PROFILE » BRAD CAMERON

Bringing homes down to earth

BY HADANI DITMARS

"I hope this story won't be too personal," Brad Cameron, the award-winning Vancouver architect and furniture designer, says over green tea in his Kitsilano apartment. "I tend to want my work to speak for itself."

And so it does. Robust and masculine, his Axis collection of dining, side and console tables consists of striking, singular pieces made of wood, steel, glass and stone. A more recent line, the Still collection, is made from salvaged British Columbia fir and features thick sections of wood carefully interlocked at the joints.

As in the creations of Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe, one of Cameron's design heroes and another architect who designed furniture, there is a sublime, almost Zen union of form and function in Cameron's work.

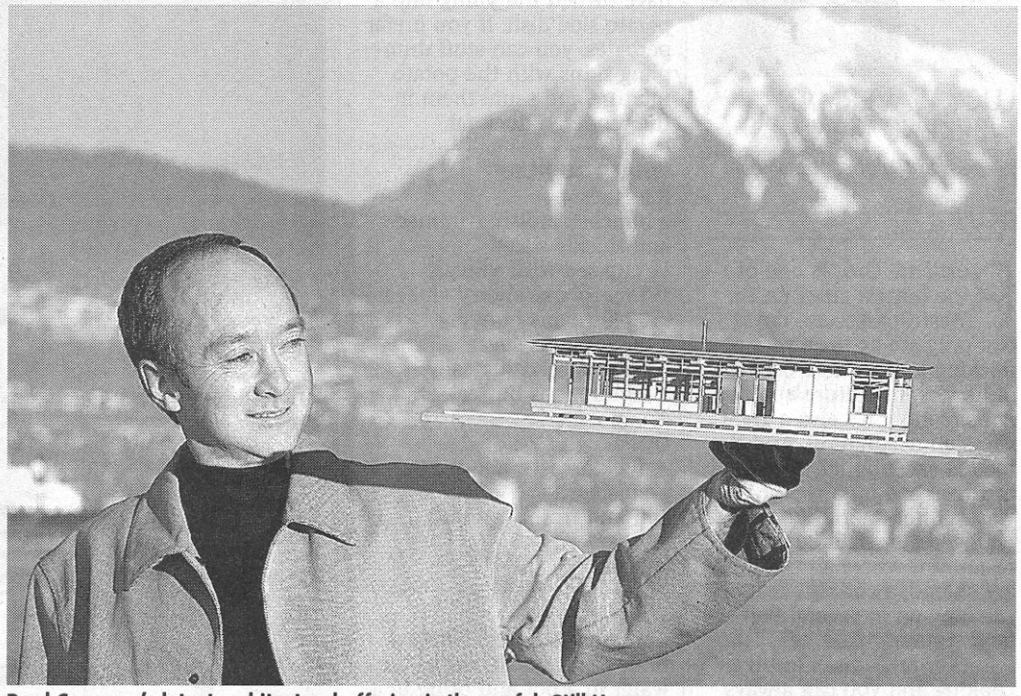
The sturdy yet streamlined quality of his furnishings also extends to his latest architectural offering: a prefab structure he calls the Still House.

"Look at the line of this table," Cameron says, pointing to his sleek, modular Levity console from the Axis collection. "It's pure architecture." And indeed, the table's long and elegant rectangular shape is mirrored in a model of the Still House, a modernist-style box with a slightly pitched flat roof.

Designed to reveal all the details of its post-and-beam construction, the Still House expresses Cameron's view of environmentally efficient "basic shelter" with a Japanese-like simplicity. It also reflects his love of local softwoods, which replaced glass and steel as his materials of choice after he used them for a 1996 park project in Abbotsford, B.C.

Cameron had founded his multidisciplinary practice, Level Design, four years earlier.

For the park, he channelled the traditional post-and-beam architecture of area barns to create structures such as a picnic shelter and a railway observation deck, choosing local fir and cedar to construct them.



Brad Cameron's latest architectural offering is the prefab Still House. JOHN LEHMANN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

He is currently obsessed with another B.C. softwood – hemlock, which he considers underused and underappreciated – but is effusive on the subject of all local woods.

"Look at this," he says, focusing on the end of one of his Still tables. There, the vertical grain of two conjoined fir pieces meet at opposing 45-degree angles. "Even if you're living on the 32nd floor of a downtown high-rise, you'll be able to reconnect to the forest with a piece like this. You can get a sense of how big the tree was."

A connection to the natural world is a major theme for Cameron, who grew up in rural Ontario and fell in love with the West Coast as a teenager. He even planned to take up marine biology before architecture school won out.

It was during his studies at the Technical University of Nova Scotia in the late 1970s that the concept of environmentally sensitive buildings piqued his interest. After taking a yearlong break to study sculpture at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, he returned to TUNS and spent hours in the school woodshop, creating sculptural pieces of furniture.

One of his experiments – a two-person chair that is divided by a lattice and evokes a woodsy confessional – sits in his bedroom in Kitsilano.

In large part, his Still House is a response to what he perceives as the dual crises of modern West Coast life: a lack of affordable housing and a growing disconnect from nature.

"It's getting so difficult for people to have the basics, such as quiet, clean air and a backyard with greenery," says Cameron, whose architectural antidote was created with rural and urban settings in mind.

The Still House "could easily work in, say, North or West Vancouver," he says, noting that lot sizes tend to be bigger in these areas than in the city's denser core.

The architect has designed eight different versions of the home, but is happy to adjust according to site and budget. At the lower end of the price scale, a Still House made from glued-together laminated timber might run for $250 a square foot, while one composed of salvaged old-growth softwood would cost substantially more.

Only one of the models has been commissioned so far – by an American who is building it in the San Juan Islands – but Cameron is optimistic that his prototype will resonate with eco-minded modernism fans.

Whether it does or not, his designs are ultimately driven by an inner muse oblivious to market realities. "My best work," he says, "comes from a self-directed process, not from external demands."

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» For more information on the Still House, visit www.leveldesign.ca.