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Accidental Archivist

By George Smart

Curiosity leads to a long-standing endeavor to chronicle modernist masterpieces.

NEARLY EVERY DAY, WE READ ABOUT THE DESTRUCTION OF ANOTHER MODERNIST HOUSE IN AMERICA. We moan for a few days then move on. The grief is brief—unless it is a house in your hometown, perhaps one your family formerly owned, or one you played in as a child or one you drove by and admired for decades. Perhaps you have searched for a list of them online. It's likely that you didn't find much, as most modernist houses by local and largely unsung architects don't get much attention. Some, the most famous, get press when they're demolished. As for the rest, without knowing where they are, how can anyone try to save the good ones?

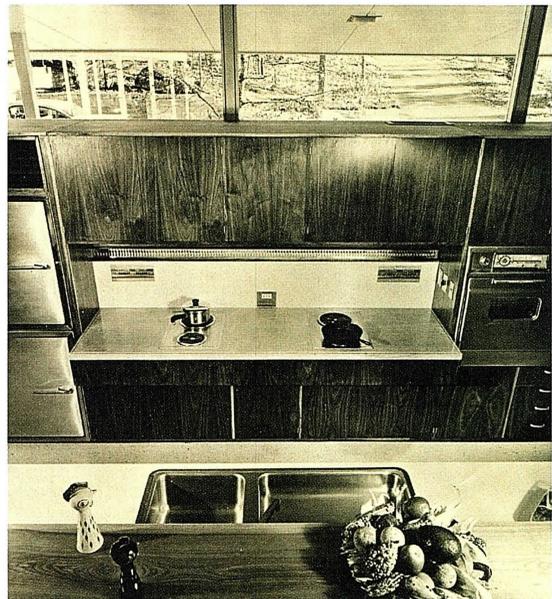
I grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina, a state capitol that, in 1961, had about 94,000 people—not very large. Raleigh's North Carolina State University had an architecture dean, Henry Kamphoefner, a maverick and avid modernist, who led the school to national prominence at a



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time when modernism was at its peak. Kamphoefner encouraged faculty and undergraduate students alike to take on private clients and today we have about 700 modernist houses within 25 miles of the school.

For decades after, the typical Raleigh citizen, including me, was unaware. Tucked away off main roads, these modern gems went largely unnoticed, as flashier—but typically uninspired—houses, apartments and townhouses were built over the years. I had no idea about this history until late one stormy night in 2007, when I decided to research

modernist architecture in Raleigh. I thought to myself, “surely someone has documented all these interesting, livable works of art! The city, perhaps? The School of Design? Some author?” There were records of occasional house tours and National Register applications, but there was no single, comprehensive list.

I’m not an architect, an architectural historian, a librarian or in any profession remotely related to design, but that night I thought, “what the hell, I’ll make a list.” As Jeremy Clarkson of Top Gear is fond of saying, “How hard could it be?” Turns out, not so hard! Within a few hours, I had a list of 20. My list included the home’s address, the owner’s name and—whenever available—a photo of the house and the architect’s name.

Showing that list to a few architects opened the floodgates. By mid-2007, there were several hundred. Now the nonprofit I started has documented over 6,000 houses in North Carolina and around the United States by some of the best 20th century masters like John Lautner, Walter Gropius and Richard Neutra. Quite by accident, I’ve become an archivist, and I speak around the country about my 11-year journey, something my wife calls “an extended seizure.”

If you’re concerned that the modernist houses you love are going away, the first thing to do is get Googling. A few hours online and a chat with an established local architect will get you started. You’ll be amazed at what you can discover and how many people want to help you. ☺



George Smart founded NC Modernist Houses and US Modernist Houses, together the largest open digital archives for residential Modernist architecture. He is host of the podcast US Modernist Radio, which posts every other Monday on iTunes. For more, visit usmodernist.org.