

# atomic

MIDCENTURY MARVELS

# ranch



**Boise, Idaho's Efforts to Preserve + Honor Midcentury Roots**

**Herman Miller: An In-Depth Look at the Maker of Icons**

**Modernism Thrives with a New Generation of Purists**



# accidentalarchivist

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## It's Up to You

Learn how to become a modernist sleuth—unearthing your hometown's history and preserving the stories behind its mid mod marvels.

By George Smart

**M**ODERNIST HOUSES FROM THE 1950s AND '60s ARE IN NEARLY EVERY CITY WITH A POPULATION OVER 200,000. We hear the most about larger Modernist communities like Los Angeles and Palm Springs, but there are many more scattered across the United States.

ONE OF MILTON SMALL'S DESIGNS





# accidentalarchivist

In your own town, there's possibly a dozen modernist houses, and if you are a true fan, you've likely heard or inquired about the architects. "Surely," you think, "the local preservation society has researched these houses and their creators." You call—and typically you find the society prefers cottages, mill and Victorian houses, and old churches, among other structures that wouldn't host butterfly chairs. "Modernist houses still look ahead of their time," the society says, "so how could they be considered historical or worth preserving?" Maybe it's time to talk to the architects directly.

When I started documenting Midcentury Modernist houses in North Carolina in 2007, 90% of the architects were still alive. In 2018, it's down to about 20%. These men, and a few women, were born in the 1920s and '30s. For famous architects like Richard Neutra or Charles Gwathmey, no problem, their legacy is secured. For Brian Shawcroft, Jim Fox, Milton Small or Richard Spencer, or any of the hundreds of unsung architects across America, their legacies die when they do. The families throw the storage boxes and plans

away after a few years, and that's that. Maybe it's time for a few good men and women to step forward—that's where you come in.

## Step 1: Pick your favorite local midcentury architect.

If they're still alive, call and plan a visit. If they're not alive, you may be hesitant to contact their family,

I connected many families to the archivists of NC State University's Special Collections. They are the Warehouse 13 of the state's design heritage. You likely have a similar group at the nearest large university offering architecture degrees.

## Step 2: Ask for a project list.

If you are lucky, that list will also have addresses, but most lists don't. Architects and their families have bits of information you'll assemble like a puzzle to find these houses, if they are still standing. From here, you're going to have the time of your life driving around town looking for buildings, searching on the internet, asking friends what and who they know in connection to these houses.

## Step 3: Create a platform to share your discoveries.

I'm talking about starting a website where you share your town's trove of modernist houses, the architect's bio and ask for the community's help finding missing houses. If you can write a letter in Microsoft Word, you can create a website. Don't worry about it looking sleek or pretty—it's all about the information. For years our website had all the aesthetic beauty of Craigslist, yet pulled in 40,000 to 60,000 page views a month. Lots of people are that passionate about modernism, just like you. ☸



RICHARD SPENCER AND WIFE JOSEPHINE CARUSO ARE PICTURED STANDING BY THE FIREPLACE IN THE SANTA MONICA HOME HE DESIGNED. NOTE THE TABLE WITH A TELEVISION BUILT IN, SPENCER MADE THAT TABLE HIMSELF.

a concern which is understandable, but generally unwarranted. I've found that families love their parent's modernist work and are thrilled you want to celebrate it. If you are lucky, that call will be the same week they're considering throwing everything away. In hundreds of calls throughout North Carolina, I have had about a dozen of these magic timing moments, and



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF GEORGE SMART

George Smart founded NC Modernist Houses and USModernist Houses, together the largest open digital archives for residential Modernist architecture. He is host of the podcast USModernist Radio, which posts every other Monday on iTunes. [www.usmodernist.org](http://www.usmodernist.org).