

# THOROUGHLY MODERN GEORGE

*'Who knew that little ol' Mayberry would be a center for great residential architecture?'*

BY DAN SHANNON PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIANA BROUGH

George Smart, the visionary founder of **trianglemodernisthouses.com** (TMH) and a dogged advocate for the preservation of modernist houses, grew up in Raleigh, where his late father was an architect. Professionally, George went another way, building a successful career as a business consultant and executive coach. His interest in modernist houses, he says, came about from a late night Google search as he was considering building a modernist house



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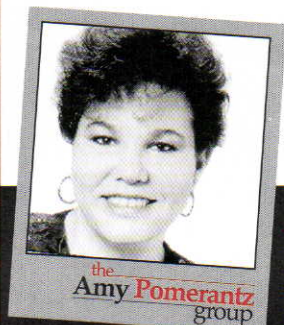
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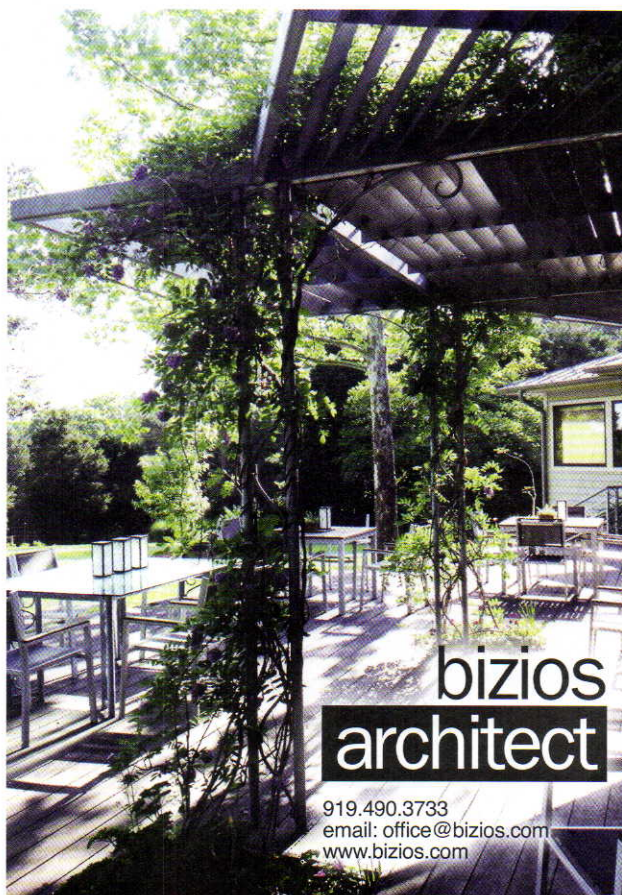
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**George Smart and his wife, Eleanor Stell, relax in the modernist house in Parkwood that George designed himself**



(which he did in 2010). After learning that Raleigh's famed Catalano house met the wrecking ball more than a decade ago, despite preservationists' 11th-hour efforts, George launched the website.

TMH is an educational archive of modernist houses and their architects.

"We preserve and revive the area's legacy of great architecture," the site says. "We host popular modernist house tours, movies and trips, giving thousands of people access to

the most exciting residential architecture, past and present. Our events raise awareness, connect people with their dreams of great design and help preserve these exceptional works of art for future generations."

#### **DM Define a modernist home.**

**GS** I see modernism as a style, not a fixed period of time. Mid-century modernism (MCM) refers to houses from around 1930-1970 and is very much en

vogue. But in this area, modernist houses kept on being built from 1970 through now, with many new ones in the last five years, including my own. They typically have common characteristics: open plans combining traditionally separate common areas — like the living room and the dining room, for example — with overly large and numerous windows and extensive use of natural light; flat or low-pitched roofs; long exposed beams; and unusual geometric forms. About 99.75% of the housing stock in the Triangle is not modernist, so a house with these four characteristics tends to stand out.

#### **DM And yet the area still is a hotbed for modernism. How did that happen?**


**GS** The Triangle became the third largest concentration of modernist houses in the country through the **School of Design at N.C. State University**, established by modernist **Henry Kamphoefner** in 1948. He encouraged faculty and students to have private practices outside of the university. There are approximately 800 modernist homes in the Triangle and about 1,200 statewide. The Triangle area of North Carolina has more modernist homes than anywhere else in America except Los Angeles and Chicago. Who knew that little ol' Mayberry would be a center for great residential architecture?

#### **DM How did you become modernist homes' champion?**

**GS** Quite by accident. What started as a list of 20 interesting Triangle houses turned into a website of more than 4,000 houses nationwide and a weekly newsletter to 3,000. My continual inspirations are the 1954 Catalano house, destroyed in 2001, and the 1950 Paschal house in Raleigh. These were livable works of art that could have been saved. The Catalano house was the most famous house in the state, second only to Biltmore, and it was lost to neglect and vacancy. The Paschal house was Raleigh's most important existing MCM house. The heirs essentially abandoned their family

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home and shunned many reasonable attempts over the last five years to save it. The heirs destroyed it recently, and five McMansions will be built on the site. The good news is the tide of modernist houses losing to McMansions has slowed the past few years, in part due to TMH's statewide database of houses for sale. We've helped probably 200 houses change hands more quickly than usual by giving the public a central place to find them.

**DM Modernist homes aren't for everyone. Who's the archetypal buyer?**

**GS** Modernist houses in 2013 tend to be bought by artists, academics, art collectors, creative professionals, architects, children of architects or those who grew up in modernist houses and young professionals looking to have their house be an expression of their personalities, not just a storage facility for their stuff. Modernist houses truly rock, if you are into this kind of thing. Sadly, most people aren't. Modernist houses are generally more works of art than construction, and the general public has little taste for living inside art. The first modernist homes in the Triangle were designed and constructed in the 1950s and 1960s, but they haven't all aged particularly well because the architecture was ahead of materials science.

**DM Is rehabbing them economically prohibitive?**

**GS** Not so much anymore. Materials science can build or repair most anything to last for much longer. And there are great contractors and architects in this area with experience with modernist design that can do things quite economically.

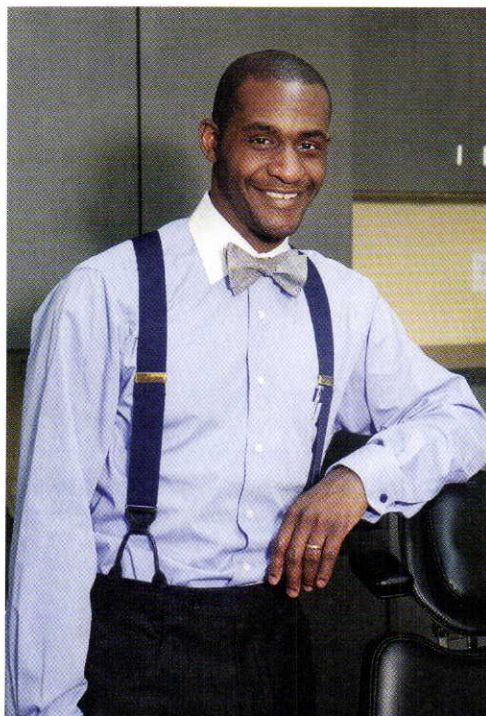
**DM And are the values on modernist homes rising or falling?**

**GS** For new construction, prices are up a bit, but not for existing modernist houses. There is an opposite problem, which is owners greatly overpricing modernist houses, sometimes for years, and stubbornly refusing to accept market realities.

**DM**

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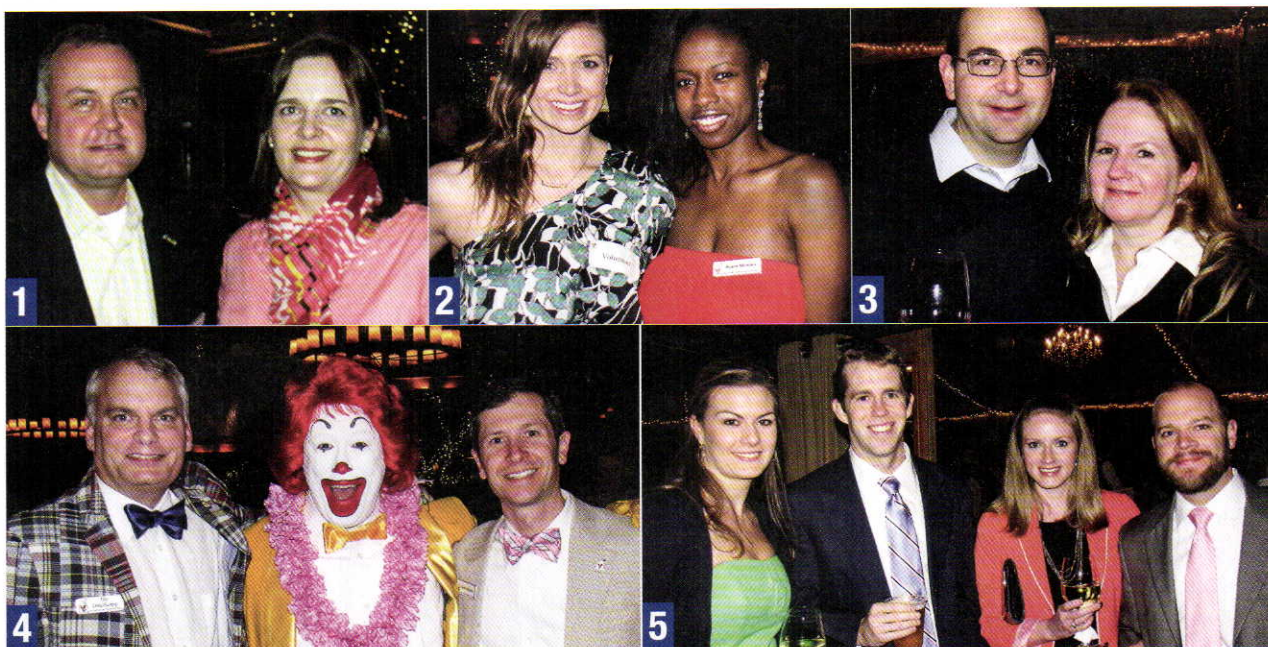
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## OH, THOSE WINTER NIGHTS

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AMANDA MACLAREN

The **Ronald McDonald House of Durham's** annual **Winterfest Gala**, its largest fundraiser of the year, drew about 550 guests and raised more than **\$256,000** for the organization. Attendees were decked out in their summer best, with seersucker suits and sundresses at every turn, for this year's "Sweet Coastal Nights" theme at the **Angus Barn Pavilion** in Raleigh. **Chef Walter Royal** prepared a delicious Southern menu, and folks were able to bid on items during live and silent auctions. **DM**