection to a more informal architectural tradition of the region and the community.

The Denmans were serious art collectors. The house includes a mural by conceptual artist Sol Lewitt on the wall between the kitchen and dining room.

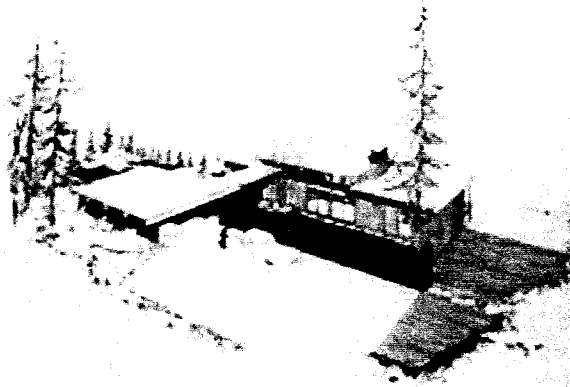
(See the Brown house description for further information on Tucker and Shields.)



Current east elevation



Current interior looking east; Sol Lewitt mural on far wall



Architectural rendering (Tucker & Shields)