



News

Modernist homes unique architecture

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Light pours into the front upper rooms at Marc and Anne Hoffman's 1956 house on Hickory Drive, which they use as exercise room and a studio for Marc, a musician.

Modernist houses from the mid 20th century are not unlike that crazy uncle no one in the family will claim.

Their owners and designers typically hid them in wooded areas, on several acres of land.

When the more daring designs showed up in established neighborhoods, the houses often created a controversy, sometimes even court challenges.

From the road, many modernist homes actually are low-slung, nondescript and built into their environment, characterized by flat or minimally pitched roofs. But inside and around back, they are creatures of light, fueled by large windows, skylights and high ceilings. They have interesting geometric lines and depend on both hidden compartments and wide open, efficient areas combining many rooms into one.

Think of the "Brady Bunch" staircase or the styling seen in "Mad Men," and you get a feel for the modernist home.

People who own them can't imagine living anywhere else. Sadly, they are usually in the minority.

Salisbury's historic architectural signature usually is wrapped in antebellum and Victorian themes, but it also could be expanded to the modernist era — thanks in large part to the late architect John Ramsay.

"Salisbury is unique because it has so many of these houses still standing," says George Smart, founder of a growing website — and movement — aimed at documenting, preserving and promoting the modern designs that seeped into the landscape after World War II.

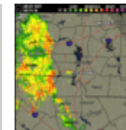
A funny thing has happened. The modernist homes — considered radically new designs in the 1940s and 1950s — are now old enough to be considered historic and worthy of preservation. Many of the homes around the state have been lost already, thanks to a lack of appreciation and development that suddenly needed their once isolated tracts. Smart says the houses often sit on land that has become more valuable than the houses themselves in developers' minds.

Smart, who has immersed himself in the subject since 2007, says the Triangle area has the third largest concentration of modernist houses in the nation behind Los Angeles and Chicago.

Stout Studio Architecture and Historic Salisbury Foundation recently sponsored a visit by Smart to Salisbury, followed by a reception at the home of Marc and Anne Hoffman, a couple who immediately fell in love with their 1956 house on Hickory Drive. The Hoffmans had always admired mid-century modern architecture from a distance, but after they stayed in a modernist house in Cuernavaca, Mexico, they started thinking houses with open floor plans, lots of glass and interesting geometric elements were right for them. In 2007, several weeks after returning from Mexico, they detoured off the Salisbury Greenway one day and happened to walk by the house for sale on Hickory Drive. John Beard, the original owner and builder, found the design in the 1953 Better Homes and Gardens Book of Five-Star Home Plans.

Salisbury architect John Hartledge added a butterfly roof to the house in 1965.

"We knew we immediately had to have it," Marc Hoffman, a



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Former Salisbury architect Anne Tennent speaks with George Smart, founder of a Triangle Web site devoted to documenting, preserving and promoting Modernist homes in North Carolina. Photo by Mark Wineka, Salisbury Post



This 1956 John Ramsay-designed house on East Park Road is now the home of Jackie and Bruce Wilson. It is a former home of both William C. Stanback and Ramsay himself. Photo by Mark Wineka, Salisbury Post

musician and composer, said in a blog promoting Smart's visit. "As soon as we moved in and I had set up my studio, I realized how inspiring it is for me as a composer to live so close to nature, which was one of the primary goals of the original architects of mid-century modern.

"I have been more productive here than anywhere I've lived and worked before."

The Hoffmans' Hickory Drive house had been on the market for five months.

"Realtors notoriously hate modernist homes," Smart said, arguing they have to realize they are not trying to sell a house.

Rather, they are selling a piece of sculpture in which people live.

"You're an art dealer," Smart tells them.

John Ramsay, who died in 1991, was maybe the poet laureate of modern architecture here.

While he's better known for Salisbury buildings such as Rowan Public Library, First Presbyterian Church and the Robertson Community Center at Catawba, his greater legacy may center on the private homes he designed. In retrospect, they all seem like exercises in love.

An unofficial count on Smart's Web site credits Ramsay with the design of 13 modernist homes in Salisbury, with a notable concentration on Pine Tree and Oak roads in the County Club section. But Ramsay-designed houses also can be found in Spencer, China Grove, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Albemarle, Lexington, Mount Gilead, Badin and Thomasville.

On Royall Drive in Winston-Salem, there are three Ramsay houses from the late 1960s and early 1970s.

His 1950 house at 16 Pine Tree Road — now the home of Jim and Gerry Hurley — won the AIANC Merit Award for homes in 1955. It was way ahead of its time in many of the "green" design elements connected to things such as site disturbance, stormwater management, orientation and landscape design.

Bruce and Jackie Wilson have lived in a Ramsay house at 1722 E. Park Road since 1993. Bruce Wilson says from the road it resembles a 1956 ranch house.

"But as you go in, it keeps opening up," he said. The family's focus has always been toward the two-story back portion of the home, which is dominated by glass and views into a secluded, natural area.

"It lives so comfortably," Bruce said. "I feel like I'm in heaven."

Bob Tannehill's family lived in a 1956 Ramsay house at 521 Confederate Ave. for 30 years, from 1967-97. Again, from the outside, it looked like a typical split-level home from the period.

But Amy Tannehill Elkin, who grew up in the house, said her childhood friends would walk into the wide open living areas and say, "Your house is huge."

Elkin and her sister, Myra, said the house had many built-in features and secret hiding places. The bottoms of the exterior downspouts were made like bowls or little ponds, deep enough to hold their goldfish.

Bob Tannehill loved the home's suspended granite hearth fireplace. The back of the chimney was exposed and in the middle of the house as an important design feature.

"Space does affect us," Smart said, and the modernist design inspires an openness, relaxation and calm that most owners do not want to leave.

Smart's website — www.trianglemodernisthouses.com — lists Ramsay and close to 40 other architects among the classic N.C. modernists. Much of the modernist movement in North Carolina sprang from the influence of Henry Kamphoefner, when he started a new school of design at N.C. State University.

There also are several nationally known modernists such as Eduardo Catalano and George Matsumoto who designed N.C. houses.

Smart has now documented some 2,000 modernist houses in North Carolina, making the case for their promotion and preservation. The key, he said, is keeping them occupied and to be first on the telephone when they go on sale.

Meanwhile, his nonprofit organization is conducting house tours, organizing out-of-state trips, sponsoring dinners and showing movies related to the period and movement, which steadily grows. He thinks the proper promotion of modernist houses can spur tourism and raise property values.

"We are a hotbed of great design," Smart said.

He's talking about 250-year-old Salisbury, too.

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