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Designed for the Future

Bowen Island – Frits de Vries's weekend rural retreat can be divided into two separate residences

Architects at Home

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Photos by Ward Perrin

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British Columbia is home to some of Canada's most innovative and celebrated architects, particularly those early pioneers who developed the familiar "West Coast" style of architecture, merging indoor and outdoor living, utilizing organic materials and warmer textures.

And while West Coast architecture continues to thrive, there also exists a new breed of architects who are forging their own unique style, while continuing to pay homage to their predecessors.

Today's "West Coast modernist" architects, whether they are well established or beginning their careers, often try out new approaches to personal space in their own private residences. In essence, their homes become their laboratories where new materials, new approaches in construction, and new design ideas are explored.

In a five-part series, beginning today and continuing the following four Tuesdays, The Vancouver Sun visits local architects in their own homes. "Architects at Home" is aimed at inspiring the rest of us with imaginative ideas for our own homes.

Architect Frits de Vries and his wife Mary Ann Buis have two very different ways of living in two very different styles of homes.

One home is a modern water-front apartment in West Vancouver, where they



spend weekdays working or ferrying their teenage son, Kean, to his various sporting events.

Their other home is a short ferry hop away on Bowen Island, but it's a long way from their hectic lives on the mainland.

The 54-year-old de Vries, known for his contemporary streamlined urban homes, designed his own cedar-shingled island house to blend with its rustic surroundings – a steep, heavily wooded lot with an ocean view.

“I like the whole setting, sitting higher up,” says de Vries. “We cut as few trees as we could,” for the home he built eight years ago for \$125 per square foot. (To achieve something similar today, given the higher cost of island construction, de Vries estimates the price would be closer to \$200 a square foot.)

Although built as a principal residence for his family, de Vries’s busy architectural practice and Buis’s work as a goldsmith at her shop, Costen Catbalue, means the home now serves more as a weekend retreat. De Vries, who was trained in his native Holland, has owned his own architectural firm in Vancouver for the past 20 years.

It is on Bowen the family can unwind in a well-designed space that works not only for today but can carry them into the future. The reason?

De Vries designed the three-level home so that it can easily be converted into two separate residences should they want to rent out a portion, or provide their son with his own place on the island.

There is also a 400-square-foot studio that sits above the garage carport, visually linked to the main home adjacent to a common courtyard. It can either be used as a home office or a fully self-contained guest house. At the moment it is being used by de Vries’s in-laws as a home away from home.

The courtyard further expands the home’s 3,000-square-foot area by integrating the outdoors into the primary living space. The outdoor living space is the perfect place to dine alfresco.

“It reminds me of one of those old French films where the family is sitting in the middle of the courtyard with their wine,” says de Vries.

The advantage of the courtyard





is that the space will remain private no matter what happens with the adjacent properties.

“The courtyard feels protected so even if houses go up on either side of us it won’t matter that much,” says de Vries. “We will still be independent.”

The studio’s roof is a shed roof, which also adds to the sense of intimacy.

I wanted the minimal impact of height in the courtyard so you feel like you’re surrounded by low buildings,” says de Vries.

“The house is not really clean modern but it fitted into the vernacular – a Bowen Island home but in a modern way.”



Tips:

-To keep costs down, instead of using all-wood frames around windows and doors, de Vries used wood just around the doors to make a statement. The windows and casings are aluminium.

-Look for hidden storage spaces. In the main bathroom, a mirror hides storage utilizing staircase space.

-Slate flooring was used throughout the home – it doesn't scratch like wood and is easier to clean than carpeting.

-In the kitchen, de Vries mixed materials, from black granite on two counters to laminate and wood. "It was less expensive and I like the look better. Using all granite would have been too hard looking."

