



When Maria Grigoriadis's new house started going up, her neighbours were intrigued. People driving by slowed down, stopped, got out of the car to ask about it. It didn't look like anything else on her block of east Vancouver, which is a jumble of century-old houses, post-war bungalows, and various iterations of the dreaded Vancouver Specials that are this city's unique contribution to residential architecture. Instead, it was a simple rectangle with a flat roof, charcoal-coloured panels, horizontal cedar slats and silvery bands of aluminum. A modernist house, the kind of thing that used to exist only in certain nosebleed seats of West Vancouver or, very occasionally, the west side of Vancouver. But such a thing was unheard of for the rest of Vancouver, whose housing aesthetic for decades has been, in the words of Architectural Institute of B.C. president Scott Kemp, "haphazard suburbia, a mishmash of everything." The city has been particularly famous for Vancouver Specials, long, rectangular boxes that became popular with immigrants of the 1960s who wanted cheap, quick and lots of room. The city, the architectural institute, and various resident associations tried for years to stamp them out through changes to zoning bylaws, a design competition, and pure shaming. Those had limited success and often resulted in ever-more-garish Specials – the wedding-cake house, the boxy Special disguised with fake gables, the out-and-out monster house. The only consolation-prize alternative seemed to be a plethora of imitation heritage houses. Now, it appears, a 2.0 group of buyers and builders is changing all of that. "We really liked the idea of having simple lines, something very organic. And we tried very hard to include the outdoors," says Ms. Grigoriadis, the daughter and sister of contractors, who designed the new house from the shell of the 1956 bungalow that she and her husband, insurance broker Frederic Lajeunesse, had bought in 2008. She had grown up in Kitsilano, living in everything from bungalows to Specials to older houses. None of those styles appealed to her as she planned a new house for her family of four. The main

floor is now one big space with walnut floors, white walls, a white Caesarstone island, and a minimalist fireplace with a slab of concrete built into the wall alongside for seating. The upstairs bedrooms are similarly spare and white, with large horizontal windows that provide expansive views of the city. Ms. Grigoriadis and Mr. Lajeunesse are far from alone. Modernist houses, duplexes and townhouses are popping up all over the city from west to east, sometimes in the unlikeliest places. Clark Drive, a major truck route on the east side, has a cluster of modernist townhouses and duplexes around the SkyTrain line, as well as one striking duplex amid a row of bungalows and Specials near 33rd. And they're not just being custom-built for specific clients, which has been typical of Vancouver modernism in the past. Companies are now also building them on spec. It's what some call the Dwell-ification of Vancouver – a homage to the magazine Dwell, which provides a monthly hagiography of modernist houses and interior design around North America. "There's a new generation out there that's kind of tired of the old Craftsman look," says Paul Albrighton, a Realtor who specializes in modernist apartments, townhomes, and single-family houses. They're not the quickest sell on the block, he says, but there is a definite market of new buyers. "A lot of them have been in condominiums as younger people and they are trying to continue with that. They like the clean lines." Modernist interiors, which incorporate large, open spaces that aren't dedicated to just one use, also suit buyers who are making do with less square footage as they try to cope with some of the highest housing prices on the continent. Shannon Kelly just moved into her house near Fraser and Broadway three weeks ago after hunting desperately for months. Although the exterior of her duplex looks vaguely Craftsman, the interior is pure modern. "It feels like we're in a full house," says Ms. Kelly, who moved in with her husband and seven-year-old three weeks ago. "And I feel like you only get that from a more modernist design. You have a lot of light and a feeling of openness." And many people like the way modernist houses are designed better to blend with their environment. "West Coast modernism created the idea that you can live within your environment, instead of turning your back to it," says Piers Cunningham at Measured Architecture, which is seeing a growing interest from clients who want something different. "So in a modernist house, the landscape plays more into the appeal. There's an interplay between the interior and the exterior." The trend toward modernism is not just, as some might assume, a function of Caucasian gentrifiers moving east or buying houses for the first time, although there's an element of that. A new generation of ethnic builders and ethnic buyers – groups who were often seen as the main drivers of the Vancouver Special look – is also part of the new wave. A couple of years ago, engineer, designer and builder Tony Jang tore down the nondescript older house that had straddled two lots on 18th between Clark and Commercial to construct two new striking contemporary concrete houses. Mr. Jang had already built several modern-looking homes on the west side. With the two in the Cedar Cottage area, he wanted to show off that style on the east side. One was built with high-end finishes, the other more modest finishes, to demonstrate the range of price possibilities. People driving by often stop to look and ask about having something similar like that built for them, says Mr. Jang, who lives and works out of one house. (A friend, Wei Do Chen and wife Hua Li, bought the one next door.) Mr. Jang says his customers like modern because of "the uniqueness and the simplicity." That includes clients he's had from mainland China who want contemporary-style homes here. "We build using feng shui principles and, with these houses, we interpret this feng shui to incorporate natural elements into the design." Perdip Moore, who built both Ms. Kelly's duplex and the lone modernist duplex on Clark Drive, said he started building modernist just because he personally liked the look. But, like others, he said there are special challenges to building modernist. One is city regulations. "I

mostly do traditional homes because that is what the city likes. It's easier to get approvals.” Modernist homes are, inevitably, slightly more expensive to build than the standard Specials or neo-trationals. Large open spaces mean no supporting walls, for example. That requires much larger beams for the house overall, in order to support the weight. The extra cost cuts into the available pool of buyers. “Often, people loved them, but they were not willing to pay the money,” said Mr. Moore.