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LOVETRIANGLE



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ONE MAN'S
MODERNIST ROOTS CATCH UP WITH
HIM? HE CREATES THE LARGEST
EDUCATIONAL, HISTORICAL ARCHIVE
FOR MODERNIST RESIDENTIAL DESIGN
IN AMERICA, OF COURSE.

BY JANE
ANDREWS



1958 CARR HOUSE. Kenneth Scott, AIA, architect. Photo by Walter Shackelford. Courtesy of Triangle Modernist Houses.

George Smart spends his working hours in Durham, North Carolina, speaking and consulting nationally with senior executives and coaching local business owners. What does a successful consultant do while waiting at airports or in the middle of the night? He Googles. The son of a Raleigh architect, exposed from birth to the North Carolina State University School of Design (now the NCSU College of Design) and the surrounding architecture community, Smart had “no interest in architecture whatsoever.” But, to paraphrase Emily Dickinson, you don’t have to be a house to be haunted.

One night in 2007, Smart thought about his Dad, a Raleigh architect, who passed away in 2003. He typed “Raleigh Modernism” into Google. Four or five houses popped up. Suddenly, names of architects his Dad talked about appeared and Smart was hooked. He spent the next week finding fifteen more houses.

When Smart’s inventory of mid-century Modernist houses reached twenty, he made pamphlets and shared them with local architects who were his dad’s friends and colleagues. They referred more homes, and by the time the list of North Carolina Modernist houses reached sixty, people said, “You should have a website.” So, he built one - [Triangle Modernist Houses](#) or TMH.

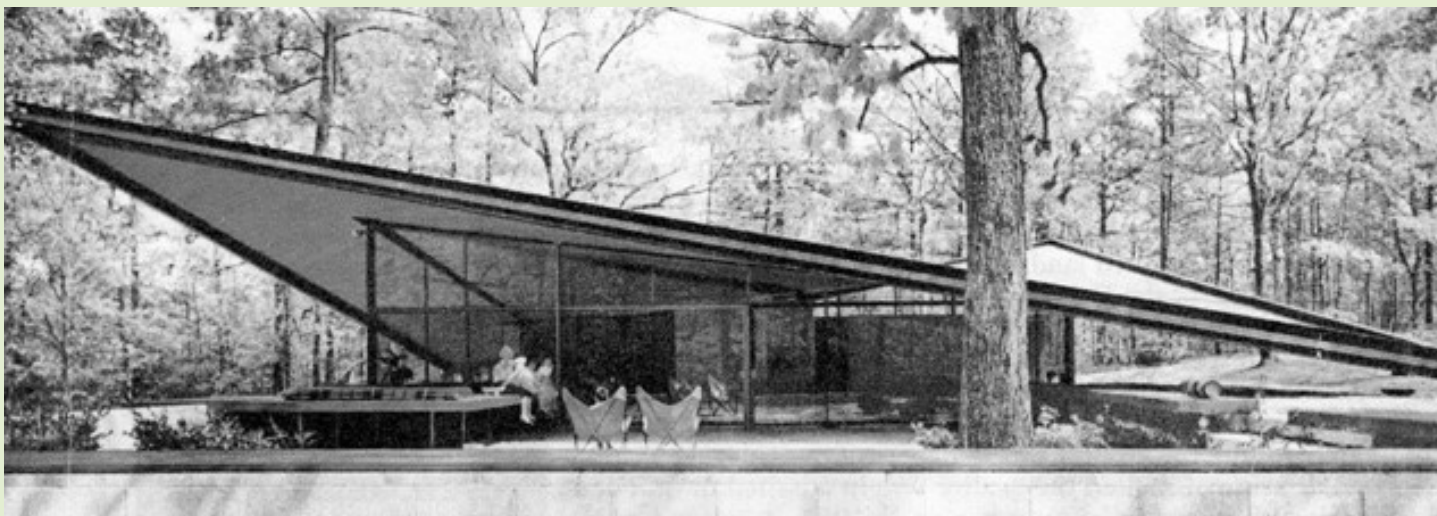
North Carolina is home to an estimated 700 Modernist houses with more documented than anywhere else except the Los Angeles and Chicago areas. TMH is an extensively detailed archive of these houses, the owners who lived there, and the architects who designed them. There are countless photographs of existing and demolished houses.

According to Smart, Modernist homes are easy to identify, even by the uninitiated. Under the strong influences of Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, Louis Sullivan, and others, Modernist homes typically have open floor plans instead of separate living and dining areas. Large and numerous windows integrate inside and outside spaces and invite natural light. Vaulted ceilings rise to flat or low-pitched roofs. Ideally, the landscaping and furnishings are planned to connect the outside with the natural elements of the house itself.

Destruction is a constant threat to mid-century Modernist architecture, Smart says. Even at their peak Modernist residences were unconventional and not embraced by folks accustomed to more traditional living spaces. In their first heyday, back in the 1950s, the designs were way ahead of materials science, therefore maintenance and repair was often costly. Flat-roofed moderns developed a bad reputation for leaks, for example. Since then, building materials used in many Modernist projects are far superior and are surprisingly more energy-efficient.



Visit Triangle Modernist Houses at www.trianglemodernisthouses.com
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Triangle-Modernist-Houses/97954432790>
<http://www.twitter.com/georgesmarttmh>



EDUARDO CATALANO HOUSE, 1954. Eduardo Catalano, architect. Although originally designed for Catalano himself, he lived there only a few years. Highly publicized as the “House of the Decade” by House and Home magazine, the house was the most significant Modernist residence in North Carolina and one of the best in the country. After a series of owners in the 1960s and 1970s, the house found a long-term occupant who remained until 1996. Following, the house set vacant from 1996 to 2001, during which time it irreversibly deteriorated.. Despite efforts by Preservation NC to find a buyer that would build a house of the same design on the lot, the house remained vacant. In 2001, the owner sold the house to a developer who built two McMansions on the site.



Photos courtesy of Triangle Modernist Houses.

Through TMH, George Smart found he is not alone. Thousands across the country share his passion for cool houses. Architects, designers, historians, and preservation advocates serve on the TMH Board and advisory council. The website gets up to twenty-five thousand hits a month. Be warned: You can lose several hours of your life there. The award-winning site has made TMH a unique and thriving organization. The website is *the* largest educational, historical archive for Modernist residential design in America.

Besides its archive, TMH hosts tours of Triangle Modernist houses. Since 2008, hundreds of modernist enthusiasts have participated in TMH’s fifteen tours.

TMH also maintains an exclusive, free online listing of local modernist houses for sale (36 are on the market currently). “Most MLS systems (multiple listing systems used by the real estate industry) can’t distinguish Modernist design,” says Smart, “but we can.”

When Modernist homes fall into disrepair because of finances, lack of knowledge, or absentee ownership, TMH connects the owners to appreciative renters and buyers, also without charge.

“Our mission is three-fold,” says Smart. “Documentation of existing houses, preservation of what’s endangered and worth saving, and promotion of new Modernist construction.”

Regarding preservation, he adds, “The worst time to save a building is when developers or bulldozers are on the horizon. That means you’ve waited too long. We intervene month or years earlier whenever possible, assuring that a house doesn’t go through the early-warning stages of long listing times or, even worse, vacancy. By making people aware earlier, we dramatically improve the chances of new ownership and, with it, the funds for restoration.”

Such education is essential to raise awareness of the historic, economic, aesthetic value of Modernist houses. Journalist Mike Welton, who contributes architecture articles to Dwell magazine and The New York Times, confirms the danger Modernist houses face. He reminds us that thirty or forty years ago, many viewed Victorian architecture as old, fussy, and overly ornate instead of historic. Since then the value of Victorian homes has increased by a large margin, and we lament the many that were destroyed.

Regarding Modernist houses, Welton says, “These buildings speak the language of our history. It’s extremely important to preserve them.” Welton’s blog, Architects+Artisans, appears daily on the TMH site.

In agreement is Brian Shawcroft, AIA, a Raleigh architect who has been designing Modernist houses since 1960. A former associate professor of architecture at the NCSU School of Design, he has seen six of his houses destroyed. Their preservation is important, he says, not only because they are historical artifacts, but because he sees them being replaced “by some very false things: post-Modernism and [a] clumsy rehash of the past.” And after fifty years of designing Modernist architecture, Shawcroft says, “It’s still fun. Always.”

Smart notes, “Modernist houses are really sculpture on a larger scale, and people are always surprised to learn how many livable ‘works of art’ we have in North Carolina.”

“Modernist architecture changes people’s lives,” Brian Shawcroft says, “and North Carolina has an ideal climate for Modernist houses.”

TMH encourages the public to revisit Modernist design and reconsider the advances in materials and technology by showcasing these homes and the lives of the architects who designed them.

Beyond the website, the heart of TMH is local programming. Besides house tours, TMH held an Architecture Movie Series this winter which screened films and documentaries where architecture was the “star.” In November, TMH hosted its first annual “ModStock” party with AIA Triangle’s Young Architects Forum. For TMH’s serious fans, there’s the “Mod Squad,” supporters donating tax-deductible gifts and receiving special discounts and invitations to exclusive events in return.



STACK RESIDENCE, 1971. Brian Shawcroft, AIA, architect. Fayetteville, North Carolina. Destroyed by fire. Photo courtesy of Triangle Modernist Houses.

TMH, which includes up to 40 volunteers now who act as docents, fundraisers and researchers, also hosted its first out-of-state architectural tours in January. Twenty-eight people went on a Richard Meier/Eero Saarinen tour of New York and Connecticut. There’s a summary on [TMH’s Past Events page](#).

Reaching out to even younger fans, TMH released an architecture music video last year that was developed by Enloe Gifted and Talented Magnet High School in Raleigh.



JOHN AND BINFORD C. CARR RESIDENCE, 1958. Kenneth Scott, AIA, architect. Prime teardown material because of its location, the house was purchased by appreciative buyers in early 2010 following a national alert initiated by Triangle Modernist Houses. Photo courtesy of Triangle Modernist Houses.

More recently, TMH launched “Appetite 4 Architecture,” or A4A, dinners that bring together a series of experts including designers, builders, and architects to share fine dining and engage in discussions with Modernist fans at local restaurants.

These efforts have not gone unnoticed. Preservation North Carolina has honored George Smart with its coveted Carraway Award of Merit for “raising awareness of Modernist architecture.” Smart received the 2009 City of Raleigh/Sir Walter Raleigh Individual Award for Community Appearance. The Raleigh Appearance Commission bestows the award to honor exceptional achievement in enhancing the appearance of the city. The award recognized Smart as “a champion of the local Modernist architectural movement, raising public awareness through web-based resources, grants, and public tours.” TMH also won the Vernacular Architecture Foundation’s Paul E. Buchanan Award in 2009.

TMH’s most recent preservation success is the Carr House, a pristine mid-century modern by architect Kenneth Scott of Durham. Small, on a golf course, and with an empty lot next door, it was prime developer bait. From a nationwide alert in fall of 2009, the house was purchased in early 2010 by two appreciative Duke University faculty who have split the empty lot with the adjacent neighbor.

Smart says the appeal of Modernist houses is not immediately apparent.

“Modernist houses are not only visually different but they also have a profound effect on people.

Over time, they often experience a very real serenity. We know how buildings evoke strong feelings from visiting significant churches and synagogues and mosques. Modernist houses produce a similarly strong emotion. And let’s face it, we don’t generally fantasize about having our own Modernist hospital or office building. It’s all about the houses. We read DWELL, we collect coffeetable books, and we dream about how profound it would be to own one.”

Soon Smart will discover this for himself, with his own brand-new Modernist house due to be completed this summer in Durham, North Carolina. Will it be on one of TMH’s tours? “Look for it,” says Smart, “as part of several special events TMH plans for late 2010 and 2011.” ■

Jane Andrews is a freelance writer, teacher, and editor in Raleigh, North Carolina. She doesn’t live in a Modernist house but wishes she did.