

Right: The Francis W. Little House by architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

Opposite: Modernism started popping up in Houston as early as the 1930s, but became popular in the mid-1950s. Notable houses include 8 Tiel Way, 2337 Blue Bonnet and Lamar High School.



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As interest in modern architecture and design has grown, both nationally and within our city, it is interesting to look at Houston's modernist heritage, which spans the last seventy years. This article is the first of two devoted to this subject. The first is a brief overview of modernism in Houston, covering the first half of the twentieth century, while the second will bring us up to the present.

Toward the end of the 19th century, and into the beginning of the 20th, great developments emerged in the fields of architecture and design as a result of both technological advances and philosophical theory. The new ideas were embodied in the work of important avant-garde architects, such as Walter Gropius in Germany, J.J.P. Oud in Holland, and Le Corbusier in France. Concurrently, in the United States, the work of architects such as Louis Sullivan, and then Frank Lloyd Wright made major breakthroughs in advancing modernist tendencies.

Although a great variety of expression existed, there were several elements which were consistent in all of the new work. These included an honest expression of structure, a reduction in surface decoration, a move away from simple symmetry and an opening of the interior floor plan, away from a traditional enclosure of space.

These ideas were new and, in Europe as well as America, prevailing taste did not embrace the new forms. Beaux Arts classicism held sway and the majority of homes and businesses,

regardless of technological advances in engineering, reflected the taste for the popular revival styles of the day: the Colonial Revival, the Georgian Revival, Spanish Colonial Revival and the Jacobean or Tudor Revival. However, towards the end of the 1920s and largely in the 1930s the impact of modernism began to be felt in many major cities. In the US, Houston, like New York, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles and other major urban centers, was exposed to these new forms.

The first quarter of the 20th century was a time of enormous change and growth for Houston. The great hurricane of 1900 wiped out Galveston's prominence in the world of shipping and Houston emerged as an important leader in this area. In 1901, oil was discovered in Beaumont and from that time on, Houston benefited greatly from the wealth generated by this natural resource. In addition, in 1914, the ship channel was dredged, and soon after the city profited from increased oil production and manufacturing related to the first World War. All of this growth generated a real estate boom, and many areas of the city were developed at the same time that the influence of modernism was beginning to grow internationally.

Nevertheless, it is apparent from a quick tour of some of the outstanding extant neighborhoods from the period 1915 through 1930 in Houston, that modernism had not yet gained any great popularity here. Take a tour of Cortlandt Place in Montrose, or North and South Boulevards in the Museum District, (Broadacres), and it is



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immediately clear that the prevailing taste adhered to traditionalism. Contrast these homes with Frank Lloyd Wright's Francis W. Little's house of 1912-14, or later, the Stein House of 1928 by Le Corbusier, and the difference is readily apparent. Within this context, it is important to realize that modernism at this time truly was avant-garde, whether in Europe or elsewhere, and was not the norm.

MODERNISM MOVES IN

However, by the late 1930s, evidence of the spread of modernism could be seen in Houston. Four homes – 1601 Milford (Campbell and Keller, 1937) and 3239 Locke Lane (Harvin Moore and Herman Lloyd 1937) and 2506 Riverside Drive (1936) and 2337 Blue Bonnet (Wirtz and Calhoun, 1937) – exhibit the non-traditional massing and lack of ornament and symmetry, all hallmarks of the modernist sensibility. In addition, in 1937, Lamar High School (John F. Staub and Kenneth Franzheim), with its streamlined façade, added a modernistic element to Westheimer Road in River Oaks.

During this period of the late 30s and 40s, many more examples of modern architecture appeared in Houston, both for domestic as well as commercial purposes. Examples include 1210 West Clay Avenue (now Tribeca Lofts) of 1936, by architect Joseph Finger, and also the Lawndale Art Center at 4910 Main St. (1930), by the same architect. These two examples exhibit modernist tendencies with leanings towards the Art Deco. Also worth

noting is 4912 Main St. by architects, McKie and Kamrath, of 1949, which exhibits truly modern massing, with clear horizontality, and cantilevered balconies. Also during this period were Congregation Emanu El Temple, (Mckie and Kamrath, 1949), 1400 Allen Parkway (now Allen Parkway Village), by Associated Housing Architects of Houston, 1942 and 1944, and Foley's Department Store, 1947, by Kenneth Franzheim. This last building was extremely innovative in its day, with stylish interiors, air conditioning and parking available by tunnel.

Of all the architects working during this period and into the 50s, the firm of McKie and Kamrath are particularly notable for their contributions. Their architecture reflects a strong interest in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright with its careful attention to siting, emphasis on the use of natural materials, and horizontal massing and detailing. In addition to the works mentioned, a number of homes designed by this firm are still extant. Among them are 8 Tiel Way (1951) and 48 Tiel Way (1957). Also particularly notable is the fine commercial building designed for Schlumberger in 1953 at 5000 Gulf Freeway.

The time period following World War II was one of great prosperity and stability for Houston. Jobs were plentiful, and many who had gone to war moved back to the area, married and settled down. The population of Houston was growing





2523 Maroneal Boulevard, 1952.

rapidly, and on August 3, 1954, Houston celebrated M-day, to mark reaching one million in population. As a result of this growth, large areas were developed in the 1950s, and it was during this decade that Houston embraced modernism, both for commercial and residential buildings.

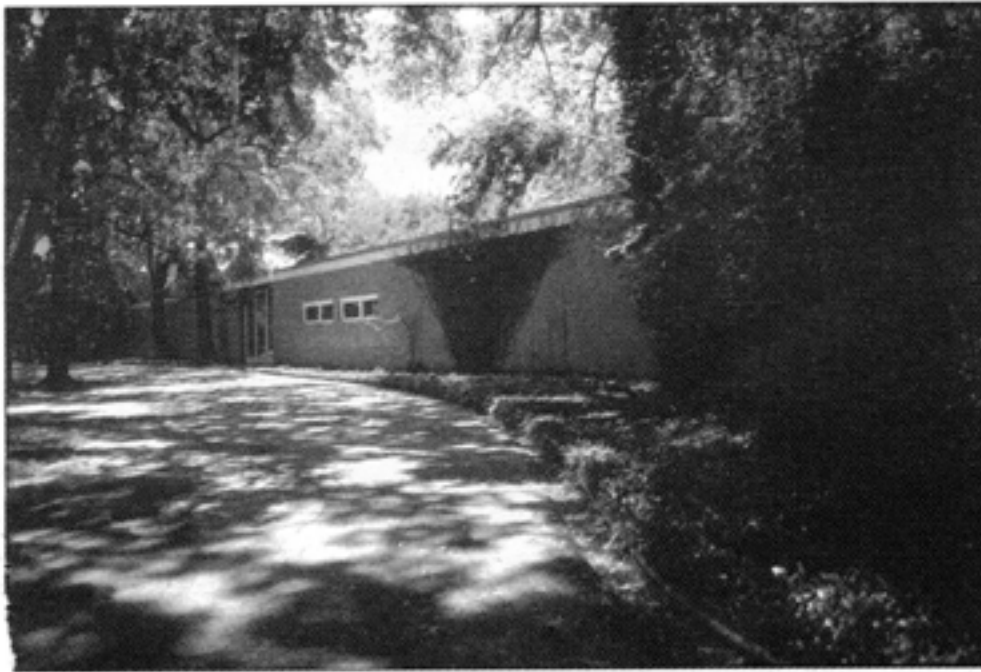
MAKING MODERNISM THE NORM

There were good reasons for greater acceptance of modernism, not just in Houston, but nationally. Many of the important European leaders of modern architecture, such as Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Mies Van der Rohe, were exiled from Germany during the Nazi era. They, and many others fled first to England, and then to the United States. Walter Gropius became a professor at the Harvard school of Architecture, and soon, whole groups of students were being taught according to the modern dictums first set out at the Bauhaus years before. These young architects then created an environment where modernism became the norm.

In Houston, the influence of wide-spread acceptance of modernism is visible in many residential areas, as

well as some of our finest museums and corporate buildings. The highly influential art patrons and collectors John and Dominique de Menil hired the (then) Miesian-inspired architect, Phillip Johnson to design their home in River Oaks. He was later asked to design buildings for the University of St. Thomas in the Montrose area, to which the Menils then had close ties. Other architects working in Houston were also influenced by Mies and the modernism of the Harvard Graduate school of Design were Hugo V. Neuhaus, Howard Barnstone and Preston Bolton, among others. In addition to the University of St. Thomas campus, the work of these architects can be seen at the 2307 Blue Bonnet (Bolton and Barnstone, 1955), 2523 Maroneal Boulevard (Paul Laszlo with Howard Barnstone, 1952), 2910 Lazy Lane (Cowell and Neuhaus 1950), and 56 Tiel Way (Cowell and Neuhaus 1952).

These architects, as well as others, such as John S. Chase, Harwood Taylor, Burdette Keeland, William R. Jenkins, worked in Houston during this fertile period. Their contributions can be seen in



The Menil estate was designed by Miesian-inspired architect, Phillip Johnson.

both downtown and in the residential areas around Houston which were developed in the 1950s.

MODERNISM FOR THE MASSES

While large numbers of distinguished residences and commercial buildings were being designed by architects, it is equally interesting to note that, at this time, developers of tract housing elected to adopt a watered down version of modernism for the majority of homes built during this period. These can be seen in the numerous ranch house neighborhoods that sprang up at this time. The areas south of Holcombe and Bellaire Boulevards, in Braeswood and surrounding areas have treasure troves of houses from this period, some more ambitious than others. Many of the streets off Memorial Drive also have houses from the 50s as well. What is clearly apparent, however, is that a taste for modernism, regardless of how watered down, had become a prevailing aesthetic, at least for the exterior of one's home. In addition, the general public accepted and expected the modern aesthetic in corporate life.

Now that more than a half century has passed, it is possible to view Houston's early to mid-century architecture with renewed appreciation. Houston's neighborhoods and downtown contain some very fine examples of modern domestic as well as commercial architecture. You may be interested in taking a driving tour to find some of the examples mentioned in this article. However, for a fuller guide, purchase a copy of the American Institute of Architect's Guide to Houston, available through the Houston Chapter of the AIA, or at Brazos Bookstore on Bissonnet. ■

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