

Developer sees a market for restored modernist homes like his own

KERRY GOLD >
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The exterior of developer Graham Kwan's home at 3267 Fairmont Rd. in North Vancouver that was designed by architect Bob Lewis in 1953.

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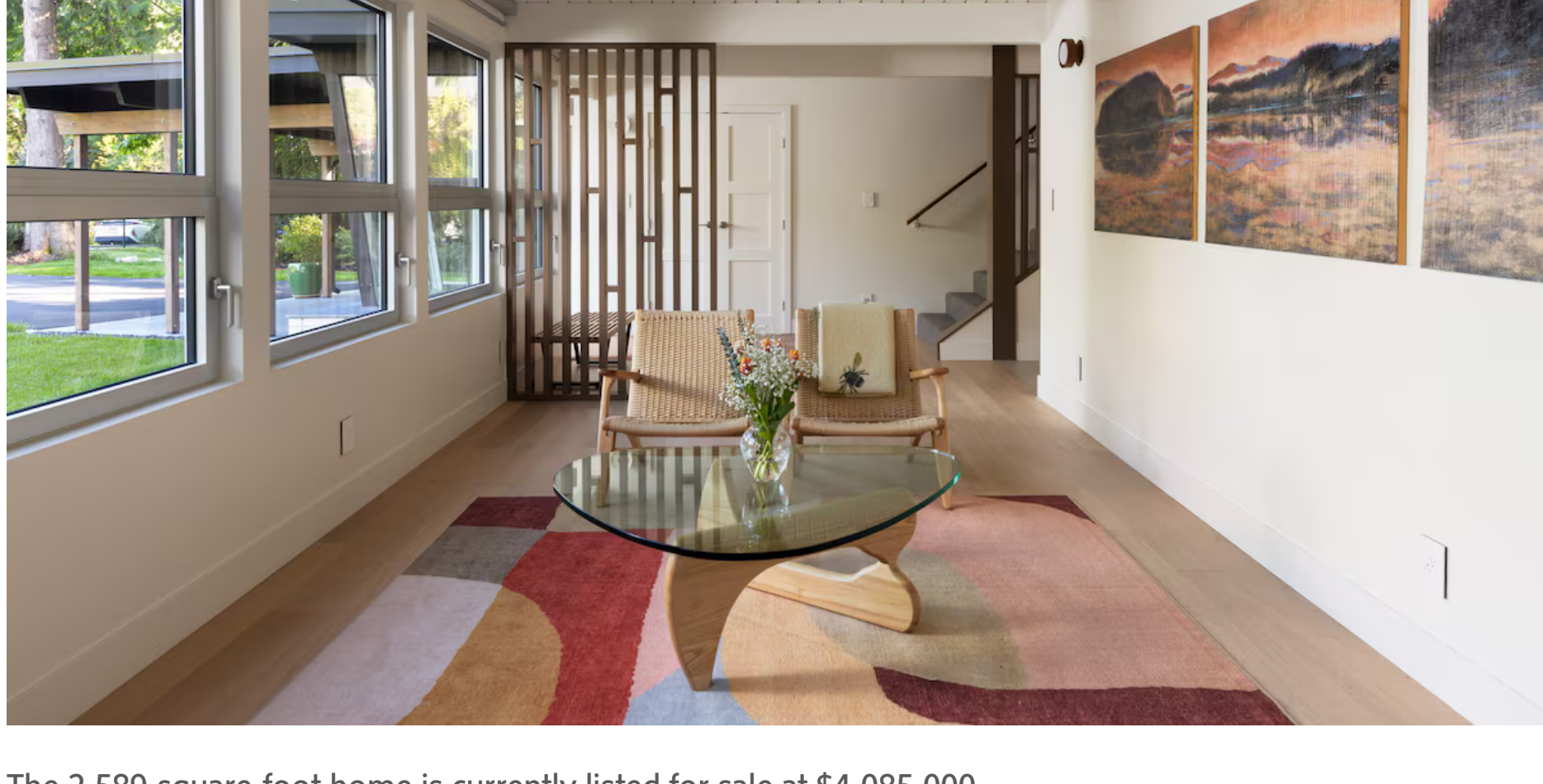
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Bob Lewis was one of the most prolific architects of the West Coast Modern movement that at one time defined Vancouver's North Shore, whose forests, ocean and mountains offered the perfect backdrop for modernist architects of the 1950s and 60s.

Recreational property developer Graham Kwan raised his family in a Lewis house at 3267 Fairmont Rd. in North Vancouver, and he's spent the past year making the home over from top to bottom, without departing from Lewis's design. At 2,589 square feet, his house – like most Mid-Century Modern homes – does not occupy a large footprint. Instead, the design incorporates the spacious 10,358-square-foot lot into the design, with extensive glazing and four outdoor “rooms.”

Mr. Kwan's home, built by Mr. Lewis in 1953, looks onto a creek and borders a forested park. After a renovation that he would only say cost him “north of \$1.3-million,” he considers it the most thoroughly updated, sustainably rebuilt, architecturally designed home of the era. A lot of similar houses have undergone updates that weren't always true to the design, he said.

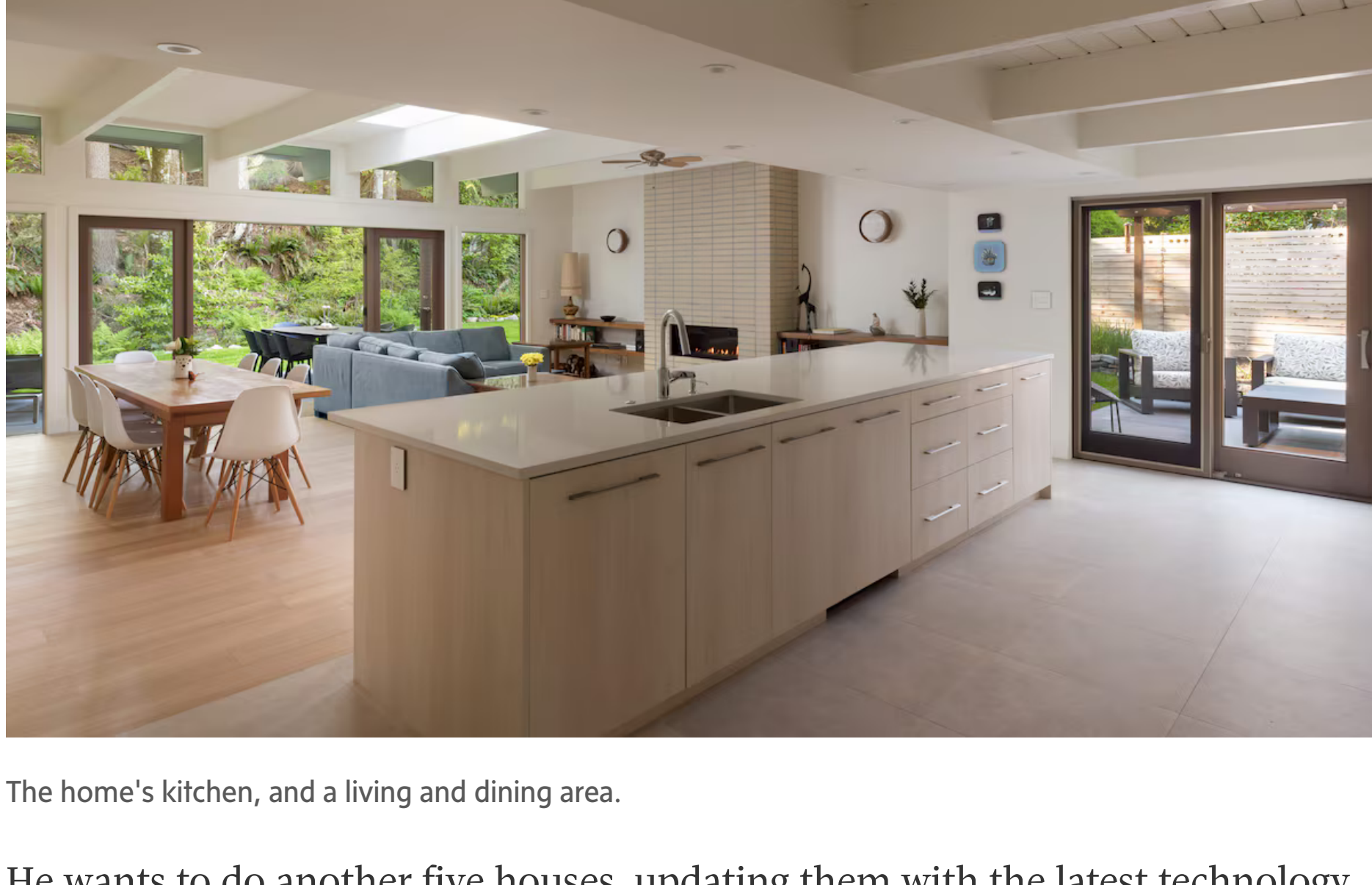


The 2,589-square-foot home is currently listed for sale at \$4,085,000.

Palm Springs, Calif., has its Mid-Century Modern homes designed by Richard Neutra, Albert Frey, William Krisel and Donald Wexler. The North Shore has its West Coast Modern homes designed by Arthur Erickson, Fred Hollingsworth, Ron Thom, Bob Lewis and others. According to heritage inventory records, there are about 750 such houses still in existence, and one-third of them are Mr. Lewis designs.

Many on the North Shore Moderns were torn down over the past couple of decades to make way for larger, more extravagant homes, say realtors. Mr. Kwan said he's still seeing such houses get demolished. That's why, after 35 years in the industry, he intends to buy several more and renovate them. As a developer, he's better poised than most people to efficiently renovate houses, and works closely with builder Greg Hasler of Hasler Homes. Mr. Kwan has built international hospitality, resort and residential projects, but the Fairmont house is his first residential restoration. The house is currently listed for sale at \$4,085,000.

“A lot of folks who are looking at [these types of houses] are nervous because they're quite peculiar when you go to renovate them,” said Mr. Kwan, chief executive officer of Hallo Properties. “A lot of folks don't want the risk. So, when we did this one, the light bulb kind of went on: ‘Why wouldn't we go out and try and secure more of these and bring them up to modern standards, but preserve what they stand for?’”



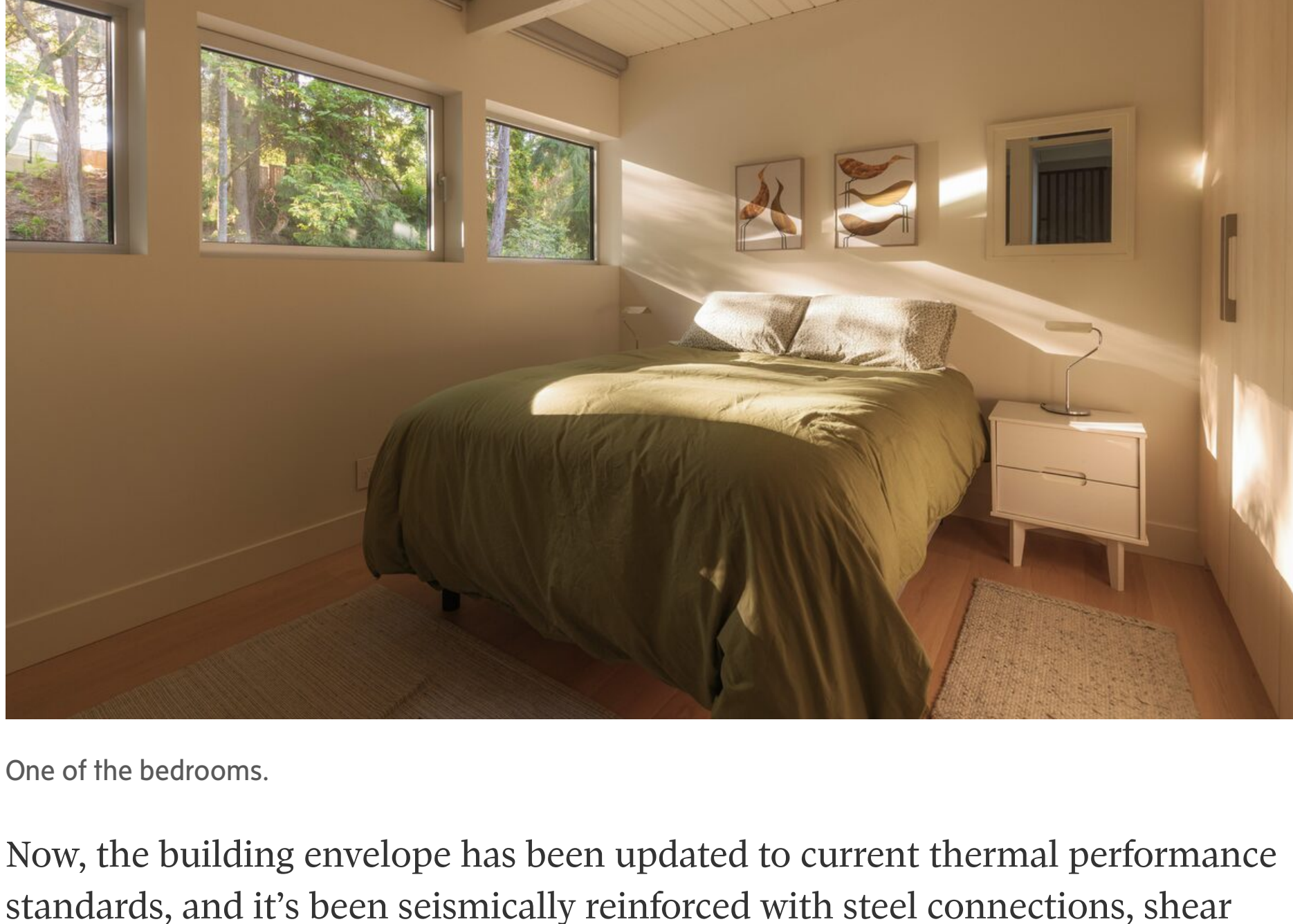
The home's kitchen, and a living and dining area.

He wants to do another five houses, updating them with the latest technology but maintaining the footprint and design. Mr. Kwan says he believes there's been a cultural shift in real estate, away from luxury brands and toward understated and thoughtful design.

“Vancouver doesn't have a lot of really special architecture,” he said. “I think there's been a big appreciation for what these homes are, and I think it's a wider trend in the market.

“Ten years ago ... everybody was buying those Hermes and Louis Vuitton bags and displaying their status,” he said. “Now, the brand is not in your face, but the quality is. ... That's what people are looking at; the quiet luxury. I think it's the same thing now in residential architecture. There will still be lots and lots of people who want a 6,000-square-foot home and five bedrooms and an ensuite in every bedroom. But I think now there's also an appreciation for something that speaks to livability, a sense of place and quality. Very North Vancouver distinguished, but not showy.”

Realtor Nick Barnes, who has the Fairmont Road listing, said not many people are eager to purchase a fixer-upper with construction costs so high. The Fairmont Road house was beautifully designed, but like many homes of its era, the windows were single-paned and drafty, and the insulation was subpar.



One of the bedrooms.

Now, the building envelope has been updated to current thermal performance standards, and it's been seismically reinforced with steel connections, shear walls and a hidden system that doesn't betray the post-and-beam design. Tongue-and-groove wood walls that had been covered in drywall have been liberated. But many buyers often don't want to deal with a house's idiosyncrasies, Mr. Barnes said.

“Buyers want the confidence of a move-in-ready, exceptionally designed and appointed Mid-Century Modern home where construction risk, permitting and timing challenges, personal disruption, escalating costs and potential budget overruns” are not a concern, Mr. Barnes said.

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Realtor Trent Rodney, who specializes in West Coast Modern homes, said even in the current downturn, the market is robust for Mid-Century Modern homes. He said he can't hang onto any houses of the era priced less than \$3-million. Once they get over that amount, the market slows down, but he did sell the 2,500-square-foot Bob Lewis Resort House at 710 Fairmile Rd. in West Vancouver for \$3.9-million, listed at \$4.185-million. He sold architect Georg Koslowski's 1979 Arbutus House in West Vancouver's Caulfield area, which received multiple offers, for \$2.7-million – or 28 per cent above the neighbourhood average.

“If it's a cool post-and-beam Bob Lewis or something, we have a lineup of buyers, especially if it's from \$2-million to \$3-million,” Mr. Rodney said.

He said many clients are selling their smaller West Coast Modern homes to upgrade to bigger ones. He has a Bob Lewis home in West Vancouver coming onto the market next week for under \$3-million and the owners are buying another West Coast Modern home that's more than \$4-million, double the size.



An outdoor entertaining space.

A few years ago, the same house would have sold for closer to \$5-million.

Mr. Rodney has compiled a list of all his sales, as well as the sales on the neighbouring properties for comparison. A Bob Lewis house in the British Properties area of West Vancouver sold for \$1,500 per square foot, while the average house in the vicinity sold for \$800 per square foot. People understand that these homes hold their value, he said.

“And if you are looking for specific features in a West Coast Modern home, they become incredibly rare.” Mr. Rodney said. “For example, the Resort House with its panoramic view, but also a Bob Lewis in original condition that you can turn into your own, how often does that come up? Those people who've been waiting years for that, that's where transactions are coming from.”

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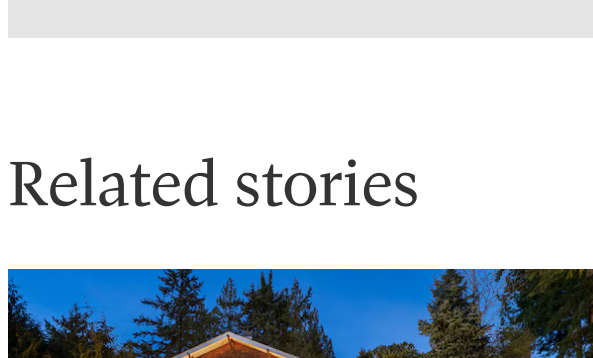
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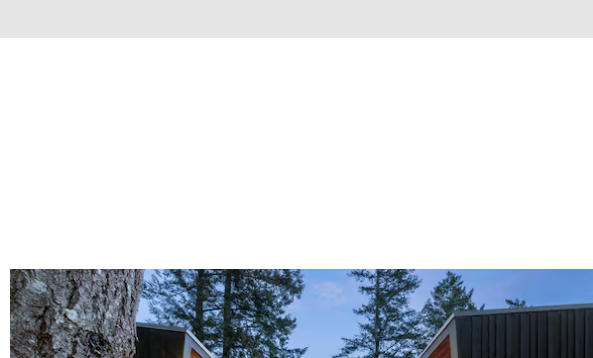
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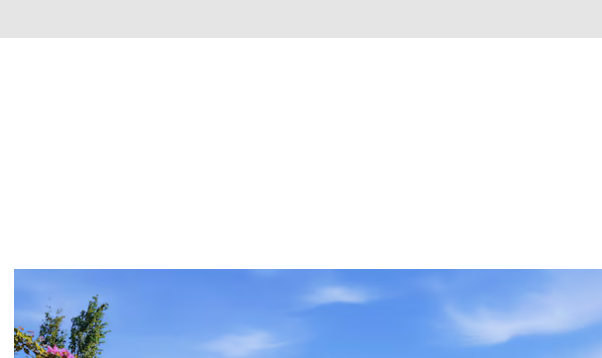
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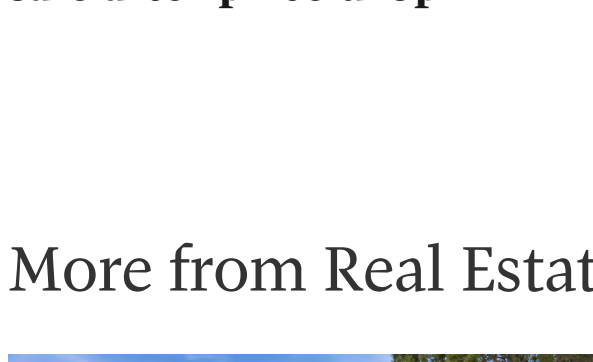


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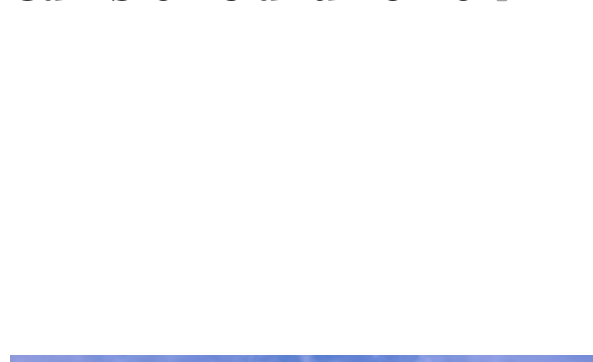


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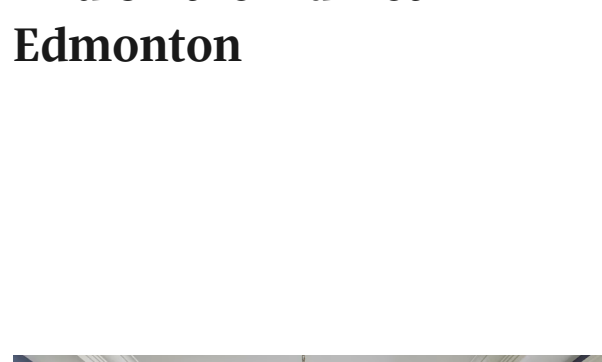
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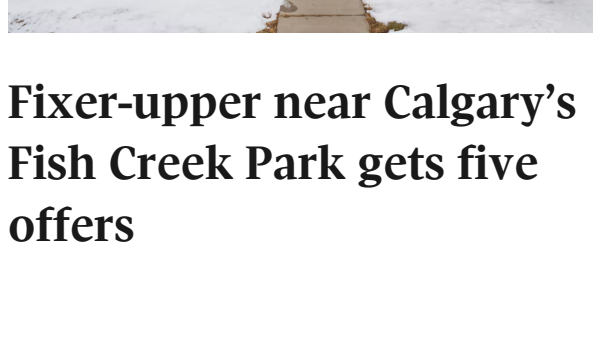
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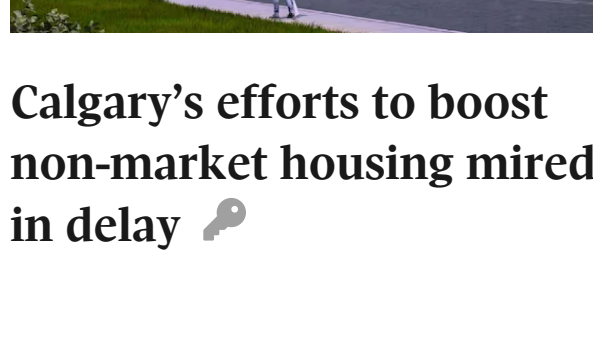
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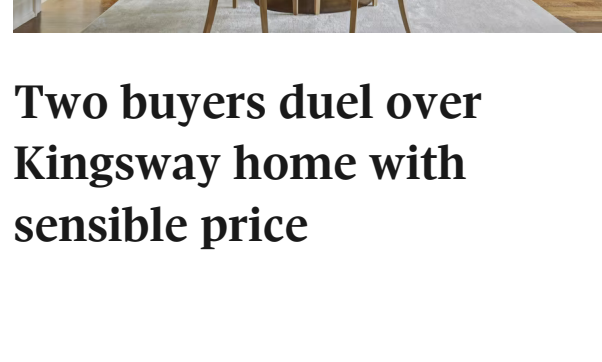
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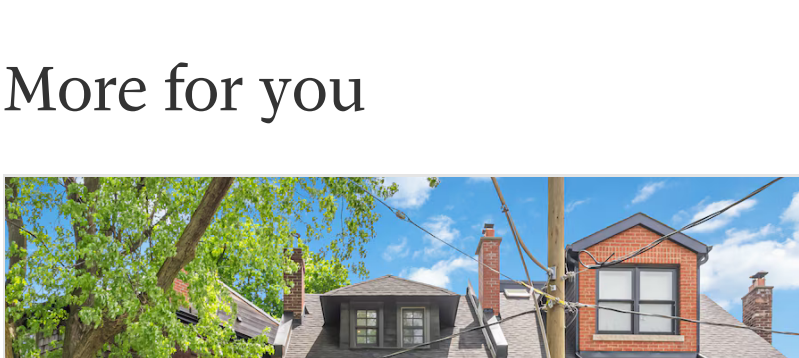


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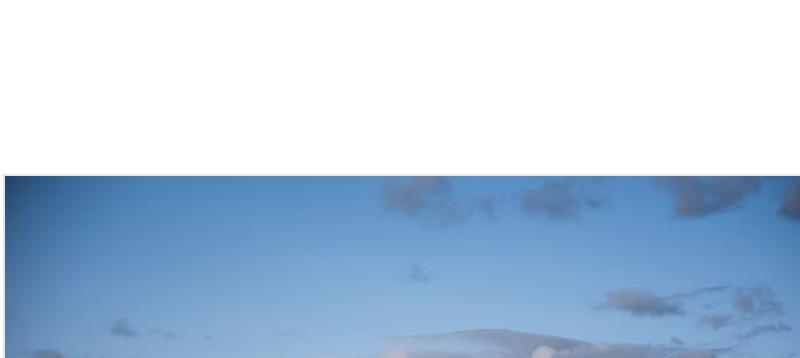


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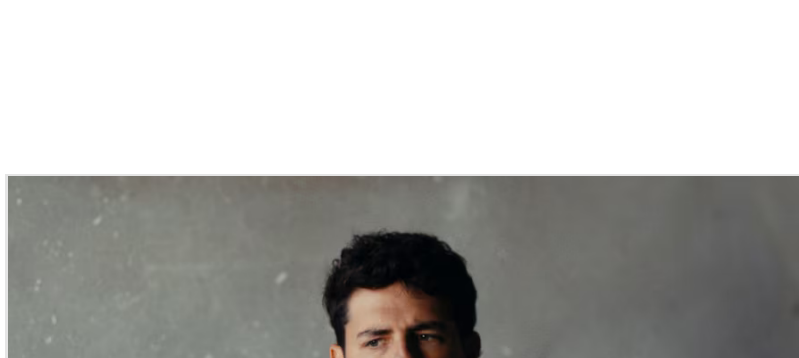
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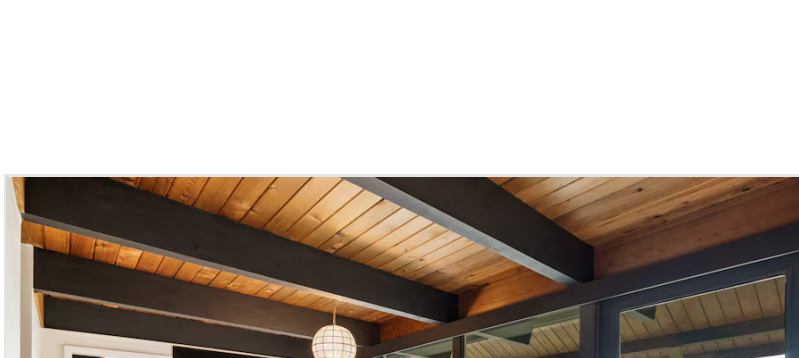
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