



STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE
UBC THEA KOERNER HOUSE
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

5 MAY 2016



UBC Thea Koerner House

INTRODUCTION

This Statement of Significance has been drafted following early research into the design of the building, with a view to giving an early understanding of the heritage values of the various external elements of the building.

Background

The UBC Thea Koerner House, also known as the Graduate Student Centre, was opened in 1961, with the south wing added in 1971. The 1961 four-storey building was a residence for Mr. Koerner on top of facilities for graduate students: a lounge, café, library, meeting room and rec. room. Support spaces include food services, offices, including small apartments for a housekeeper and gardener. The two-storey 1971 addition added facilities for meeting and the administration of the Graduate Studies Program.

The original Thea Koerner House won a gold Massey Medal for Architecture in 1961. Its architects were Thompson, Berwick & Pratt and Partners – Charles E. (Ned) Pratt, Zoltan Kiss and Roy Jessiman – with Peter Kaffka Architect.

Thea Koerner, the building's namesake, was the wife of Dr. Leon Koerner, an important university philanthropist and the founder of the Alaska Pine Company.

The expansion of departments and degrees, and the growth of the student population following that war created a demand for student residences, additional classrooms and laboratory infrastructure at the same time that the Modernist aesthetic was in ascendancy. The post-war faculty grew more cosmopolitan, mirroring Canadian society's welcome of European populations after the war, and contributed to a new openness and thinking on the campus. New building on the campus was actively promoted to be in the Modernist idiom by the first director of the School of Architecture (created in 1946), Frederic Lasserre.



*Plaza in front Graduate Centre (Thea Koerner House,) 1960-69
UBC Archives 1.0162691.jpg*

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Description

The Thea Koerner House is the building set in a garden amongst evergreen trees at the northeast corner of the intersection of West Mall and Crescent Road on the UBC Vancouver Campus. The building is comprised of the original 1961 structure, and the 1971 south wing addition.

Heritage Value

The building is important as a prize-winning and published part of the Modernist expansion of UBC in the 1950s and '60s, its singular design, its association with Thompson, Berwick and Pratt and Architect Peter Kaffka, and its unique conception as a residence for the building funder and new facilities for graduate students at the University, marking an expansion of the University culture and cultivation of philanthropy for that culture.

The building is aesthetically important for its expression of this unique conception in its form, materials and detailing. Although

somewhat obscured by alterations since its construction in 1961, the original expressive elements remain and of great value to the building and the campus.

In a quintessentially Modernist manner the Main Floor floats above the Entrance Court, on slender square-sectioned columns and visually solid blocks of building that are back from the perimeter of the Main Floor plate (terms used for the floor levels are taken from the original design drawings). From the Entrance Court there was originally a clear view through the building to the trees and sea beyond under the Main Floor – a dramatic and dynamic engagement between the building and its naturalized setting. See the first photograph below for this original transparency as well as design drawings from the time.

The building also exemplifies Modernism's goal of giving formal expression to interior functions. The residence and the graduate student portions of the building are given distinctly different forms and characters. The Penthouse Floor residence is set back from the main bulk of the building – the Main Floor student centre spaces – and has domestic-scaled door and window openings. The Main Floor portion of the building is made the dominant building element by defining it within a block from underside of the Main Floor drop beams clear up to the top of the Penthouse Floor terrace parapet. The block is given extremely simple facade compositions: a window wall for its north facade, and almost completely solid-looking screened walls on the other three facades.

In typically Modernist fashion, interior planning, fenestration and facade detailing express ideas about the place. The North facade's view potential and lack of penetrating sun led it to be treated differently from the other three facades that had no such breathtaking view but much more exposure to direct sun. While the North facade is essentially a window wall, while the other facades are masked by a shade- and privacy-making heavy timber screen. This simple floating Main Floor block, with its wide-open band of windows facing north and continuous bands of heavy timber screens on the other facades, is the defining characteristic of the building.

For its role in making this solid-looking floating building, the timber screen is the single most important design element of the building. Its opacity masks a multitude of small window openings, unifying the building formally, and sets the Penthouse Floor residence apart from the rest of the building.

The building is important as a the work of Thompson, Berwick & Pratt, the successor firm of Sharp & Thompson, architects for the UBC campus plan and its earliest buildings. The Thea Koerner House is also important as design work informed by the sensibilities of Middle European émigré designers schooled in early Modernism before the Second World War, and who enriched the planning, architectural and landscape architectural design cultures with their arrival in Canada and Vancouver following the war.

The 1971 addition is valuable as an expression of the extension of the graduate services culture on campus, and for extending the formal language of the Thea Koerner House – most notably by extending the timber screen treatments over large window areas.

Thea Koerner House Character-defining Elements

- Penthouse Floor form set back from Main Floor block below
- Roof fin element encircling the Penthouse Floor
 - Areas of exposed joists with and without skylights
 - Wood fascia
 - Stucco soffit surface
- Door/window composition of the Penthouse Floor rooms
- Fourth Floor roof terrace completely encircling Penthouse Floor area
- Simple block of Main Floor floor plate projecting beyond supporting structure
- Main Floor perimeter wall timber screening on East, South, and West facades
 - Cantilevered concrete supports for screening
 - Exposed bolted connections
 - Rough-sawn timber screening members: 4x6 non-structural filler between 3x10s
 - Wood timber caps
- Wood doors and windows where remaining: sills and frames
- Mitred glass corner windows on Main Floor
- Full-length portrait of Thea Koerner
- Original pieces and finishes of interiors of Thea Koerner House spaces

1971 Addition Character-defining Elements

- Exposed concrete structure
- Timber screening following screening of Thea Koerner House timber screening

Site Character-defining Elements

- Exterior terrace tilework; Entrance Court tile work and sculpture pool
- Sculpture in pool and its lighting
- Interior exposed concrete work
- Parged and painted concrete exteriors
- Interior wood trim, paneling and ceiling paneling
- Original interior lighting fixtures
- Garden
- Second growth forest remnants

Intangible Character-defining Elements

- Memorial to Thea Koerner
- Association with Leon Koerner