

The Whole Story: Clearing Through the Emotion

By Alisa M. Notte, IAKM 60105, Information & Visual Design, Kent State University, July 8, 2011 / October 6, 2011 (revised)

The Catalano House

For mid-century modern architecture enthusiasts, the Catalano House (Fig. 1) in Raleigh, North Carolina, was an iconic structure. It was designed in 1954 by Eduardo Catalano, an Argentinean architect [3] who was, at the time, helping lead the budding North Carolina State University School of Design [5]. To describe Catalano's design as unique would be an understatement.

The massive, hyperbolic paraboloid roof looked as though it jetted across the private wooded lot in which the house was nestled. The living area, enveloped by walls of glass, sat protected underneath. Dappled sunlight enhanced the natural, undulating surrounding landscape, which gradually tapered and transitioned into a cozy patio. The Catalano House was part spaceship, part serene pavilion—together, a striking example of mid-century modern design at its boldest and best.



Fig. 1

In addition to the general attention the Catalano house invited, formal awards and international notoriety flowed. In 1956, Catalano's design was dubbed the "House of the Decade" by House & Home Magazine. The North Carolina chapter of the American Institute of Architects recognized Catalano's contributions to architecture by giving him an Honor Award with special commendation in 1965. Even Frank Lloyd Wright—who was not known for doling out praise—complimented Catalano's design [5].

How did it come to be that, in March 2001, the revered Catalano House was demolished—bulldozed to make way for two new homes? Toward the end of the 20th century, the property fell into severe disrepair, and by the end of the 20th century, was uninhabitable [4]. In the wake of the demolition, I (and I suspect most others) knew only that the property had belonged to four different owners, and that—during the last owner's tenure—the house deteriorated to its final state. Photos of the house, just before it was demolished, are available on JetSetModern.com.

The strong emotions that arose when people saw what happened to this beautiful home led some to commit to preserving other mid-century modern marvels. George Smart is the founder of Triangle Modernist Houses (TMH), a "North Carolina nonprofit organization committed to documenting, preserving, and promoting modernist architecture" [1]. He describes learning of the sad news as the impetus for starting TMH [6]. Those same robust emotions have also made it easy for people to jump to conclusions and blindly assign blame to someone, anyone who would let this happen.

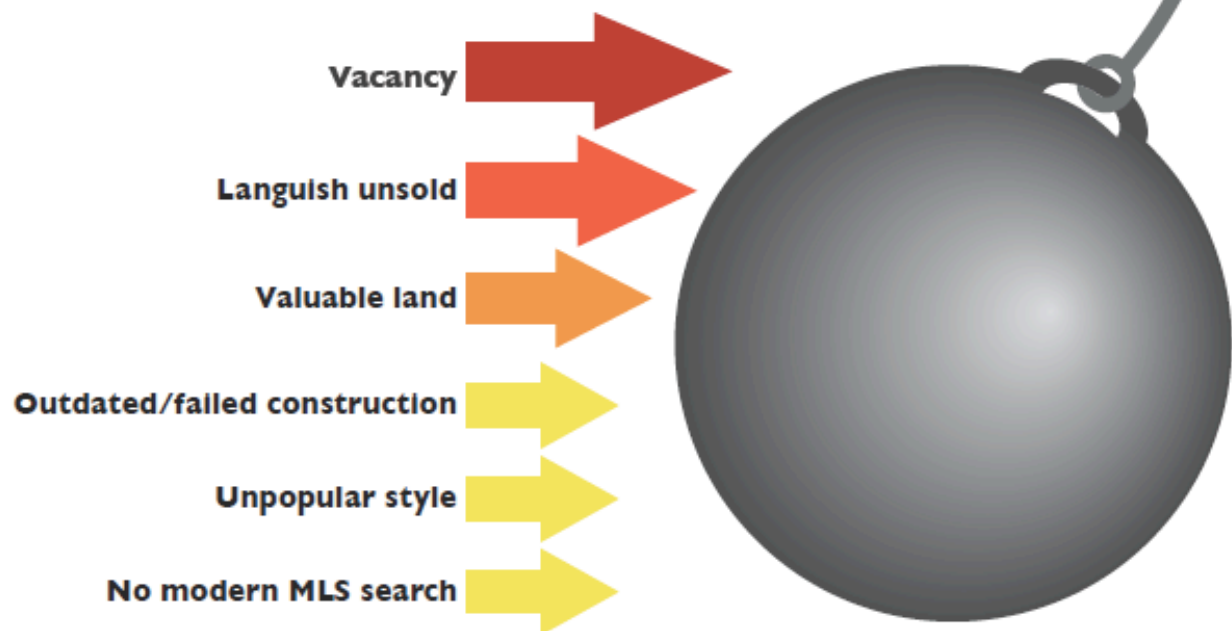
In 2011—ten years after the Catalano House had been torn down—the fourth and final owner, attorney Arch E. Lynch, Jr., wrote a paper in which he described, in detail, his experience while living in the home. In the document, Mr. Lynch provides vast insight into what it was like to live in and take care of the Catalano House. I appreciated the chance to learn his side of the story because, prior to him coming forward, there was little clear information about what happened.

Understanding Mid-Century Modern Architecture's Place and Plight

The feelings generated by the story of the Catalano House's demise were important for fueling the passion to save other historically-significant buildings; however, when it comes to determining what needs to be done to actually save those buildings, it is important to clear through those feelings, learn what happened, and start taking action. This is why I have chosen to create two graphics. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the factors that often lead to the loss of mid-century modern buildings—either through demolition or by renovation-beyond-recognition. My hope is that the graphic will help readers remember the six contributing factors and to fully understand the impact they can have when they stack up.

Vacancy is the "kiss of death" for mid-century modern homes. When coupled with long periods spent on real estate listings, unsold, chances of finding someone to preserve and care for a property is diminished. Many mid-

Factors that lead to loss of mid-century modern homes



Prepared by Alisa M. Notte
Source: TriangleModernistHouses.com

Fig. 2

century modern homes sit on very valuable land [7] because they were built before urban sprawl took hold of metropolitan areas. Much of this land that was once part of the quiet countryside in the 1950's and 60's is now located within cities' belt-lines. These properties are usually in established neighborhoods that are close to major work centers—two very attractive real estate qualities.

One distinguishable characteristic leading to the plight of Mid-century modern architecture is its experimental nature. When mid-century modern homes were being built, construction material science had not caught up with the level of design the architects were attempting. Many homes (not all of them) and the techniques used to build them could be described as experimental. The untested designs lend a bold, unique quality to the structures that is appealing to fans of the modern style, but many system, structural, and efficiency problems often tag along [1].

Mid-century modern is also unique in that it was a trend that never fully took off. It did not enjoy the same level of popularity garnered by other movements, such as American Craftsman, Colonial Revival, and ranch style. This aspect affects the survival of mid-century modern buildings to this day. It is strange that—for people who truly love modern style homes—most multiple listing services (MLS) do not offer a modern search classification. Homebuyers have to trudge through all types of homes or delve into an even lesser-appreciated category in real estate circles: *Contemporary* [1, 6, 7]

The Not-So-Glamorous Life

The second visual (Fig. 3, next page) is a timeline showing some key events and ongoing situations that occurred, according to Mr. Lynch, during his ownership of the Catalano House. Mr. Lynch's paper is 36 pages long, and most pages contain large blocks of text [8]. I created this graphic to give readers a quick overview of his story. Perhaps seeing this post-mortem visual analysis of the work it took to keep the house alive for as long as Lynch did will help people recognize the enormous effort it takes. With the ability to see the events on a timeline, perhaps current and future owners of mid-century modern homes will start preservation efforts earlier than Mr. Lynch did. It is also important to remember that the race to save the Catalano House happened before mid-century modern architecture experienced the comeback it is currently enjoying. If Mr. Lynch's problems culminated in, say, 2005, the result may have been different.

After creating these two graphics, I can't help but think how visual representations of events and problems could have benefited Mr. Lynch and Preservation NC back in the 1990's, as they tried to save the Catalano House. In my mind, this situation would have been an excellent candidate for a *The Back of the Napkin* makeover. In the book, *The Back of the Napkin: Solving Problems and Selling Ideas with Pictures*, Dan Roam explains the importance of illustrating--not just verbally describing--problems that need to be solved and ideas that need to be sold. He provides step-by-step guidance for drawing and presenting what people want to say in very simple ways. Roam believes that "whoever draws the best picture gets the funding." He also says that the person who presents the best picture also gets the influence [2]. Imagine what could have been different if someone would have drawn the picture that helped get the money and attention to solve the problem.

Sources

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Additional sources in graphics

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- [9] Wake County Real Estate Data, <http://services.wakegov.com/realestate>

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Arch E. Lynch's ownership of the Catalano House

As reported in his 2011 booklet, *Fine Thoughts: A Story about a House and a Vision*

Lynch buys Catalano House for \$60,500. \$1,000 of purchase money put in escrow for repairing existing roof leaks.

Lynch renovates kitchen.

Water flows inside house after heavy rains - a result of 2 entrances set below grade of access paths.

⚠ Support cable breaks during application of new Elastomeric foam roof.

Lynch entrusts builder, Frank Walser, with replacement of broken roof cable

Lynch begins extensive patio, outdoor, landscape repairs and improvements (finished in 1985)

Lynch purchases beach condo.

Lynch visits architect Eduardo Catalano to discuss ongoing roof deterioration and possible solutions.

Lynch retires from law firm.

Lynch plans, builds, and installs hydraulic lift system to raise and support roof.

Lynch has 8 trees removed to reduce leaf cleanup and let more sunlight get to roof surface.

⚠ Cable breaks while Lynch is on vacation, causing extensive damage to roof and glass/steel walls.

Lynch buys new home, and puts beach condo up for sale.

⚠ Hurricane Fran downs and uproots trees. Septic system destroyed, roof damaged further, all utilities down.

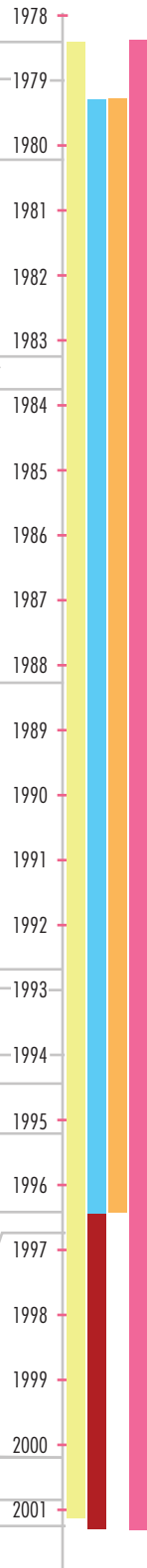
⚠ Severe snow storm causes roof collapse.

⚠ Catalano House declared unsafe building by Raleigh Inspections Department.

⚠ Preservation NC fails to find buyer

⚠ Catalano House sold to developer

Catalano House demolished. 2 new, large, expensive homes are built on the property during subsequent years.



Legend

⚠ Significant setback

Ongoing factors & situations

- Period of ownership
- Lynch resides in Catalano House
- Bottled drinking water used instead of well water
- No laundry facilities available
- Lynch continuously patches roof leaks himself
- Interior flooding from runoff continues.
- Symptoms from ailing roof system continue to appear
- Stress at work
- Lynch has ongoing health problems
- Catalano House vacant

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Figure 3