

Modernist aficionados help save home

By Meghan Cooke

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One of Charlotte's historic homes has been saved from the wrecking ball after modernist style enthusiasts made a push to find new inhabitants for the house south of uptown.

The Lassiter House, located at 726 Hempstead Place in the Eastover neighborhood, is the oldest surviving mid-century modern style house in Charlotte. It's designated as a historic property by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission.

It was threatened with demolition when the previous - and original - owner said that if it didn't sell by June, the house would be razed to allow the property to be sold as a lot.

That's when Triangle Modernist Houses, a nonprofit that documents and preserves modernist houses, began its efforts to help find a buyer.

The home had been on the market for more than a year, said Gail Jodon of Modern Charlotte Realty. But by June, Leslie and John Culbertson of Charlotte had purchased the house and began making plans for renovations.

The house was built in 1951 during the building boom of the post-World War II era, according to the Historic Landmarks Commission.

Charlotte native Robert Lassiter had returned to his hometown after serving in the Navy, bringing with him his wife, Elizabeth. But soon after their move, Elizabeth Lassiter contracted polio, a disease that can cause muscle weakness or paralysis.

The couple recruited their friend A.G. Odell Jr. to design them a home that would have wheelchair access.

Odell, who became known as one of the most prominent architects of the 20th century in North Carolina, designed several notable buildings in Charlotte, including Ovens Auditorium and Wachovia Tower, the city's first modernist skyscraper.

The three-bedroom, three-bathroom Lassiter House has glass walls and doors and large, open spaces thanks to steel beams that made load-bearing interior walls unnecessary. It was featured in Better Homes and Gardens magazine in 1956.

Kim Weiss, Triangle Modernist Houses' publicist, said the house is exemplary of the architect's style and of the era.

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"You can just picture Frank Sinatra walking through it with a cigarette in his hand," Weiss said.

The Lassiter House sold for \$655,000, Jodon said.

The Historic Landmarks Commission says the home's modernist style was one that was never "fully embraced" in Charlotte, and similar designs are regularly threatened by demolition.

"We've lost a lot of good ones to the wrecking ball, unfortunately," Jodon said.



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