

TREND

LINE

MODERN DILEMMA

"I Don't Understand It, It Doesn't Look Old to Me"

BY RICHARD
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During the mid-20th century, the champions of modern architecture seldom missed an opportunity to ridicule the past. At best, the past was a closed book whose chapters had mercifully ended with little bearing upon the present. But often the past was portrayed as an evil. Buildings and cities created since the rise of industrialization were charged with having nearly ruined the planet. The legacy of one's parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents was not only visually meaningless and degenerate, but socially and spiritually repressive as well. Architects such as Walter Gropius saw the contemporary city as so much detritus. The more of the alleged blight removed from the scene, the better.

Such sweeping indictments in architectural and planning circles added fuel to the cause of historic preservation in others. It is no coincidence that the National Historic Preservation Act came at a time when the Modernist cause seemed to be exercising a hold on Federal policy.

This relationship, among other things, makes it difficult to consider the legacy of Modernism. Furthermore, Modernism is still with us. It can be argued that more of its agenda has been realized over the past three decades than over the previous half century.

Nevertheless, the products of a generation ago can indeed be examined from a fresh perspective. What was called by its proponents simply "Modern Architecture" does not always seem modern anymore.

Washington, DC's southwest redevelopment area fully manifests the Modernist imperative. Planned in the 1950s, and largely in place by the mid-1960s, this model venture retained but a few vestiges of the previous urban fabric. Street patterns and block size were modified. New construction increased density and open space at the same time. Planning struck a balance between automobiles and pedestrians, and separated the two wherever possible.

The project was a consummate manifestation of Federal urban renewal programs, when wholesale clearance and sweeping new designs were irreproachable objectives. It was comparable to the National Mall, a few blocks away, in that nothing of its kind was more ambitious, more realized, and, arguably, more accomplished in its design.

Locally, the project represented not only major physical and demographic changes. It also, for the first time, allowed Washington Modernists to exhibit their talents in a conspicuous way. The precinct stands as a pantheon to the best and brightest: Chloethiel Woodard Smith, Charles Goodman, Keyes Lethbridge & Condon, among others. Famous practitioners from outside Washington, including Harry Weese, I.M. Pei, Dan Kiley, and Hideo Sasaki, also contributed.

We would not question the historical significance were the area developed 175 years ago, and we should not from a distance of some 40 years either. The scheme no longer represents the present: the buildings, the planning, indeed the approach itself differ from anything in our current vocabulary. Yet the project possesses an enduring value, and not just as a museum

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Right, above: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, architect Marcel Breuer and Associates, 1968, in Washington, DC's southwest redevelopment area.





piece. Some residents refer fondly to their neighborhood as Brasilia. The idea of an historic district has been entertained by those who, just as Georgetowners a half century ago, fear that outside forces will alter what makes the place like no other.

Another example is a benchmark of its kind: Shopper's World, in Framingham, Massachusetts, 16 miles west of Boston. When it opened in 1951, it was the second regional shopping center developed as an integrated business around a core pedestrian area—a mall (Northgate, opened in 1950 in Seattle, was the first). For many years, Shopper's World was the only one of this first generation of malls, and perhaps the only one from before the 1960s, to remain in anything close to original form. It was the foremost example of the initial trend that revolutionized shopping patterns and outlying development. Like southwest Washington, it embodied beliefs that the old order could not meet contemporary needs, that radical new solutions were needed. Shopper's World should have become a National Historic Landmark, although arguing the point is academic because it was leveled in 1994—for a parking lot.

The complex was clearly of national, perhaps international, significance. Why did the preservation effort, a local one, focus on the anchor department store's saucer dome, interesting in its own right, but with little bearing on the design's transcendence?

Often we do not "see" the landmarks of the mid-20th century. Their landscape is not centralized. Rather it is multi-nucleated, and the nucleations often lack traditional focal points. Southwest Washington has a main thoroughfare, but no vantage point from which to appreciate the precinct. Shopper's World was hardly noticeable from its approach, even in isolation, before an array of businesses began to surround it, a result of its drawing power. Moreover, the shopping strip does not read as a district, it lacks visual coherence. Similarly, little apparent relationship exists

between like groupings scattered about a metropolitan area.

Examples of this kind are the rule. Chances are that the elementary school does not crown a hill or otherwise conspicuously demark its importance. More likely it is sited well back from the road, from which, if visible at all, it appears as a series of unobtrusive pavilions. A number of headquarter offices, such as those of Reynolds Aluminum and John Deere, are the polar opposites of their skyscraper precursors, sited like great country houses on the edge of the city in lush preserves. It is easy to cast them as anti-urban. However, the past 50 years show that there is a clear order in recent growth, a distinctly metropolitan offshoot of the old, more traditional forms.

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Perhaps no type is so central to preservation, in the popular mind at least, as the single-family house, and here, too, modern architecture defies convention. The great modern houses do not line main streets, nor do they cluster in defined, viewable enclaves such as Kansas City's Country Club District. Most are as invisible as the mountain cabin, marked only by an unassuming driveway through dense foliage. Even in communities with an abundant collection of noted examples—New Canaan, Connecticut, for instance—little is known about them except through individual encounters with domiciles owned by friends.

And even when property sizes are smaller, the setting not quasi-rural, the impact often is no greater. Los Angeles affords a telling example, with great works from the mid-20th century sequestered on tiny hillside sites, seen by the few who drive the winding roads as sheer walls, garage doors, and vegetation. The plant life can completely subsume a building, such as Richard Neutra's Nesbitt house of 1942, even without the aid of the topography. Thousands of people pass by each day and never "see" it.



"Brasilia on the Potomac"—the fond moniker of some residents for this southwest DC enclave from the urban renewal era—gave local modernists a place to shine. Charles Goodman's townhouses, far left and right, frame Keyes, Lethbridge & Condon's Tiber Island complex.



Modern architecture often cannot be appreciated from one or two exterior elevations, a single photograph or description. Movement around and through a building, or its complex, may be essential. Just as the experience is frequently more internal and private than external and public, so space is often accorded primacy over form. One must look beyond motifs and veneers. Modern architecture did not just eliminate ornament; it did not just eschew references to the past; it did not just emulate a machine aesthetic; it challenged basic assumptions about design.

Despite innumerable claims to the contrary, modern architecture has never been monolithic, but rather defined by an array of individualistic approaches. Look at the picture around 1955: the laconic structuralism of Mies van der Rohe; the geometric organicism of Frank Lloyd Wright; the understated abstractionism of Richard Neutra; the “soft” naturalism of William Wurster; the flamboyant expressionism of Bruce Goff.

In banishing academic principles, modern architecture’s proponents established a new order defined to a stunning degree by individual will. Many espoused purportedly transcendent principles of design—Wright’s and Le Corbusier’s among the best known—but these were seldom used by others unless transformed in an equally personal manner. Furthermore, the academic notion that principles were immutable was silently discarded in favor of an outlook that encouraged more or less continual change, so that the premises espoused by one group were, and are, frequently challenged by others. Modern architecture, in short, is very much relativistic.

Modern conceptions of space have certainly affected settlement patterns since World War II. Too often this landscape is dismissed as “sprawl,” with no effort to understand the forces that shaped it. The modern metropolis is not the product of fools, any more or any less than the industrial city. Functions gravitate to where they

appear to operate efficiently from an owners' perspective. The shopping mall flourished not just because larger numbers of the middle class possessed unprecedented mobility, disposable income, and leisure time. Retail districts in many cities were saturated, unable to expand at a rate commensurate with market growth.

Decentralization has been a fact much longer than many realize. Beginning more or less with the railroad, factories and worker housing scattered about the large cities. The rich and the middle class sought the periphery. The sprawl of cities such as Detroit seemed epic by the late 19th century, but this, in turn, was diminutive compared to the next several decades. The surge after World War II was hardly unprecedented, and, had it not happened, cities would have had to remake themselves, leaving little fabric to preserve.

What did change, of course, were the particulars. The major cause was the car. These machines not only consume space themselves, they allow us to traverse space in ways never before imaginable. Driving time, not linear distance, has been a standard locational measure since the 1940s. We think little about driving an extra five miles—a few minutes—for shopping, to church, to our home. The car did not so much introduce choices as it

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Shopper's World took the New England green as a prototype. The open spaces around the school, amid the office parks and apartment complexes, are latter-day surrogates for seeing the country from the town and being able to reach it in minutes.

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Part of the challenge is for preservationists to think less like critics and more like historians. Most are bad critics of the built environment, which they cast in simplistic terms, the development Godzilla versus the preservation Bambi. But it's not all their fault. Even the most sophisticated tend to cast things in black-and-white. Lewis Mumford did this: Park Avenue was no better than a slum; ye olde New England village was beyond reproach.

Yet preservationists have done a pretty good job with history. Over the past 40 years, they have saved a remarkably diverse swath of the past. And they made a major contribution to the academy by insisting that more things were significant than the textbooks let on.

Still, much remains to be saved. After World War II, the United States became an international leader in modern architecture. The legacy of a broad range of creative designers—of landscapes and interiors along with buildings—is probably unmatched by any other nation. The vernacular realm offers many examples as well. At no time has such commodious housing been available to persons of moderate means. All the derisive comments about sprawl, about ticky-tacky, inhumane boxes out to the horizon, refer to a remarkable phenomenon that may never be duplicated, with the family-run motels, the chain department stores, the idiosyncratic cheek-by-jowl with the idiomatic.

We cannot squander this legacy the way we squandered what came before. We do not have the luxury of time.



Far left: North Shore Congregation Israel, Glencoe, Illinois, Minoru Yamasaki, architect, 1964.

Near left: Dace House, Beaver, Oklahoma, Bruce Goff, architect, 1964.

allowed us to retain the openness and free movement associated with many towns (but not with most cities) in the 19th century. The modest tract houses of the postwar era are really incarnations of the modest ones in most American towns.

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