THE·HOUSE INTERVIEW

JAMES K.M. CHENG
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Angus Cheng, Rédacteur du Graphisme, a récemment interviewé James K.M. Cheng, un architecte en pratique priv de Vancouver sur sa perception de la "Maison."

TFC: Besides maintaining a busy architectural practice, are you still teaching at the U.B.C. School of Architecture?

JAMES CHENG: Only occasionally. I go out as a guest critic. I just don't have the time to go run a tutorial anymore.

TFC: From the standpoint of an educator, what do you think are some of the important issues that students of architecture should address today?

CHENG: OK. That's a tough one, because I think every school has different opinions. My personal opinion is: I think young architects should be as well rounded as possible before they get out of college, and I would avoid specializing in the first professional programme. The main issue that I would stress is to equip the student with as good a design background as possible. After all, in the end, what distinguishes an architect from a draughtsman is that the architecture student has the ability to design. The drafting college graduates might be able to draft and draw very well, but they certainly cannot resolve problems that deal with the same issues as an architect.

TFC: Do you feel then that the practical skills, for example, of doing working drawings, could be learned at the office, and the design theory or the baisis should be learned while you're at school?

CHENG: I disagree with that. Look in my office anyway. We don't see working drawings as a separate issue from design. We design everything from conceptual design to the last detail of the window trim, because I feel that every little bit of that contributes to the final making of the building. You cannot separate production from design.

TFC: What are some of the products that your office is working on at the moment? Are you very much a residential architect?

CHENG: Well, we do anything that a client would allow us to do, but the bulk of our work is residential. We are currently doing two residential towers and we are doing a high rise mixed-use building. Well not that high, only about 8-9 storeys. And then we did work for EXPO, which is not of a residential nature. We do have commercial office buildings as well. So generally speaking, we like to have the challenge of different design problems rather than finding a niche and hiding our heads in it.

TFC: Going on to another topic, if we may. Since the 50's, the West Coast/Vancouver area was considered to be the only place in Canada with a distinctive regional style. This perhaps can be identified with the domestic works of Ron Thom and Arthur Erickson. What role do you think these figures have contributed to the West Coast Style and is there an ongoing concern for regional architecture in Vancouver?

CHENG: Well, I think there is no question that Ron Thom

Layout by: Jennifer Joyal and Julie Lyras

and Erickson and B.C. Binning and a few others have contributed to a West Coast Style. I think one has to understand the background. In those days, there was an arts and hiring programme. These people, meaning architects and artists, they all knew each other. They got together frequently and they discussed where architecture is and what the West Coast thing is. So there was a conscious effort to put a sort of unified front to the public to promote a new sense of architecture. You also have to realize that's also the time when international architecture and Neutra were just coming up to the West Coast of Canada and everything was just changing at that time. So that particular moment of time is quite critical. Whereas if I compare it to today, we are constantly being bombarded by the media, meaning all the international magazines. Nowadays, we can walk down to a local bookstore and see magazines from Italy, Japan, all over shelves, and any new building of any consequence that is done next month will be flashed all over the world. So consequently, the younger architects today are exposed to a very international set of influences. Now, good or bad, that influences a lot of the thinking of the students at school. You know, there is not as much regional thinking in Vancouver right now as there was in the days of Ron Thom and Erickson. However, I do say that we have a different climate say than Alberta, Nova Scotia or Toronto, and certain conscious architects are trying to deal with this, and with the materials and the labour force that's available, to try to generate a kind of architecture that is more peculiar to our region than just anywhere else, especially concerning the quality of light and so on. It is actually interesting to see and to read the manifestos that the Ron Thom Group (well I call them the Ron Thom Group, but that's really the whole gamma of those people), they talk about dealing with the light in B. C. They talk about dealing with the landscape. They talk about the colour of natural wood and all that. And I think you'll find that some of those concerns are still very valid today. However, we don't have the beautiful country sites like they had, anymore. Most of the architects today are building in the city or in the suburbs, and we don't have the same kinds of labour force or lifestyles anymore. Life is far more complex than, say, in the 50's so that a person's home requirements are totally changed. You know if you look at the early houses, they are rather simple houses, but today, because of multi-media, you know things that we have, people are going back to wanting rooms. They have rooms for their videos, rooms for stereos, rooms for sewing, rooms for all kinds of things. And the activities that one does at home are completely different than in the 50's, so the programme becomes more complex. The electronic intrusion is definitely here, so that also dictates. All that influences, I think, a whole different type of house that's going to come out.

TFC: Would you consider wood as a local material to be a contributor to the West Coast Style, and is it a very relevant material for today?

CHENG: Oh, it's still the absolute material for building in Vancouver, and there are very few people who can afford steel or masonry houses. To that end, it is still a major influencing factor. However, the use of wood is different, the approach to wood is different. In the older days, when you're building in a forested setting like some of the famous Ron Thom and Erickson houses, you want the wood to weather naturally, you want it to blend with the landscape because that was the whole purpose of choosing to live out in the country, even though the country was only twenty minutes from downtown. Nowadays, you live in a context of suburbia, you live in an urban rowhouse situation, so the use of wood has to reflect the new context. We're no longer living in the context of volume, but we're living in the context of a man-made environment, and to that end, it brings out other considerations like urban design, like cultural continuity and things like that, and privacy, which is very important. Now that you have very close proximity of neighbours, you have to find a way to retreat and you have to obtain your privacy and your sanity when you are at home. So that forces a different use of wood other than the big wide expensive glass that made the early West Coast houses so famous. Now you have to consider how you use that large expansive glass and whether glass is used as transparent or almost an absolute folly or so that you can create illusions and that privacy is preserved. And the other thing is in new material, new old material like glass block. Such things come into play because they allow you to bring light into a place without losing privacy.

TFC: You mentioned B.C. Binning before. He once remarked that the city, meaning Vancouver, has always been influenced by the Far East, and one can indeed trace Asian influences in both Thom and Erickson's work. And he also mentioned that we are exposed to so much worldwide media at the moment. Do you think Binning's statement still holds true today?

CHENG: Which statement?

TFC: That Vancouver has always been influenced by the Far East.

CHENG: Oh, I think so, but now you have to count the influences of Rome and New York and Chicago and everywhere else.

TFC: I guess you can say that Vancouver is now a melting pot of ideas?

CHENG: Oh, I think most major cities are right now. I don't think there's an isolated city anymore. Just look at the work of the Japanese architects. Look how much American influences they have absorbed. Look at the work of, say, even people like Stanley Tigerman in Chicago or Michael Graves in Princeton. They are getting ideas from Aldo Rossi; they are being , you know. There is a cross- fertilization that happens all the time. These people are constantly travelling on the same circuit. They're lecturing, talking to each other. They are good friends of each other, so it's not unusual for Frank Gerhy to be in New York one day and be in Toronto another day, and then in Vancouver, and then back to Los Angeles. So consequently, you know, people are exposed to all these new ideas. But I think the most important thing though, is to be a good designer, to understand the problem at hand. To go back to the question of Oriental influence. I think that Vancouver still has a very strong Oriental base in our design approach because of Erickson and Ron Thom and the Neutra and the Frank Lloyd Wright School from which the West Coast architecture was derived. We don't have the kind of Roman base or the Greek base from which the East Coast architecture is derived. However, because of this Oriental influence, I think the West Coast architects are still more sensitive to nature and landscape and the softness of the light we have up here, say compared to the East Coast.

TFC: So, to that end do you think then that the West Coast is more susceptible to the influences from the East or perhaps from its neighbour to the South, where the climate and topography may be more comparable, for example, San Francisco and the California Coast?

CHENG: Well, urban design-wise, there's no question that San Francisco has exerted a major influence, in the city

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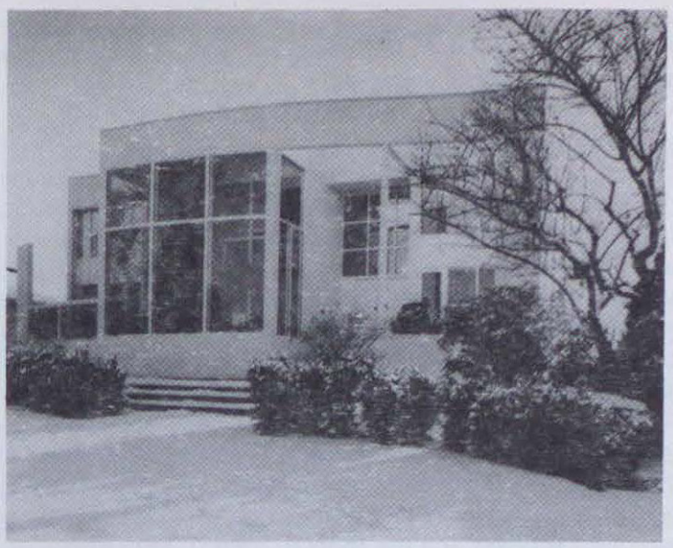
guideline. For example, a lot of the Fairview Slope urban design guideline is based on some of the housing types in San Francisco. However, that is like a policy statement from the bureaucrats. But as you look at how architects are responding to those policies, that's where you see a regional approach perhaps about to emerge. For example, you use a lot more skylight and natural light than, say, most other provinces. For several reasons, we do have more grey days here and also our climate is much milder. We can afford to use more glass. A lot of it you don't use in Alaska or Winnipeg, where you have 30 below. Also, a lot of West Coast architects, I believe, are sensitive to the colours. For example, you will very seldom see the West Coast architects use bright primary colours, whether they're in or not, just because of the quality of light we have here, the vibrant colours just don't come off. You can't do it like you do it in Mexico or in the Mediterranean. Also, more importantly, for me anyway, in my own work, I'm more interested in a balance of diffused light rather than a direct input of huge quantities of sunlight, because, especially on grey days, that kind of light is not very pleasant if it just comes in from one side of the room. It's very important to balance it on two sides. So we tend to have, for example, a South-facing window on the opposite end of the room, to introduce a wash of natural light, so that you don't have a dark cave-like effect. And sometimes that becomes a generator for the ordering principle of the house. Then you deal with structure and integrating it with light admitting devices that penetrate a sort of internal order that in turn could be expressed on the exterior or form of the building. And perhaps this kind of an investigation could lead to a stronger personal style or regional style, depending on how you look at it.

TFC: Do you consider yourself a regional architect? And if so, what makes your architecture more Canadian?

CHENG: Well, I do consider my work regional. I certainly would not do the same kind of houses I do in Vancouver if I were to get a commission in San Francisco. In that sense though, I look at my own work as very regional. But I have to admit it, I do have international influences. Let's face it, all of us that are interested in design are constantly trying to expand our horizons and explore what is in the nature of architecture. And my personal interest is in evolution rather than making a statement all the time. What I'm interested in developing in my own work is a sense of continuity and a sense of evolution, so that my work is gradually evolving with a philosophy that I believe in, and that hopefully each work that I do is sort of based on the previous example that I've done and reading further. As you learn more about the making of buildings, you know, that to me is very important. So every job that we do sort or refers to the work that we've done before, but takes on a different departure or whatever. So, we never quite abandon something that we've done and jump into something else.

TFC: Judging from the work of yours that's familiar to me, would you consider yourself a disciple of Le Corbusier or how would you compare your designs in residential architecture to that of the 50's and 60's?

CHENG: Oh, OK. I do have two influences that I admit to very much. When I was in college, I was very much, as an undergrad, very much influenced by Wright and when I was at Harvard, at graduate school, of course, I was very much influenced by Le Corbusier and Richard Meier, because Richard Meier was my studio master or whatever you call those. It's really interesting because when I was an undergraduate student, I didn't like Le Corbusier at all. I don't think I understood him and superficially, you know, I didn't like his crude concrete work and the use of bold columns. I found it was a bit harsh. That was very bad judgement in the sense that, you know, as a young architect, you don't really understand architecture that well, and to cut him off like that wasn't very good. It took me ten years to understand what he was doing. But I still personally say that the Wright influence is the strongest even though it doesn't show in the work. I would say it's the philosophy. I don't look at an architect's work just by their formal attributes, meaning the forms or the technique of making a building; I look at Wright as an inspiration or as an influence because of his integrity as an architect, because of his philosophy, how he deals with architecture and what architecture meant to society. His forms are highly personalized forms and it is very difficult for anybody to copy, whereas Le Corbusier has a set of almost kitten parts that you could copy or you could take off from. His influences is therefore far easier to superficially look at. But I find Wright's philosophy or attitude towards landscape and so on are far more conducive to the work in architecture here in Vancouver; meaning the regard to landscape and integrating the inside outside and all that stuff. I do not, however, find the personal forms of Wright suitable. For instance,in that period when Ron Thom was literally adopting and Fred Hollingsworth literally doing Frank Lloyd Wright houses; they are beautiful houses but I find them kind of dark and a bit, you know, outdated for what the style is today. They are beautiful pieces for



what they are and a sort of reckoning of a different lifestyle of a recent past. People just can't live like that anymore. We don't have that much leisure. We don't have that kind of gardener to maintain the lawn and trees and shrubs, cut branches for Christmas and this and that. So one likes to change. Also we don't have the kind of craftsman that we use to have. Now we have to deal with pre-manufactured items, meaning siding is pre-cut, your studs are pre-cut. You don't get custom pieces of lumber anymore. I mean, if you do you're paying through the nose for it and most of our clients can't afford those things. So we have to find a new expression based on the machine produced items and that is what Le Corbusier had anticipated. And so in that sense, the five points that he puts out of how to build a free plan and all that is still quite relevant in the design of the building. And secondly, you know, for an Oriental that I am, I am fascinated by the Western contribution, and for me to see Le Corbusier, you know, being able to draw inspiration from the Mediterrenean and from the Greeks and carry it through, that is quite important, because afterall, this is North America, and our basic influences do derive from Europe. And it is a Western inclination even though it's now being moderated by other influences. So for me it is a very interesting mix of the two. So it is very important for me to understand Le Corbusier and to understand the Western civilization.

TFC: You mentioned the importance of a reflection of the times: I would like to read you a quote from Le Corbusier in which he said, 'A great epoch has begun. There exists a new spirit. Industry, overwhelming us like a flood which flows on towards the destined end, has furnished us with new tools adapted to this new epoch, animated by the new spirit. The problem of the house is the problem of the epoch.' How relevant do you feel is this statement today?

CHENG: I still believe that it's very accurate in the sense that I don't think that we're at the same epoch making period as Le Corbusier was all the time. But the house is still to me, a prototype of the whole architecture gamble because the work that we do in houses are some of the bases of the large works. To that I refer to a lot of traditional European architects. Take currently, Leon Krier, for instance, who is very interested in a city room, and that kind of urban space. But what is really desired is a room in a house. So in that sense, it goes back to my early comment about a young architect's education because you have to know how to design a room before you can design a city and what is involved with the design of a room is so different in proportion than say some of the things that is involved in the city. It's just a matter of magnitude. If a person doesn't have the sense of scale to be able to deal with problems in a room, then they can't deal with it on a city scale. In that sense, houses are still very very important in the development of a lot of architects' careers because they give them a chance to modify their ideas, to try out their ideas, make the mistakes and still not have a major impact on the environment. Houses, can absorb a lot of personal idiosyncracies in them. Whereas if you're doing a major work downtown, you can't do that. It would become, you know, quite an eyesore. So in that sense, houses are always going to be a very important experimental vehicle for any architect that is formalizing their ideas.

TFC: Please correct me if I'm wrong, but I can recall you saying once that architecture is really very simple. All you have to understand is about the wall, the column, and the window. If this is true, how have you adopted it in your house designs?

CHENG: I still believe that that's the basic tools an architect has to work with: the wall, the columns and the window. What we have done is gradually clarify these elements a little bit more. Our early houses tend to deal with volume, like the Gwathmey, Seigel or the Richard Meier houses where the concepts of space interpenetrating space and volume are the most important things. But after working with clients and developing further, I come to find that that doesn't work for most people. When you have a family of young children and so on, who are running around, you do need privacy, you do need places where you can shut off and also you have people that have messy living habits. Not everybody could live in a Richard Meier house. Also I value the traditional works. A lot of people like Tudor. A lot of people like Georgian houses and so on and I became curious trying to understand why, and it is because they have formal rooms. To a lot of people, you know, they can go to a living room, they can go to a dining room, they can go to a certain space. So in our recent works, that is what we have done — but I'm still fascinated by space that is one, that is highly integral with the quality of light because you cannot deal wih space without light. So the two have to come together and to me, the quality of light, is one of the paramount concerns of my works. So I'm still very much interested in space but at the same time I'm very interested in articulating light in space. So in order to articulate light in space, I have to deal with columns, windows, walls. So

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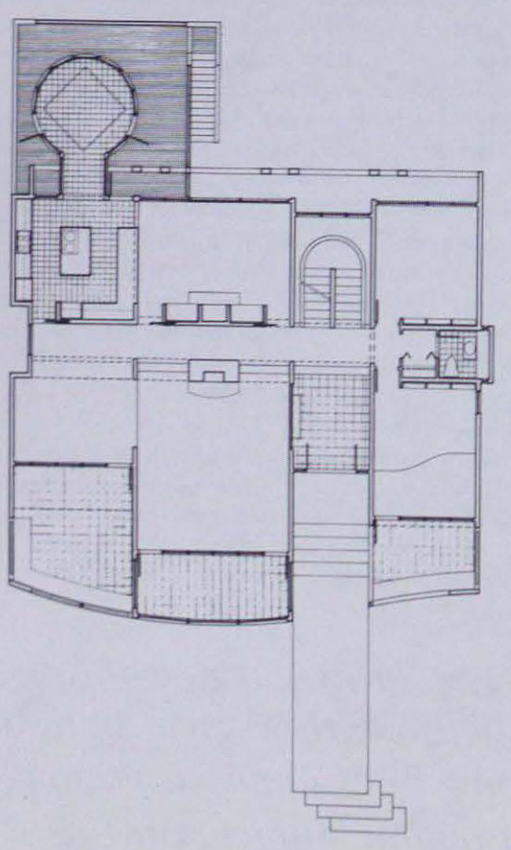
we are now constantly working on a system, looking at a house as a series of interesting walls and columns and placing enough windows to have various kinds of transparency and reflection. It creates many different kinds of spaces and different moods within this dwelling. At the same time, I try to integrate that back into my personal interests of, say, Oriental architecture, where landscape and building merges together. We're now extending the columns and carrying out the walls, which becomes a frame into the landscape. Or we include the landscape into this kind of structure, so that you blur the boundary of the object. In other words, we hope to fragment the object and integrate it more. So, that is the resolution that I'm trying to get between some of the Wrightian attitude and Corbusian form. The Corbusian form basically is an object in space. You're designing a piece of sculpture to live in. But I'm interested in fragmenting that sculpture and to bringing the landscape into it and giving it a softer scale, because quite often, and that's my criterion of my own house too, they tend to be too much of an object that they dominate things surroundings them, including other people's houses. But we haven't found a perfect resolution of the two. Sometimes, you have to suppress certain things in order to investigate other issues. That's why, for example, when Peter Eisenman was doing his house series, he was actually only interested in the structural sense of the architecture. He wasn't really addressing a lot of other issues and that allowed him to investigate just that. Of course, we don't have that kind of privilege. For a practicing architect, it could be deadly to suppress something to such an extreme. Houses become not likeable. However, you do have to play that sort balance game, that you have to suppress certain things in order to explore and understand others. But then I really believe that an architect has to build in order to understand architecture.

TFC: Do you feel then that the house is the most personal form of architectural expression as well as perhaps a response and a reflection of social values? And would you consider it a cultural artifact?

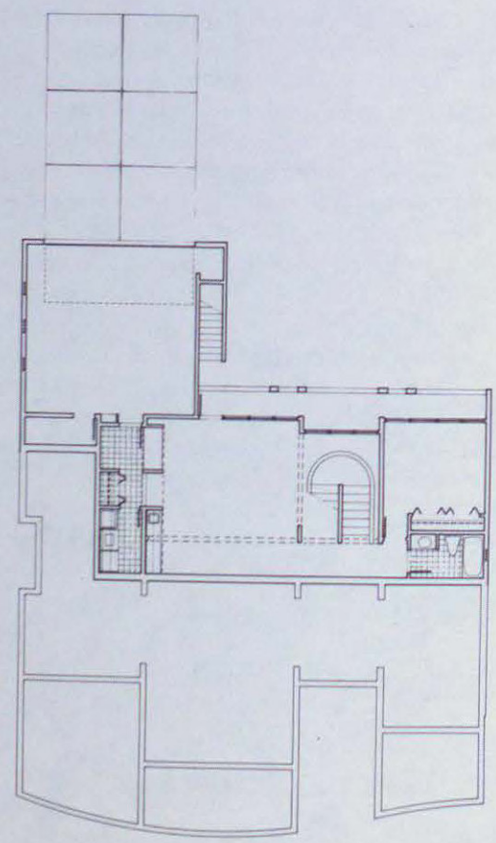
CHENG: Well, it is a very personal expression and it does reflect certain kinds of social values because you're dealing with a very elite sector that can afford to have a custom house built. But I certainly would not say that it reflects a wide range of social concerns. I think houses are basically rich men's follies and to that end an architect has to use it to enrich his own vocabulary, so that you can apply it to the less gifted project. For example, we adapt a lot of things, light admitting devices and spatial qualities that we learn from single family houses, to our multiple family dwelling properties. A lot of the things, the details and approaches that we we developed through single family houses, we were able to adapt onto other projects and use them to inform other things, so to that end, I think that that's very important.

TFC: Would you say that the idea of the American Dreamhouse, or the American Dream of owning a house is past and that the condo is in?

CHENG: Oh no, I wouldn't say that. But I wouldn't distinguish a condo and a house as two separate things. I mean the dream is to own your own home, be it a house or a condo. It's just a matter of your financial capabilities. People nowadays have a choice whether they want a city dwelling or a country dwelling. In the old days you had to be very rich to have one of each. In Vancouver or in most of our cities now, you do have a choice. You can try to own a house on a lot in a traditional-house sense, or you could own a condo, or a townhouse downtown. It depends on the lifestyle you want. It's a very interesting phenomena right now in Vancouver. A



Ground Floor Plan



Lower Floor Plan

condo on Fairview sells for the same price as a house in Richmond. So you have a choice.

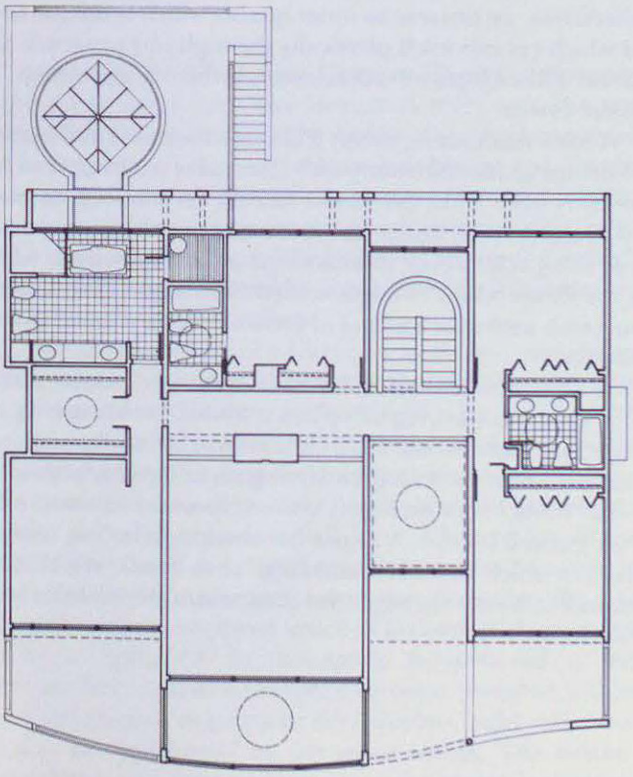
TFC: Does that reflect a tendency towards a more urban lifestyle?

CHENG: Oh, no question. I think the lifestyle is definitely more urban. A lot of the houses that I've designed in my career are actually a mixture of a city house and a country house. I say in my career since I haven't designed a country house yet.

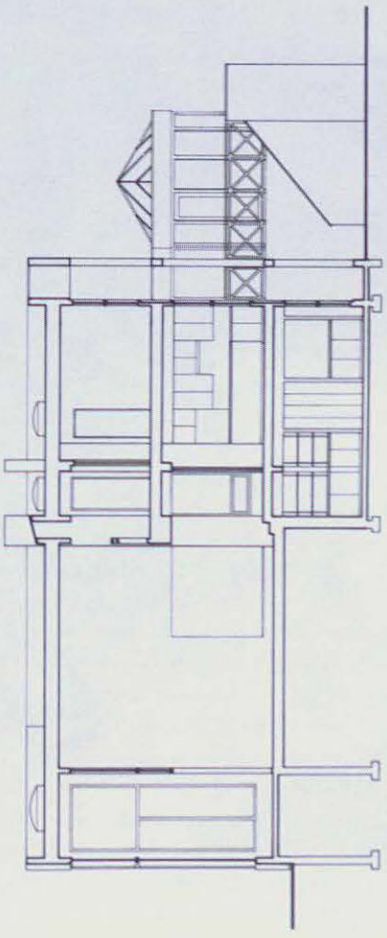
TFC: A final note perhaps about the upcoming EXPO? EXPO '67 was considered to be a watershed event for Canadian architecture. As a contributor to EXPO '86, are there any architectural lessons to be learned from the coming event?

CHENG: I don't think so. I think, right now, EXPO '86 is at best an example of what's currently going on. I think it has opened the doors to new directions. I don't think it's going to have a tremendous impact on the practice of architecture. It's basically a showcase of the current expression of architecture. Actually, the only thing that is beneficial to a lot of B.C. architects is that it's mandatory for every building to be demountable and reusable. And it forces a lot of architects to consider the use of steel. If any influence is to come out of EXPO it is that it opened up a lot of architects' vocabulary to include steel. But as far as I'm concerned, unfortunately we don't have any so-called super stars working on the site. You know, Erickson was excluded, and the only person of any international stature that has been allowed to practice is Zeidler. So in that sense, we do not have any real great works of architecture in EXPO. To me it's just a bunch of competent buildings that would make the fair very successful. That should not be construed as criticism of the fair, because I think there's two different issues here — One is to create a very successful fair and the other one to make works of architecture. It would be ideal if the two could come together, but even if you look at the Olympics in L.A., it's very successful, but there's certainly no architectural legacies left over. So maybe it's a sign of the times that we're in that it becomes very difficult. I think the architecture state that we're in right now is very exciting, but also very confused, because right now anything goes. It was rather amusing to read the current issue of Newsweek, where there was an architectural criticism on post-modern architecture that's been springing up everywhere. And now post-modern architecture in high rises or corporations have completely replaced all the glass plates. And this particular critic is saying that so many of them are done by bad hands with no understanding of what post-modern architecture was originally intended as. It's like a bad dream. It's like a Walt Disney on air. It's all aver the place. We are at that kind of stage in our architectural world where anything is possible. And I think it is up to the good designer to exercise a certain sense of constraint and a certain sense of selectivity. And that's one of the reasons why I'm more interested in evolution rather than jumping on band-wagons, because eventually a person's work has to be judged by the whole entire body of work that he's created. You don't look at Le Corbusier as one building or Aalto or anybody like that. It is the embodiment of their life's work, and that's what matters to me or Luis Barragin, or any of those people that I'm very interested in. There is a consistency in approach and a quality that prevails in every one of their projects.

Angus Cheng, Graphics Editor, recently interviewed James K.M. Cheng, a Vancouver architect in private practice on his views of the "House."



Second Floor Plan



Longitudinal Section