

VISUAL ARTS

# These black and white images keep their distance

By ROBIN LAURENCE

**T**he curator of *Distance and Proximity*, a new exhibition of contemporary German photography, says he is interested in "the still fresh view of the curious person who can distance himself [sic] from . . . events but who wants to get close to them."

But does this oxymoron really hold? In terms of effect, of emotional impact, there's a lot more distance than proximity in this show.

On view at the Charles H. Scott Gallery (1399 Johnston, to Feb. 26), the exhibition was curated by Wulf Herzogenrath, organized by the Institute of Foreign Cultural Relations (in Germany) and sponsored in Vancouver by the Goethe Institute.

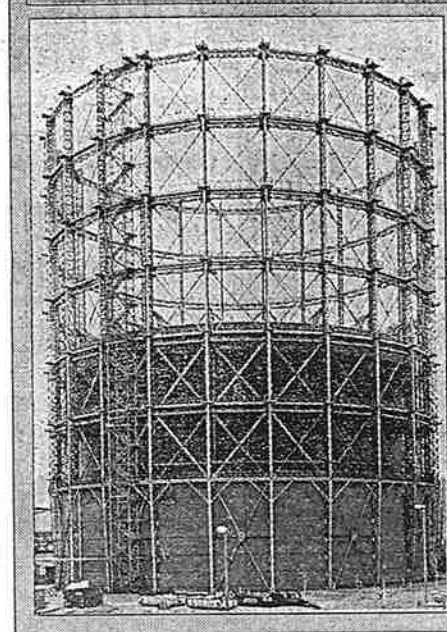
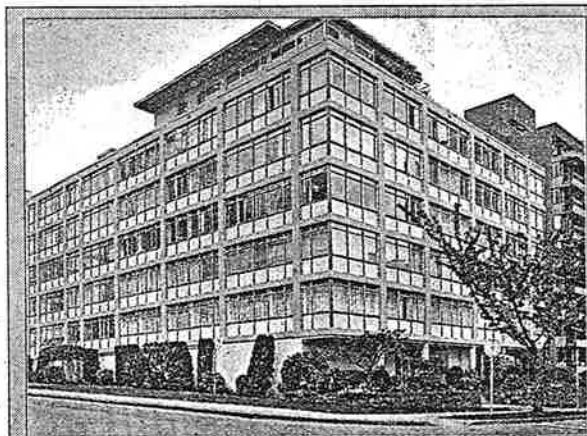
Photographers represented are Bernd and Hilla Becher, who have collaborated since the late 1950s in the documentation of their country's aging and obsolete industrial structures, and eight of their former students at the Dusseldorf Academy.

In their clinical detachment, anti-formalist compositions, urban and architectural subject matter, serialist methods, technical facility, slick presentation, often enormous scale and attraction to the banal, the anonymous and the uninflected, the works in this show do manifest a collective sensibility, a formal and thematic cohesiveness. They also manifest a shared relation to the project of recording what Herzogenrath calls "typologies."

You know that when the word "typology" (meaning the study of types) comes up in the discussion of photography, you're in for a cool, analytical and probably didactic viewing experience.

If you're more interested in individuals than types — more attracted to the idiosyncratic, the quirky and the dramatic than to minor variations on the same conceptual theme — that's a sign that you're not really getting with the postmodern program. (And that you're not really going to enjoy this show, either.)

Herzogenrath speaks of the relationship of the Bechers' work to minimalist-conceptualist art of the 1960s. He also writes that most of the photographers here have been influenced by the scientific studies of Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey and the portrait work of August Sander (1876-1964).



**STARK STUDIES:** Parkwood, 1955 (above), from Arni Haraldsson's *Projects on Vancouver Architecture and Landscape*; coal-gas storage tank in Germany (left) from Bernd and Hilla Becher's collaboration in *the Distance and Proximity* exhibition

The former two are straightforward enough art historical hook-ups, but the paradox in the latter is that even though Sander set himself a serial project and was searching for social types, he achieved a wonderful portfolio of individuals.

**D**espite their consistency of composition and style, there is a considerable humanity, even idiosyncrasy, in Sander's images. There is also an intimacy of scale that is not immediately reflected in the work of these contemporary German photographers.

The Bechers, it seems, consciously set out to accentuate in their photos the functional aspects of the factories, cooling towers, gas holders, water tow-

ers and coal storage bins of a time and type now in decline.

Adopting the methods of early industrial photographers, they have achieved an anonymous remove from their anonymous subject. This remove also reads as cold, and is enhanced by the black-and-white photography the Bechers employ and the frequent appearance of winter-bare trees behind the structures depicted. (Even the leafy trees have a wintry look.)

Equally wed to a deadpan, documentary or inventorial impulse are Candida Höfer's interiors of modernist public buildings, Axel Hütte's images of Berlin subway stations, Thomas Struth's glum-looking families and deserted street scenes, Petra Wunder-

lich's churches and marble quarries, and Jörg Sasse's focus on the banal fixtures and features of domestic life — crocheted potholders, appliquéed toaster covers, plastic-lined garbage cans, beyond-awful knickknacks.

But there are exceptions here. A golden light and fondness for the pastoral prevail in Simone Niewig's images of vegetable garden plots. And another kind of gold suffuses Andreas Gursky's immense color photos of people and things in immense public places — in ferry lineups, university plazas, cafeterias, train stations.

So much light floods through Gursky's images that figures shimmer and deliquesce at their edges. Despite the mundane settings and subject matter, these photos are made sublime by their immensity and their radiance.

**S**cale is an interesting and apparently gender-specific factor in this exhibition. Struth and Hütte work large, Gursky, larger, and Thomas Ruff largest of all.

Ruff's two color prints of starry skies, taken in 1990, are each 201 centimetres (about 6½ feet) high. If presented page size, their impact would be much altered, rendered prosaic.

This is true also of the series of photos of his friends for which Ruff is best known locally. (Ruff's portraits are not in the current show but have been exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery.) Frontal and deadpan, they look like nothing more than passport photographs when printed small. Blown up to an immense scale, they take on an entirely different political and critical agenda.

The extravagant scale of Gursky's *Train Station in Porto*, 1988, allows us to see the impoverished blind woman, with white stick, faded apron and straining plastic bags, who is the moral centre of this unstaged work.

*Train Station* is one of the most compelling images in *Distance and Proximity*, possibly because, in the warmth of its vision and the glorious age of its architecture, it is inconsistent with the other modernist and post-modernist typologies revealed here.

Arni Haraldsson: *Projects on Vancouver Architecture and Landscape* suggests that the analytical qualities evident in *Distance and Proximity* are not specific to German photography. Haraldsson, a Vancouver photo-artist and former student

of Jeff Wall (Wall has used the word "typologies" in describing his own work), has been documenting both modernist and contemporary architecture in Vancouver and its surrounding municipalities. His color photographs and videotape are on view at Presentation House (333 Chesterfield, North Vancouver, to Feb. 19).

Haraldsson's large photos of 1950s apartment buildings in the West End, interiors of modernist homes and contemporary housing developments and high-rise towers in Coquitlam, Burnaby and New Westminster engage a number of issues.

These include the loss of modernism's Utopian vision and the shifting of visual traditions to accommodate the "defeatured landscape."

But, oh, it's just too disheartening to think that Haraldsson's bland photos of pink and beige tract housing, spreading like sludge across field, forest and mountain, might represent the new face of landscape art. ♦



The Vancouver International Writers Festival Presents the First Event in the 1995 Author Series:



## Alice Munro "Open Secrets"

Mrs. Munro will read from her new book a collection of eight short stories that enter into an intimate world of other people's secrets. Each of these stories will lure us in to learn the drama of the lives of so-called ordinary people. Copies of *Open Secrets* will be available for purchase courtesy of Blackberry Books and Ms. Munro will autograph books.

Sunday, February 5, 1995  
2:00 pm

Arts Club Theatre Mainstage  
Granville Island

Tickets \$12.00 (GST included)  
For tickets call 687-1644

Tickets are also available at Amber Books, Blackberry Books, Duthie Books, Octopus Books, The Granville Book Company, The UBC Bookstore and Women in Print.

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of CMHC Granville Island, the Government of British Columbia through the Ministry of Small Business, Tourism and Culture, Blackberry Books and McClelland & Stewart.

Author Series Media Sponsor

scribble

# Saturday Review

## ROBIN WARD

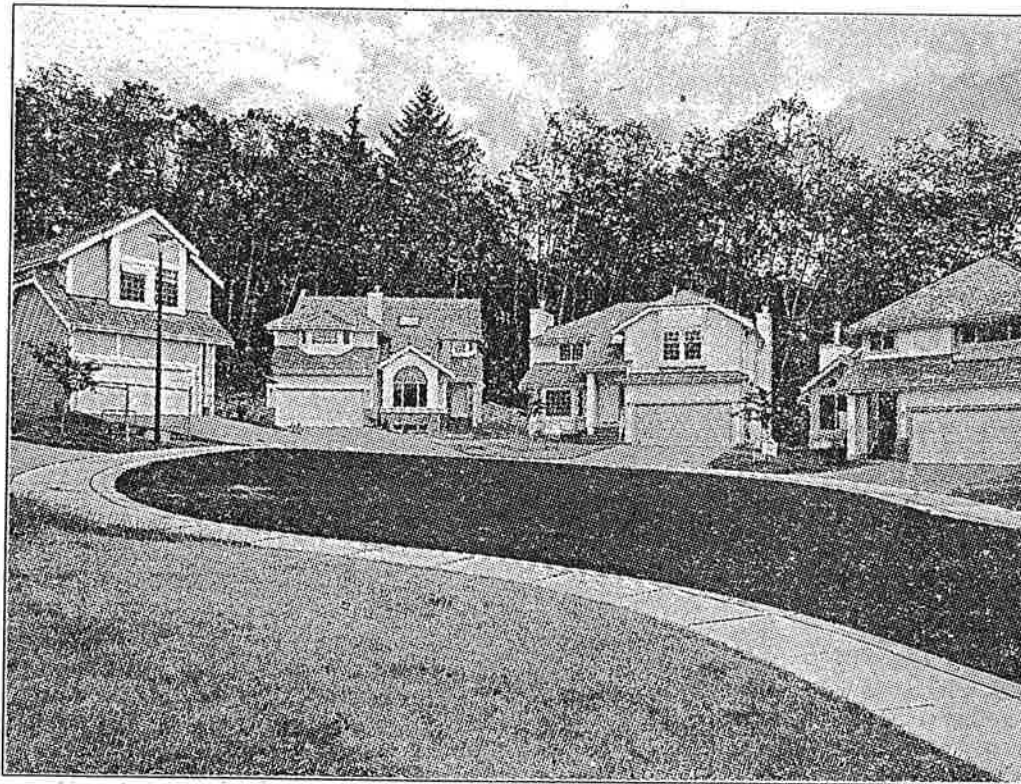
I was planning a piece on Greater Vancouver's new suburbia, but photographer Arni Haraldsson has done a more effective job illustrating the phenomenon in his exhibition *Projects on Vancouver Architecture and Landscape* (Presentation House Gallery, 333 Chesterfield, North Vancouver, until Feb. 19).

Image after image documents the architectural and cultural aspirations of today's realtors, town planners and new suburbanites. Culs-de-sac creeping up to the edge of the forest seem built with 1950s demographics and two-car families in mind rather than with any sense of environmental or social responsibility.

Here we have *Citadel Heights, Port Coquitlam*, a landscape of box houses striding over a ridge and down a cleared, graded deforested brae. In the foreground, trenches and tire marks left by earthmovers show the unromantic patterns of change in Utopia.

*Westwood Plateau, Coquitlam*, shows a stand of trees and stumps with flimsy mansions being erected in the background — a scene reminiscent of Shaughnessy Heights being cleared by the same slash and burn technique in the early 1900s but without the well-built, architect-designed villas that are now considered heritage homes.

*The Harvey Residence, New Westminster*, a dilapidated, deserted Edwardian home is contrasted with *Tiffany Ridge*, a bland but coyly named subdivision that may become a future academic case study but is unlikely to move 21st century heritage preservationists.



ARNI HARALDSSON

WESTWOOD PLATEAU appears to be palatial, but empty, suburbia

Hedonistic condominiums advertised as "renowned illustrious residences" with "European courtyards" and "breathtaking views from every window" are featured in the exhibition along with text, as dreamily banal as the architecture, quoting realtors' sales spiels.

*Canterbury Place*, a name evocative of medieval England,

is revealed as a monster home high up on the British Properties in West Vancouver. Roofers ponder its tiles, unmoved by the view of the Lions Gate Bridge, Stanley Park, and the city beyond that they will never afford.

In contrast to the neo-proletarian grandeur in Coquitlam and nouveau-riche pretension in West Vancouver, Haraldsson presents interior views of artistic ambience in the B.C. Binning house in West Vancouver and the Shadbolt House on Burnaby Heights.

The Binning and Shadbolt homes, in this context, seem an elegy for the pine-scented modernism that made Vancouver in the 1950s progressive and avant-garde. So, too, the modernist apartment blocks of Ambleside and the West End, their Bauhaus elevations and Le Corbusier idealism greying with age, uncluttered by postmodern frippery. Accompanying the large wall-mounted color photographs, a video takes a mesmerizing but architecturally anesthetizing drive around the subdivisions. Haraldsson's images show how municipal politicians, planners and developers have abandoned the naturalistic west coast suburbanism and the modern architecture of B.C. Binning and his kin — but not all.

Judging from this show, Westwood — or is it wastewood? — is very strange. There

are no people; only big houses with double garage doors and two-storey halls squeezed on to treeless lots. There are no lanes, no gardens and no shops in this palatial but empty suburbia. Haraldsson's everyday glimpses are provocative. But his depopulated pictures do not answer the question: who lives there?◊

# Tall buildings, Big meanings

*The Balsam & The Arbutus and The Westroyal*

*Our residences, their names, our concerns*

Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver is currently exhibiting the work of photographer ARNI HARALDSSON. The show explores the changes in the "built environment" of Greater Vancouver from the 1940s to the present. Haraldsson gave a talk about his work earlier this week and wrote the following commentary for the Opinion page on two of the centrepiece photographs in the show.

As a photographer, I've been documenting the changing city of Vancouver for the last few years. In particular, I've been interested in the continuing encroachment of suburban developments up the sides of Hollyburn Mountain in West Vancouver and Heritage Mountain in Coquitlam.

My photographic approach to the landscape of the Vancouver area and, by extension, its architecture is determined by my belief that the built environment embodies societal values and beliefs.

In 1991, while driving between suburban locations, I began to observe more closely the architecture that visually most dominated the landscape — the high-rise apartment. I then decided to do a photographic survey of these towers. Since the majority appear to have been built in two stages (the '70s and '90s), I would approach the subject chronologically — an approach I hoped would also allow for a visual comparison between these two architectural styles.

The first building I photographed was a '70s twin-tower complex characteristic of the so-called "bunker style." These two towers looked like stacked-up milk crates cast in grey concrete, some 30 stories high. Awesome! I had earlier decided to title each photograph after the building it depicted. Above the lobby entrance, in block-like letters, appeared the names of each tower: one was named The Balsam and the other, The Arbutus. What exactly did these names refer to? Were they a monument to some majestic balsam and arbutus trees which once stood nearby? Were they a surrogate for nature? A builder's clever literalization of the rubric "the concrete jungle"? The Balsam and The Arbutus, I decided, allude to a utopian image of an ideal, imaginary nature but the "real" image, together

**TWO PROJECTS, TWO DECADES:** Right, The Balsam and The Arbutus in Burnaby, built in the 1970s, 30 stories of stacked-up milk crates and, at least in the names, a yearning for nature. Far right, The Westroyal in West Vancouver. It was built in the '90s and, again at least in the name, attempts to evoke the status and security of another time, of Empire and Commonwealth. For exhibit hours, call 986-1351.



with the act of naming, proves a pathetic reconciliation.

By comparison, the naming of '90s high-rises contain predominantly chivalrous, regal and monarchical references — The Sovereign, The Excelsior, The Chatham, for example. These names suggest British tradition and regalia, a nostalgia for a Commonwealth culture imported to a former colony as a status sign and means of further domesticating the frontier.

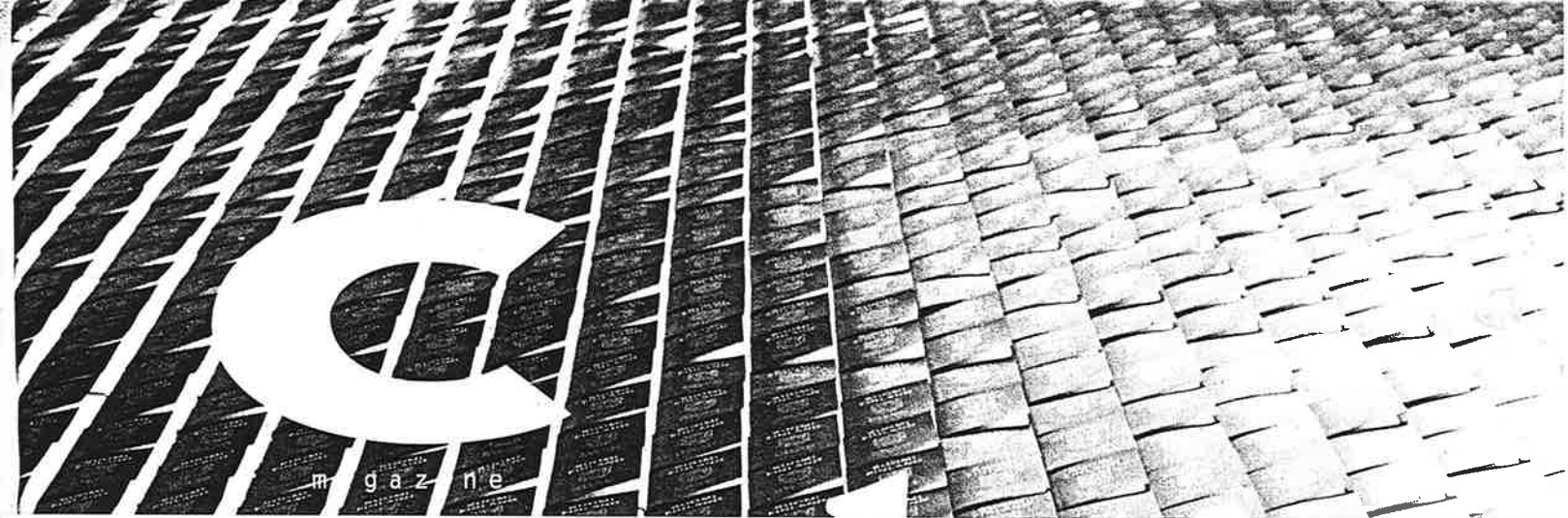
The advertisement of recent Vancouver architecture in magazine and newspapers seems to perpetuate an ever-increasing socio-economic demarcation, emphasizing separatism and exclusivity. Described, both in terms of text and image, is an ideal surface of absolute perfection available for immediate consumption to the prospective client. One ad for a new high-rise refers to "... a natural visual and aural separation . . ."

When comparing '70s buildings like The Balsam and The Arbutus with a '90s building like The Westroyal, similarities overshadow differences; one structure forms a continuation of the other. The difference, it would seem, is solely of surface appearances. With larger, rounded balconies, expansive windows of tinted, green glass, a beige-painted facade and gabled roofs, The Westroyal appears slightly more organic. Yet, even stylistic differences are still reduced to a level of sameness, with the modernist credo of external legibility (exterior reflecting interior) and with the cube and the grid serving as recurring motif, no longer emphasizing the novel but rather the monotonous. Certainly, the primacy of a mechanized environment continues to inform equally the architectural esthetic of the modern and so-called postmodern. □

The Vancouver Sun

# Opinion

FRIDAY, JANUARY 27, 1995



## ARNI HARALDSSON

Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver

Arni Haraldsson's recent exhibition exemplified how the work of an artist can participate in a number of discursive formations. Reflecting on modernity and the city, Haraldsson's project simultaneously lays out the parameters of his artistic practice and brings critical attention to Vancouver's own narrative as a city at the edge of the wilderness whose economy depends on urban development and the real-estate market. And while its financial economy turns on these industries, so too does its aesthetic economy, contrary to the prevailing local mythology that Jeff Wall has described as "orthodox Romantic aesthetics." The tension between realistic and romantic modes of representation led to fascinating contradictions in the reception of Haraldsson's work by the local press.

The exhibition consisted of fifteen colour prints of Vancouver apartment buildings and local suburban developments in Burnaby, Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam and West Vancouver as well as a twenty-minute videotape titled, A Drive Through the Suburbs of Coquitlam and Port Coquitlam, B.C. (1994). In addition, there were fourteen colour photographs representing interior studies of two modern residences: the B.C. Binning

house, designed by Binning himself, founding head of the School of Architecture at the University of BC; and the Shadbolt house, owned by Doris and Jack Shadbolt and designed by Douglas Shadbolt, also a former head of the UBC School of Architecture.

Haraldsson's work reads as part of the West Coast chapter of an international conversation on photography situated in relation to the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher and their former students in Dusseldorf. The *neue sachlichkeit* or new objectivity has been characterized by some in a quasi-scientific frame as cool and unemotional, trafficking in typologies and concerned with the paradoxical products of modernity, particularly architectural structures. In an essay on the work of another Vancouver photographer, Roy Arden, Wall clarified that the *sachlich* "marks the category of things in their alienated state" in contrast to "the aesthetic of rhythmic expressivism."

The object becomes abject and it is "at this moment that it truly comes into being as an object." Wall is as significant as the Bechers to this conversation, for he too is an influential voice in it and Haraldsson, like Arden, is a former student of Wall's. On close inspection Haraldsson's work, like that of each artist working within this tradition, establishes its own unique chapter in the formidable project of redefining photography at the end of the twentieth century.

Haraldsson's contribution is that his images tell a specifically local story. Functioning as both portraits and landscapes, they refocus attention on the city's proximity to the vanishing edge of the wilderness, much as Emily Carr's paintings did over half a century ago in BC. They evoke a sense of pathos that many Canadians feel at the loss of our romance with the frontier in the face of the imperatives of that other international conversation, the economy.

Judith Mastai



Arni Haraldsson – Above: *Westwood Plateau, Coquitlam, BC* (1991), colour print, 41 x 49 in / Left: *The Beach Park* (1958) *West End* (1993–94), c-print, 29 x 37 in, photos courtesy Presentation House Gallery