

Scarcity and Plenty, Experimentation and Nostalgia

MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY ARCHITECTURE ON CAPE COD

By John R. DaSilva

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY ATTENTION TO MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY MODERNISM

as an architectural style is confirmed nationally by *Dwell*, a consumer magazine; Design Within Reach, a retail company selling mid-century modern furniture to the public; and several books focused on enclaves of houses from this era across the country. Preservation groups have been formed nationwide to save threatened Modernist neighborhoods and houses and to educate the public about them. Even traditionally conservative groups, such as the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (today called Historic New England), now pay attention to Modernism. The Gropius House of 1938 in Lincoln, Massachusetts, is the one twentieth-century property in its thirty-six-house collection. Also, confirming popularity among design professionals, most of the houses featured in the professional and academic architectural press over the last twenty years have been inspired by Modernism.

Cape Cod has a concentration of Modernist houses, mostly in Wellfleet and Truro but with important individual examples elsewhere. There are also little-known planned Modernist neighborhoods in Wellfleet (Mayo Hill Colony Club, 1949), Yarmouth (Salt Box Association, 1938—artist George Grosz’s early getaway), and Falmouth (Bywater Court, 1940). Since the 2006 show at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum *A Chain of Events: Marcel Breuer to Charles Jencks, Modernist Architecture on the Outer Cape* (catalogue essay by Michael Hays), the region’s Modernist houses have been featured in the 2013 documentary *Built on Narrow Land*, and in books such as *Artists’ Handmade Houses* by Michael Gotkin (Abrams, 2011), *Tomorrow’s Houses: New England Modernism* by Alexander Gorlin (Rizzoli, 2011), and, most

recently, *Cape Cod Modern: Midcentury Architecture and Community on the Outer Cape* by Peter McMahon and Christine Cipriani (Metropolis Books, 2014).

Cape Cod Modern follows McMahon’s important work establishing Cape Cod Modern House Trust, an organization devoted to saving and restoring Modernist houses on the Outer Cape. McMahon and Cipriani’s depth of coverage, the first of its kind, does a great service to the architectural history of the Cape. They categorize Modernist houses in Wellfleet and Truro (with one exception each in Orleans and Dennis) into three overlapping phases. The first started in the late 1930s with the introduction of Modernism to the Outer Cape by a small group of bohemian “Boston Brahmins,” who were highly educated, artistic, and worldly. They were self-taught as designer-builders and



THE KEPES HOUSE BY MARCEL BREUER (WELLFLEET, 1949) REPRESENTS THE SECOND PHASE OF MODERNISM ON THE CAPE, WHEN EUROPEAN EXPATS CREATED INEXPENSIVE BUT ELEGANT AND IDEA-RICH HIDEAWAYS (IN THE SPARTAN TRADITION OF SCARCITY) FOR ARTISTS AND INTELLECTUALS SUCH AS GYORGY AND JULIET KEPES AND FOR THEMSELVES. THE FOUR HOUSES BREUER BUILT IN WELLFLEET SHARE THE SAME BASIC ELEMENTS: LONG, LOW FORMS; SHALLOW SHED ROOFS; STUDIED PROPORTIONS; AND SIMPLE BUT WARM MATERIALS SUCH AS THOSE IN THE KEPES LIVING ROOM.

PHOTO © RAIMUND KOCH
COURTESY METROPOLIS BOOKS

committed to a “do-it-yourself” mentality. They also sought a Thoreau-like escape into experimental living close to nature and practiced Minimalist aesthetics based on knowledge of avant-garde European Modernism. European intellectual architects who, beginning in the 1940s, summered and built on the Cape after fleeing World War II-era oppression and joining American universities, characterize the second phase. This phase shared many aspects with the first, including tectonics of scarcity (lightweight construction, inexpensive/recycled materials used in strictly honest ways), reductionist aesthetics, and abstraction. It largely resulted, however, in work with more sophisticated formal, spatial, and landscape interaction qualities.

The third phase, Late Modernism, occurred in the 1960s and ’70s with disparate strains: a revival of heroic 1920s European Modernism, the incorporation of vernacular American forms, inspiration from Frank Lloyd Wright’s “Usonian” houses, and

the “Brutalist” use of concrete as both structural and finish material. The final project featured in the book, Charles Jencks’s “Garagia Rotunda,” shares its experimental stance, ad-hoc tectonics, and utopian get-away-in-nature location with the earlier work, but not its intellectual or aesthetic point of view, which are Post-Modernist. This project introduced representation—anathema in pure architectural Modernism but important in virtually all previous eras. It included ornament that referenced pre-Modernist historical architecture synthesized with De Stijl (early Modernist abstract compositional approach), creating a complex, multivalent whole. Jencks used materials in a representational rather than “honest” way—in one example, wood was given the pattern and proportions of stone. Materials for Jencks did not have to be simply beautiful unto themselves, but could also (or alternatively) be beautiful, or just interesting, as signs pointing to or standing in for something else.

In contrast to its revolutionary avant-garde origins, Modernism has become since the 1970s a historical style open for nostalgia, revival, preservation, and historical interpretation like any other architectural genre. Professional and academic attention, however, has not affected the desires of the majority of homeowners. The public has never been sold on Modernism as a house style. Without the representation, metaphors, quotations, irony, and symbolism that serve to connect the present to the past—without the legibility that connects the built environment to ideas—many are alienated. Most homes built throughout the United States, including Cape Cod, are based on premodern house styles. Gorlin’s beautiful, and beautifully written, book celebrates regional Modernism but rightly points out that Modernism as a house style was ultimately a failed experiment.

McMahon and Cipriani focus on Cape Cod Modernism as evolved from a tradition of scarcity that produced the Cape Cod cottage house type as an honest solution to subsistence in the eighteenth century. There is, however, an alternate tradition of plenty that is equally prevalent in the region. Frequently, as soon as nineteenth-century owners of Capes could afford it, they transformed their simple cottages with additions and renovations using Greek, Gothic, or other more elaborate revival elements. Areas of wealth, such as Old Kings Highway on the Upper and Mid Cape, or Provincetown’s East and West Ends, produced houses in an array of wealth-displaying styles visually unrelated to the Cape Cod cottage. Methodist campgrounds were developed with lightly structured but elaborately ornamented cottages that were, like Jencks’s project, tectonically a part of the tradition of scarcity but with visual affectation implying the tradition of plenty. Grand mansions and hotels were built in classical, Shingle Style, and even occasionally Mediterranean styles. While Thoreau made it clear in *Cape Cod* that he hated revivalism, it is as important a determinant of the built environment on Cape Cod as any original architecture, either ancient “Capes” or avant-garde “contemporaries.”

Today, those with Modernist bias sometimes display derision toward recent architectural trends in the region with phrases like “Shingle Style mini-mansions” and “decades of conspicuous consumption,” referring to the period after Modernism. Yet one of the finest Modernist houses on the Cape, designed by Walter Gropius and his firm the Architects Collaborative, the Murchison House (1956) in Provincetown, was, like nearby Land’s End (1904), large, expensive, and on a highly visible hilltop—a “mini-mansion” displaying the owner’s wealth and taste but in a Modernist rather than Shingle Style mode. Modernist architects were happy to design showplaces for clients willing and able to pay for them—happy to be a part of a conspicuous tradition of plenty, even though their own Cape retreats were more likely to be spare, hidden, and experimental personal utopias. They understood what architectural historian and Harvard professor Neil Levine wrote in *Modern Architecture: Representation and Reality*: “The ‘show’ aspect has always been a significant feature of architectural



THE HATCH HOUSE BY JACK HALL (WELLFLEET, 1962) IS PERHAPS THE MOST SOPHISTICATED WORK BY A DESIGNER WITH ORIGINS IN THE FIRST PHASE OF MODERNISM ON THE CAPE. HE CAME TO THE CAPE IN THE LATE 1930S AND BROUGHT HIS WORLDLY INTEREST IN MODERNISM WITH HIM. A CRISPLY EXECUTED THREE-DIMENSIONAL GRIDDED FRAMEWORK ORGANIZES THE ENTIRE HATCH HOUSE AND IMPLIES ENCLOSURE FOR CIRCULATION SPACE THAT IS OTHERWISE OPEN TO THE ELEMENTS. THIS ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE FOR INDOOR/OUTDOOR SPACE MAY BE IMPRACTICAL FOR DAILY LIVING BUT REPRESENTS A DISCIPLINED ARCHITECTURAL IDEA. PHOTOS © RAIMUND KOCH, COURTESY OF METROPOLIS BOOKS

expression and, in most cultures and periods, has been what distinguishes architecture from mere building.”

Proponents of Modernism on Cape Cod are in danger of falling into the same trap as Thoreau. Rejecting the past itself, or representation of the past in the present, is just as narrow and intellectually irrelevant as demanding only the past, as do numerous regulations and “no-change” advocates who influence development in much of the region today. Breuer’s most elaborate Cape project, the Scott House (1949) in Dennis, is in a “historic” district, and approval to build it today would be unlikely given the regulatory restrictions. Many of the Outer Cape Modernist houses of the mid-twentieth century could also not be built today because of codes that prohibit light construction and require systems and energy efficiency that the houses do not accommodate.

The popular perception of Cape Cod, as established in the early twentieth century by author Joseph Lincoln, photographer Samuel Chamberlain, painter John Hare, and others, was decidedly antimodern. Like Thoreau, who decried the contemporary houses of his time, these artists

celebrated only the old-fashioned. Their work created a narrative fiction establishing a conservative image for the built environment that suited those who did not like the changes brought about by expanded wealth, industrialization, immigration, and population growth. That image persists in the popular imagination today. In this context, Modern architecture was and is an aberration. Bias against it is so strong that it is legislatively outlawed in some areas. Highly regulated districts prevent the use of the flat or shallow pitched roofs, smooth board siding, and large expanses of undivided glass characteristic of Modernism. They also limit eclecticism in favor of romanticized eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century vernacular. Rising real-estate values relative to income also limit the type of experimentation that characterized early Modernism on the Cape. When land was relatively inexpensive, the pressures of protecting a major investment were fewer and risk taking was more palatable.

Early- to mid-twentieth-century development of Modernism on the Cape paralleled the colonial revival movement that was strong throughout the country and region at this time. Boston architect Royal Barry Wills designed numerous houses in the region that were sophisticated historicist representations of the nostalgic fiction of Lincoln and others but also designed to accommodate contemporary

living. When Edward Hopper bought his house in Truro, he consulted with Wills on the renovation. His wife, Jo, wrote letters (archived at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) in May and June of 1934 to her friend Bee Blanchard describing Wills as something of a kindred spirit to her husband (but not necessarily to her):

We were taken to see some houses he did in Brookline & Ches. Hill & they were lovely—so chaste looking—like E. H.’s watercolors—that is like the style of his watercolors—not the subjects . . . he has taste as well as knowledge. . . . Architect—Royal Barry (some such) Wills . . . cast an eye on E’s plans and said they were good. Maurice A. Dunlavy, his contractor, did Mrs. Jenness’ Chestnut Hill house & she wasn’t content ’til she got him doing ours here. He & Wills have done very lovely houses in Brookline—Glorified Cape Cod adaptations. . . . Not my idea of a house. This is E. Hopper’s house. His, and the dear dead uncle whose money is buying it. My uncle would never stand for anything but the (conventional) best. . . . It’s rather interesting that his preferences are working themselves out in this little house. . . . Personally I like the reclaimed horse car—or house made out of ex moving van. Something with a smack of adventure about it. This may be comfortable but smug.



THE MURRAY HOUSE BY ROYAL BARRY WILLS (CHATHAM, 1963) SITS ON THE EDGE OF EAST-FACING DUNES. ITS ADDITIVELY COMPOSED TRADITIONAL CAPE FORMS, AND ITS HORIZONTAL SPREAD, ARE TYPICAL OF WILLS’S DESIGNS. COURTESY OF POLHEMUS SAVERY DASILVA ARCHITECTS BUILDERS

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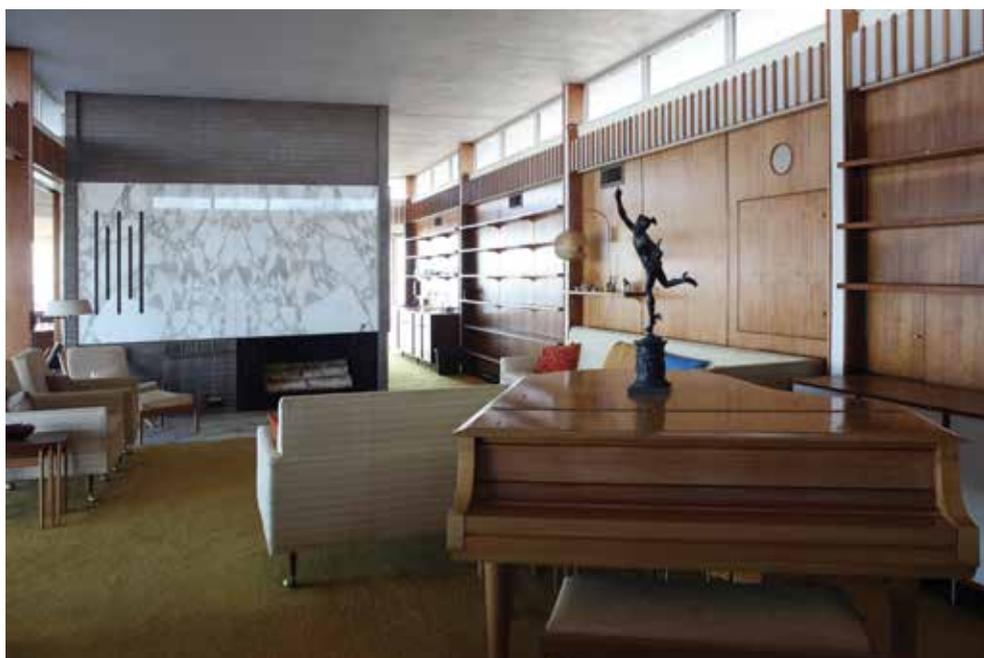
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Wills's houses were wildly popular with the public but largely ignored by architectural intelligentsia who, then as now, had a Modernist bias and an inclination to disregard the past in search of the "new." Being avant-garde for its own sake, however, has led to the constant, and tiresome, pursuit of novelty above quality, beauty, function, contextual appropriateness, and more. Wills's houses were popular in the region and elsewhere because they represented "the simple life" without the abstract Minimalism that virtually forced it on the inhabitants. He offered an unabashedly romantic version of a historic past, even though that past never truly existed. This carefully controlled fabrication was fueled by social factors such as the Depression-era search for dignity despite scarcity, a World War II-era nationalism focused on celebrating uniquely American qualities, and a post-World War II need for numerous affordable single-family houses with mass appeal. Wills understood that the majority of people wanted only stage sets that represented a romanticized "simple life" connected with the past, not the totalitarian rigor—the brave new world of the future—offered by Modernism. Gorlin quotes Norman Mailer from a 1964 essay: "Totalitarianism . . . proliferates in that new architecture which rests like an incubus upon the American landscape. . . . This new architecture, this totalitarian architecture, destroys the past."

Many writers who investigate Cape Cod invoke Thoreau and his Transcendentalist espousing of simple, truthful living close to nature. A broader view of Transcendentalism, however, has historically led to very different aesthetic ends than the minimalist Modernism readily associated with the ascetic side of Thoreau. Such a view includes Emerson's imperatives of self-reliance, American cultural independence, and tolerance of multiculturalism. It also includes Whitman's "Democracy," integrating the universal and national with the unique and individual, and providing freedom from constraint. Ornament-rich and often eclectic buildings that included historic reference, but not sentimental revivalism, by Frank Furness and Louis Sullivan in the nineteenth century were deeply influenced by Transcendental thought, and they pave the way for an appropriately eclectic architecture for today.

A broad, inclusive vision is necessary to achieve this, rather than the narrow, exclusive vision represented by Modernism and the novelty-based ends to which it is now often deployed. Whether nostalgic and revivalist or avant-garde, no monothematic vision is adequate. A complex hybrid architecture in which multiple and even seemingly opposing forces are synthesized—an inclusive rather than exclusive architecture—is necessary to address the complexities of contemporary life. This will be influenced by the complexity of organic systems and cycles as well as the deceptively simple outward beauty of nature; by representational expression as well as abstraction; by participation in both historically continuous culture and unique ("self-reliant") creativity; by protecting the collective good of communities as well as allowing the personal intuition and inspiration of individuals.



IN CONTRAST TO THE RUSTIC NATURE OF MOST OF THE MODERNIST HOUSES ON THE CAPE, THE MURCHISON HOUSE HAS PAINSTAKINGLY EXECUTED DETAILS AND RICH MATERIALS LIKE TEAK, CYPRESS, AND SLATE ON THE EXTERIOR AND MARBLE, TEAK, AND WALNUT ON THE INTERIOR. THIS PHOTOGRAPH SHOWS THE LIVING ROOM, UNCHANGED SINCE IT WAS BUILT.

PHOTO BY JULIA CUMES, © 2007, COURTESY OF POLHEMUS SAVERY DASILVA ARCHITECTS BUILDERS



THE MURCHISON HOUSE DESIGNED BY WALTER GROPIUS (PROVINCETOWN, 1959), IS PROMINENTLY SITED ON A HILLTOP IN PROVINCETOWN'S FAR WEST END. IT COST \$300,000 TO BUILD AND IS PROBABLY THE LARGEST, MOST EXPENSIVE, AND MOST VISIBLE MID-CENTURY MODERN HOUSE ON THE CAPE.

PHOTO © DAVID W. DUNLAP/
BUILDING PROVINCETOWN

It is unfortunate that the polarization of architecture as a whole worldwide, and the antimodern "all change is bad" sentiment that is so strong on Cape Cod, leave little room to revel in both Modernism and historicism and to create in this vein of complexity. There are few who would have it multiple ways and accept the contemporary materials, methods, and abstraction of Modernism; the nostalgia of Joseph Lincoln; and the showy conspicuous consumption of mansions in any style. Yet the beauty of architecture on Cape Cod is in the diversity created by competing forces and change over time. From basic Capes to romanticized recreations, from boxy colonials to classically refined mansions, from Greek and Gothic revivals to carpenter-ornamented campground style cottages, from Shingle Style piles to experimental Modernist utopias, the Cape has a wealth of high-quality architecture that responds to various local contexts, represents different eras and lifestyles, and displays multiple agendas. A rich and interesting built environment is the result. A few have been able to bridge the various traditions and create work that is multivalent—both forward and backward looking, both utopian and scenographic. Cape Cod will be richer architecturally and more relevant culturally if such complexity is encouraged rather than stifled. ❏

Architect and author JOHN R. DASILVA, AIA, is Design Principal of Cape Cod-based Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders. His design work and writing have appeared in numerous books, television shows, online forums, and periodicals, including several issues of Provincetown Arts. His book *Shingled Houses in the Summer Sun: The Work of Polhemus Savery DaSilva* was published in 2011. DaSilva can be reached through www.psdab.com.

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