

Modern Marvels

As residences or museums, Modernist houses pose unique preservation challenges. *By Kim A. O'Connell*

If not for the water, it might have been a typical August day at the Farnsworth House – that spare, glass-walled Modernist icon in Plano, IL, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. But the dog days of 2007 had plagued the Midwest with torrential rains, stranding the house amid 4 ft. of floodwater. Commandeering a neighbor's boat, a small group of preservationists motored to the islanded house to rescue furniture and other valuables before the water rose further. Despite their concern, they remained hopeful. “Knowing that this house has endured for so many years with this high-water behavior was reassuring,” says director Whitney French.

The house is so perfectly suited to its wooded setting, yet so distinct from it, that one imagines that Mies must have anticipated this very thing happening. Located in a floodplain facing the Fox River, the horizontal, one-story house sits 5 ft. above grade on impossibly thin-looking white supports. This allows it to float above the landscape, its aloof detachment and perfect lines in stark contrast to the meandering branches and thick trunks of nearby trees. It is “more nearly temple than dwelling,” as historian Franz Schulze famously observed, “and it rewards aesthetic contemplation before it fulfills domestic necessity.”

Or perhaps this is simply domestic necessity honed to its essence. Completed in 1951, the house was designed as a bucolic retreat for Dr. Edith Farnsworth, providing prospect and refuge and little else. “It’s meant to be relaxed in and vacationed in, and from that perspective, this incredibly minimal house is ideal,” French says. “There is nothing that would need your attention.”

Unless, of course, you were trying to restore the house. Like many other aging Modernist buildings, the Farnsworth House has presented myriad challenges to the team of preservationists that has worked to refurbish the dwelling in recent years. Yet their work has been informed by a burgeoning movement to save Modern architecture and develop technical expertise for dealing with its often-unusual materials and forms.

“Preservation of these Modernist structures is in its discovery and research phase,” French says. “While many years of experience exist out there to refinish wood and reconstruct elaborate details on Victorians, and many resources are available to purchase period wallpaper and fixtures, the art of refurbishing Modernist structures is very exploratory at this point. Experts are rare, and valid guidance is just beginning to be developed.”

A Modern Movement

In the past, the construction of a Modernist house often occasioned a great hew and cry from observers, who were either horrified by its non-conformist silhouette or enchanted by its imaginative appearance. The demolition of a Modernist house, by contrast, has often occurred quietly and with little fanfare or outrage. In recent years, however, as more iconic Modernist houses have been torn down, preservationists have sat up and taken notice.

This past January, a 1972 house in Stamford, CT, designed by architect Paul Rudolph (most famous for his Brutalist concrete Yale Art and Architecture Building) was razed so that another house could be built on its lot. In February, a mid-century Modern house outside Cincinnati, designed by Ohio architect Woodie Garber, was demolished. Modernist commercial and institutional buildings also face the wrecking ball, such as Eero Saarinen's Bell Laboratories complex in Holmdel, NJ, Richard Neutra's Cyclorama Building at the Gettysburg battlefield and a Rudolph-designed high school in Florida. At the Marine Corps installation in Quantico, VA, nearly half of the base's 60 postwar Lustron houses – all-metal prefab structures that exemplified the “machine age” – were demolished last year, and the other half needed to be removed or disassembled this fall or suffer the same fate. Nationwide, Lustrons and other modest mid-century Modern houses remain vulnerable to this pervasive tear-down mentality.



The Farnsworth House – a Mies van der Rohe masterwork – is one of several high-profile Modernist buildings that have been restored in recent years. Now owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the house still needs a roof replacement and repairs to the steel supports and famous travertine steps. *Photo: Jon Miller, Hedrich Blessing Photographers; courtesy of Landmarks Illinois*



Now that the Farnsworth House is open to the public, historian Franz Schulze's description that it rewards “aesthetic contemplation before it fulfills domestic necessity” seems to have been correct. The National Trust and the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois are continuing to restore the house so that it can better accommodate its 6,500 annual visitors. *Photo: Jon Miller, Hedrich Blessing Photographers; courtesy of Landmarks Illinois*

Beyond the threat of demolition, many Modern houses are now more than 50 years old and falling into a state of disrepair. The materials employed in many 20th-century buildings, including plastics, engineered woods, prismatic glass and reinforced concrete, sometimes age in unexpected ways and create a range of problems unfamiliar to many preservationists and restorers.

“The number of preservation battles over Modern-era buildings has increased significantly over the past few years,” says Tom Jester, AIA, project manager with Quinn Evans Architects in Washington, DC, and editor of *Twentieth-Century Building Materials: History and Conservation*, the seminal work on the subject. “In some cases, the buildings are hitting an age where renewal is needed, prompting some owners to consider demolition or major renovations that may not be sympathetic. Most people don't understand Modern architecture. Some of what was built isn't easy to love aesthetically and didn't work particularly well on an urban level, but it is our heritage and we can't erase it entirely.”

To address these and other issues, several organizations have devoted themselves either in whole or in part to protecting Modern heritage. DOCOMOMO International (based in Paris, France), for one, has pursued the identification and preservation of Modern buildings since 1988. It now has chapters or working parties in 49 countries, including the United States, and maintains and adds to an international registry identifying hundreds of Modern buildings. In this country, DOCOMOMO US has seven chapters, advocates on behalf of threatened structures and holds conferences and other events to promote the recent past.

Where DOCOMOMO once trod alone, several other organizations have ventured as well. The granddaddy of preservation groups, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has a nationwide initiative to preserve



Above: Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, CT, is the centerpiece of a 47-acre site that became an architectural playground of sorts for the architect. In addition to his iconic Glass House, which opened to the public in June 2007, the grounds include several other structures, including a pool, guest house and galleries. *Photo: Paul Warchol*

Right: To restore the house and prepare it for public view, the National Trust undertook more than two dozen restoration projects, including replacing the flat roof. The National Trust has written a short treatise about this work and posted on the Glass House website, where it can be applied to Modern residence elsewhere. *Photo: Eirik Johnson*



20th-century structures and has acquired several high-profile Modern buildings in recent years. Often working in partnership with other private groups to operate these sites, the National Trust now owns the Farnsworth House, Philip Johnson's Glass House and Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House in Chicago, IL, and Pope-Leighey House in northern Virginia, among others.

Earlier this year, the Association for Preservation Technology International (APT) launched its Technical Committee on Modern Heritage, which will develop techniques for preservation of 20th-century building materials, host seminars and conferences and explore the philosophical aspects of restoring Modern buildings – how much historic fabric should be protected, how they can be added to and adapted, and so on. The Recent Past Preservation Network, founded in 2000 primarily to highlight significant places under 50 years of age, has advocated on behalf of an eclectic mix of Modern buildings, ranging from all-metal Lustron houses to shopping centers and bowling alleys. Still other groups such as the Los Angeles Conservancy and the Miami Modern Coalition have taken up the cause in their respective regions.

"Modernism is catching fire," says David Fixler, AIA, a principal with Einhorn Yaffee Prescott Architecture & Engineering in Boston, MA, as well as the president of DOCOMOMO US's New England chapter and co-chair, along with Tom Jester, of APT's Modern technical committee. "There have been a couple high-profile advocacy fights in recent years, and the National Trust acquired two major Modern properties [the Glass House and the Farnsworth House]. I would like to believe that DOCOMOMO and APT and others have gotten through to people that these buildings are exciting."

But they can also be challenging, as several projects illustrate.

Landmarks for Living

Despite the flood, August was an auspicious month for the Farnsworth House. Before the banks of the Fox River overflowed, the house received an outpouring of a different sort – a financial windfall courtesy of Brad Pitt. The actor and noted architecture buff had chosen the house as the location for a Japanese jeans company commercial he was shooting, generating a \$60,000 rental fee. Although the fee only went so far as to cut the house's annual deficit in half, Pitt's visit and the attendant news stories helped to generate wider awareness of its ongoing preservation needs.

When the National Trust purchased it at auction in 2003, saving it from possible demolition, the house was in generally good condition. In 1972, then-owner Lord Peter Palumbo had hired the firm of Mies' grandson to restore the house to its original appearance. A 1996 flood severely damaged the interior, occasioning another restoration. Now operated by the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois as an official National Trust historic site, the house was opened to the public in 2004 and receives about 6,500 visitors annually. "This house is becoming a classic," French says. "The Farnsworth House is studied in every architecture school in the country."

Presumably, visitors are so entranced by what critic Paul Goldberger has called a "sublime architectural experience of extraordinary power" that they don't notice its flaws. French says that, among other things, the house needs a new roof; steel supports and beams are corroding and distended; and the travertine steps and floor are buckling and cracking in places. (All this was before the August deluge, which closed the house temporarily, and whose effects remain to be seen.) Thanks in part to a Save America's Treasures grant, the National Trust and the Landmarks Preservation Council are now arranging for several intensive studies of the materials to determine



Above: The Westcott House in Springfield, OH, is one of Frank Lloyd Wright's lesser-known works, and the only Prairie-style Wright building in the state. A multidisciplinary design team from Akron, OH-based Chambers, Murphy & Burge Restoration Architects and Columbus, OH-based Schooley Caldwell Associates undertook the complex task of restoring the house to its original 1908 appearance, including removing later additions and opening up long-divided spaces. *Photo: Brad Feinknopf Photography*

Right: Frank Lloyd Wright's Pope-Leighey House in Alexandria, VA, was one of the architect's so-called Usonian houses, modest but distinctive homes designed for the suburban middle class. To save it from demolition, the National Trust moved the house to its current location on the grounds of the Woodlawn Plantation, where it provides an interesting counterpoint to the Colonial main house. *Photo: Kim A. O'Connell*



Above: Because of limited historical documentation, the restoration team made educated choices and decisions about the details that would have been included inside the Westcott House, commissioning the manufacture of special art-glass light fixtures, for instance, in a style that Wright might have crafted at the time the house was built. *Photo: Brad Feinknopf Photography*



the best approach to their conservation. Already, every inch of the travertine – a porous stone that is ill suited to the humid environment – has been mapped to identify problem areas and forecast future repairs.

If the Farnsworth House is ethereal in white, the Glass House in New Canaan, CT, is its earthier, darker cousin. Inspired by Mies' work at the Farnsworth House, architect Philip Johnson designed the Glass House as his country residence, a large-scale terrarium of quarter-inch glass supported by black steel piers. In contrast with the Farnsworth's floating quality, the Glass House sits solidly on the ground, more resolute in its relationship to the land. Johnson bequeathed the house to the National Trust before his death in 2005, and it opened to the public this past June.

Like so many Modernist buildings, the house is not without its share of problems. To prepare the home for public view, the National Trust undertook more than two dozen separate restoration projects, most notably replacing the flat roof and the leather-tile bathroom ceiling. Other initiatives include fundraising to enable the purchase of land to the north of the house to protect its extraordinary view. "As 'Modern' is now becoming historical," says Glass House Director Christy MacLear, "the interest in new practice, policy and examples is also very high. The Glass House is well positioned to exemplify the National Trust's Modern historic preservation as well as draw in entirely new audiences to preservation – namely those interested in Modern art, architecture and design."

The Glass House appears so open to the outdoors that Wright is rumored to have remarked, upon entering it, that he didn't know whether to doff his hat or keep it on. Like Mies, Johnson and other contemporaries, Wright was undeniably a Modern architect, and like them he experimented with new forms and materials on a wide range of structures. Yet Wright is a particularly interesting case, in that his career was improbably long and his work quite diverse, from his early Prairie School houses and his middle-class Usonian homes to his iconic Fallingwater in southwest Pennsylvania, with its cantilevered balconies, and the Ennis House in Los Angeles, CA, constructed mostly of interlocking pre-cast concrete blocks.

Preserving Wright's many extant buildings is the work of several organizations, such as the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy and the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust, among others. Recently, a team of architects and engineers restored one of Wright's earlier and lesser-known buildings – the Westcott House in Springfield, OH, now an historic house museum. The FLW Building Conservancy and the Westcott House Foundation retained Chambers, Murphy & Burge Restoration Architects (CMB) of Akron, OH, and Schooley Caldwell Associates (SCA) of Columbus, OH, to research and restore the house, which had been much altered and deteriorated since its 1908 construction. "It's an old house, and surprisingly it retains some Victorian details," says Lauren Pinney Burge, AIA, principal of CMB. "It's on the cusp of Modernism in terms of Wright's work, and yet it's a very modern space in the way it functions."

With minimal historical documentation at hand, the team had to make educated decisions about how the house's original details might have looked or worked, designing a new art-glass light fixture in a Wright style, for example, and creating a new water-drainage system that didn't detract from the house's historic appearance (since Wright had not included downspouts). "We did have to deal with the fact that Wright was pushing the envelope on certain details," says Robert D. Loversidge, Jr., FAIA, president of SCA. "If they worked, great, but if they didn't work, we had to find ways to make them look like they worked."

Neighborhood Watch

In northern Virginia, just south of Washington, DC, a quiet neighborhood of middle-class houses is shaded by abundant trees. Unlike the red brick, pediments and columns one might expect in the Old Dominion, these houses have floor-to-ceiling windows, flat roofs and boxy shapes – a boldly Modernist enclave in an architecturally conservative area. This is Hollin Hills, a post-World War II housing development designed by architect Charles M. Goodman from 1949 to 1971. Today, the neighborhood is



Built between 1948 and 1950, all-steel Lustron houses combined a Modern aesthetic and materials with a pitched roof and low profile that complemented traditional mid-century neighborhoods. Only about 2,500 Lustrons were built nationwide, including 60 at the Quantico Marine Base in Quantico, VA. Today, half of the Lustrons on base have been torn down, and the others shown here face a similar fate. Photo: Kim A. O'Connell

impeccably maintained, and nearly all of its 450 houses look fresh and up to date. The community has led a long effort to nominate the Hollin Hills neighborhood to the National Register of Historic Places. Modern heritage has increasingly been reflected in the National Register, which now includes two other Goodman-designed communities in Maryland as well as the post-war Green Gables and Greenmeadow neighborhoods in Palo Alto, CA, developed by Joseph Eichler.

Nationwide, preservation organizations are working to apply the lessons learned at landmark houses to more typical mid-century Modern residences. As part of its Preserve the Modern initiative, the National Trust has posted six points about flat-roof replacement on the Glass House website. The site acknowledges that newer technologies and products may work better on an aging Modernist structure, which will require thoughtful discussions about which is more important – protecting the historic fabric of a house or merely its historic intent or aesthetic. "When it comes to Modern houses, you don't have to preserve it exactly as it was," says Fixler. "You can take the dynamic essence of what it was, without destroying that essential character. For the vast majority of Modern houses, it's healthy for them to grow and change."

In addition to this effort, the Glass House, the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, the Northeast Office of the National Trust and the New Canaan Historical Society have launched a comprehensive survey of more than 90 architect-designed mid-century Modern residences, outbuildings and landscapes in New Canaan, CT. Similar efforts abound. The Los Angeles Conservancy encourages homeowners to celebrate the unique elements of their Modern homes – their "originality, sophistication and relevance to contemporary living," as one document states – before jumping to the conclusion that they must be replaced or altered beyond recognition.

Tom Jester encourages more states and localities to survey their Modern resources, as the state of Maryland recently did. Sustainability, he adds, should also go hand in hand with Modern preservation. "The number of buildings from this era is vast," he says. "We simply can't afford to throw them all in a landfill. This means that we must recycle or renew what we have."

By preserving Modern heritage, we are embracing new ideas and technologies, just as the Modernists did, but we are simultaneously celebrating our history, something they generally refused to do. Despite that fact, we are better for their contributions to our national discussion about where we live and who we are. "There's an exhilaration that can take hold of you in a good Modern building that is very different than the feeling you get in a traditional building," Fixler says. "They're about dynamism and possibility." ■



Above and left: In an otherwise conventional part of northern Virginia sits Hollin Hills, a Modernist enclave designed by Charles M. Goodman. The local civic association is working to nominate the neighborhood to the National Register of Historic Places. If this effort is successful, Hollin Hills would join a growing roster of Modern historic districts, including two other Goodman-designed residential communities in Maryland, two California neighborhoods developed by Modernist Joe Eichler and the hip Miami Modern commercial district. Photos: Kim A. O'Connell