THE SOUTH THAT

ROSE AGAIN

By J. MICHAEL WELTON

Due to the efforts of a group of committed mid-twentieth century architects and academics, North Carolina boasts one of the nation's richest—if most under recognized—troves of modernist design

Above and left: **Henry L. Kamphoefner house, Raleigh, by Kamphoefner with George Matsumoto, 1948.**

Shortly after he received his master's degree from MIT and Harvard in 1960, the British-born architect Brian Shawcroft arrived with his wife in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he was to teach landscape design at North Carolina State University and drawing at its school of architecture. The Shawcrofts were met at the downtown bus station by Henry Kamphoefner, dean of the university's School of Design, who drove the couple to his home (in his bright red Raymond Loewy-designed 1953 Studebaker) for an overnight stay. "He took us to the two guestrooms, each with its own single bed," Shawcroft recalls. "He said: 'Frank Lloyd Wright slept in this bed, and Mies slept in that one. You have to choose.' I chose Frank Lloyd Wright, and my wife slept where Mies had."

Fifty years later, New York-based architect Tom Phifer's new building for the North Carolina Museum of Art has opened in Raleigh to great acclaim. To the provincial minds of East and West Coast architecture aficionados, Phifer's shining minimalist structure may

Right: **Dr. George W. Poland house, Raleigh, by George Matsumoto, 1954.**
Below: **The Small Office Building, Raleigh, by G. Milton Small, 1966.**

seem an oddity in a state most often associated with tobacco, college basketball, and high-tech research. But in fact, the museum is just the newest addition to a body of modern architecture in North Carolina that reaches back to 1948. That's the year Kamphoefner and four fellow professors arrived to set up what would become the School (now College) of Design. Says Roger Clark, a fellow of the American Institute of Architects who joined the faculty in 1969 and teaches at the university: "Kamphoefner, I believe, started the second architecture school in the country, after Harvard and Walter Gropius, that was fully dedicated to modernist design principles and methods based on the Bauhaus."

Kamphoefner was as much concerned with reality as he was with theory. As dean he insisted that his faculty must build as well as teach, and so the Raleigh area is now home to hundreds of modernist buildings, many of them revolutionary in concept and design. "I've archived about seven hundred in Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill," said George Smart, executive director of the nonprofit preservationist organization Triangle Modernist Houses. "The faculty had practices on the side, and the students were building also. Then they'd set up their own practices and build for decades."

In 1948 Kamphoefner brought with him James Fitzgibbon, a talented outspoken devotee of Frank Lloyd Wright; George Matsumoto, a gifted graduate of the Cranbrook Academy of Art and former employee of Eliel Saarinen; Terry Waugh, a South African native and former partner of Matsumoto; and Duncan Stuart, a protégé of Buckminster Fuller. And he aggressively recruited talent from around the world. Matthew Nowicki, a Polish architect recommended by architecture critic Lewis Mumford, designed the J. S. Dorton Arena for the North

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Right and below: **Interior and exterior of the George and Beth Paschal house, Raleigh, by James Fitzgibbon, 1950.**

Carolina State Fairgrounds in 1950. After Nowicki's death in a plane crash, Raleigh architect William Dietrick completed the radically modern building with its parabolic arches and cable-supported roof membrane.

The dean also brought in a series of visiting lecturers and guests considered absolute giants in the profession. They included Fuller, Mumford, Mies van der Rohe, Wright, Gropius, Ray Eames, Marcel Breuer, Eero Saarinen, and Paul Rudolph. As Clark says, matter-of-factly: "There was a challenge to the faculty to be equal to that."

Kamphoefner was modest about his own abilities as an architect. His own home, now listed on the National Register, is a gem of low-slung modernist design, with a double-canted roof and natural wood siding. But Fitzgibbon would become a star of the faculty. His Fadum house in Raleigh—with its sharply-pitched shed roof—was featured in a 1951 edition of *Architectural Record*. (In 2008 Shawcroft was asked to design an addition to the house. "I arrived at the solution of repeating the same form, but turned at a right angle," he says.) Fitzgibbon's Paschal house of 1950, a one-story stone-clad building comprising 3,340 square feet and reminiscent of Wright's Usonian designs, is regarded by some area architects as the greatest modernist house in Raleigh.

Living colleagues gripe, tongue-in-cheek, about their peer's success. "Fitzgibbon got all the big houses," Matsumoto says. "I got all the small ones with the tight budgets." His Poland house is a 1,200-square-foot jewelbox designed in 1954 for the head of the foreign language department. "It was patterned after my own house," Matsumoto said. "It was modular, based on four by eight panels of masonite." He would build more than twenty houses in the area from 1948 to 1961, winning at least thirty awards for his widely published work.

As Roger Clark points out, the defining factor of North Carolina modernist architecture is deference to the terrain. He sees this attribute in Phifer's new museum, which occupies a 164-acre site. "It's a big box building, surrounded by fabulous landscaping, and a sensitive way of bringing light in-

side," Clark says. "Tom Phifer understands the relationship between a building and its natural surroundings."

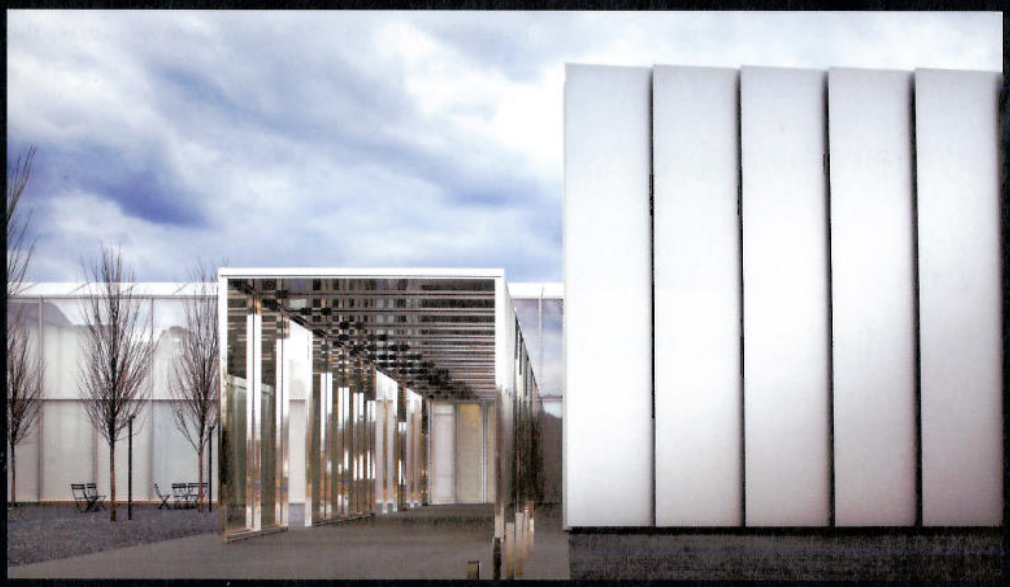
The museum is stripped down in the Miesian manner, a 127,000-square-foot modernist gem with a form pierced by five courtyards. Taking his cues from Renzo Piano and Louis Kahn, Phifer used louvers and elliptical skylights coupled with floor-to-ceiling glass walls to flood his one-story open floor plan with natural light. The effect on white gallery walls is that colors seem to explode out of the artwork.

Glass walls cover half of the building's exterior. The rest is clad in ultra-thin panels of anodized aluminum, tiled one on top of another, attached to and slightly tilted off a substratum of polished stainless steel. The aluminum softly reflects the light of the day and the blue of the sky. "This is a contemporary notion of making a building environmentally sensitive," Phifer says. "We wanted to make the building connect to its place and let it dissolve into nature. The question was: 'What's the least it could be?'" To help it disappear further, Phifer surrounded the museum with hundreds of bamboo and elm trees that will eventually envelop it.

The building's contribution to Raleigh's modernist legacy is likely to be substantive. Dan Gottlieb, director of planning and design at the museum, believes that the new building will serve as a jolt to the next generation of North Carolina architects seeking to pick up the N.C. State School of Design's spirit of bold and lively exploration. As he says: "It's all about the rebirth of great architecture in this region."

J. Michael Welton writes about art, architecture, and design for national and regional publications. He also edits and publishes an online design magazine at architectsandartisans.com.

Clockwise, from lower left, opposite page: **J. S. Dorton Arena, Raleigh, by Matthew Nowicki and William Dietrick, 1952. Nancy Fields Fadum house, Raleigh, by James Fitzgibbon, 1950, with addition on left by Brian Shawcroft, 2009. Rodin courtyard and entry canopy of the North Carolina Museum of Art, Thomas Phifer and Partners, 2010.**



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