

Little Boxes

The Triangle boasts America's fourth largest concentration of mid-century modern homes, reinforcing this architectural style's relevance today. So why do these homes face an uncertain future?

By Chris Gigley

It figures that a mid-century modern masterpiece, the Poland-DeFeo House, is set in the woody backwater of Bahama, a small community outside of Durham. That seems to make as much sense as this rural area sharing its name with an exotic tropical getaway, even if it is pronounced differently (bah-hay-mah).

Mid-century modern architecture has a boxy, contemporary look that, at first, seems out of place in such a rustic setting. And it's more closely linked to the West, where these types of homes populate mountaintops, deserts, and beaches. But mid-century modern is a vital part of Triangle history, and the style actually emphasizes the natural setting surrounding it.

According to George Smart, who runs the website www.trianglemodernisthouses.com, a nonprofit educational archive for cataloging, preserving, and advocating area modernist residential design, the Triangle has the fourth largest concentration of modernist homes in America. Only Los Angeles, California; New Canaan, Connecticut; and Chicago, Illinois, have more.

A modern boom

The Triangle's wealth of modernism traces back to 1948, when North Carolina State University launched a School of Design, naming Henry Kamphoefner dean. A star in the architecture world then, Kamphoefner served as associate architect for the Rural Resettlement Administration in Washington, D.C., and as a University of Oklahoma professor from 1937 to 1948. He was a proponent of modernism and hired faculty who shared his passion.

"Each professor would have a practice on the side, which was not only allowed, but also encouraged," says Smart.

As a result, modernist homes popped up around the Triangle like dandelions in the '50s and '60s. They were easy to spot. Derived from the German Bauhaus movement, the style produced spare, squared buildings from concrete, glass, and steel components. Most of the mid-century modern homes in the Triangle tended to be small but efficient with light and space.

The 1,780-square-foot Poland-DeFeo House exemplifies the style. Designed by architect and NCSU professor George Matsumoto for his colleague George W. Poland in 1954, the house features an open living room that wraps around a narrow kitchen space. Concealed cabinets and drawers line about every wall in the house, and large windows let sunlight pour in from all directions. For most of the day, artificial light is unnecessary.

The home itself looks like a distinctive rectangle block that has been dropped where an old farmhouse should be. And in fact, that's exactly what happened. The Poland-DeFeo House originally overlooked Raleigh's Crabtree Valley until vast commercial and

residential development threatened its very existence.

Poland died in 2000, and, in an effort to save the house, his family donated it to Preservation North Carolina a year later. DeFeo bought it but with one serious stipulation: He had to move it.

With the help of local architect Ellen Cassilly, he moved the house in 2002, and it now faces hayfields at the edge of a pine forest in Bahama. For a while, DeFeo spent his weekends there. Eventually, it became his primary residence. Today, he lives in Vermont and has the house for sale.

DeFeo misses his old house.

"You feel like you're outside all the time."

"You really feel like you're part of the environment," he says. "You feel like you're outside all the time but in a conditioned space."

When she takes clients to see it, Realtor Debra Smith likes to stand on the screened-in back porch and gaze through the pines at the Little River reservoir.

"It's just so peaceful here," she says.

"The Poland House is really about being an envelope for your life rather than being your life," DeFeo says.

Green before the green movement

Mid-century modern architecture resonates with current societal aspirations. More than 50 years before people began craving simpler lifestyles, closer relationships with loved ones, and environmental friendliness, modernists were addressing these longings in their blueprints.

Some environmentally efficient ideas worked and others didn't. Smart says mid-century modern homes designed out West used passive solar technology. Triangle architects tried radiant heating systems, but those didn't work so well.

"You'd have a concrete floor with pipes running through it and hot water running through the pipes," explains Smart. "The heat would rise up through the floor and heat the homes. The trouble was they tended to break after a while and were almost impossible to fix."

The modest sizes of these homes, however, require less energy to heat than today's ever-present McMansions. Mid-century modern homes also use space more efficiently, providing ample storage cabinets, drawers, and shelves to minimize clutter.

Even their layouts invoke what many of us lack in the



PHOTOGRAPHY (OPPOSITE PAGE) BY LISSA GOTWALS

An expanse of windows overlook the landscape in the Poland-DeFeo house, designed in 1954. The home currently awaits its next owner.

Internet age — interpersonal connections. “The open floor plan means you don’t have so many discreet rooms separate from each other,” says Smart. “A hallway spinal cord provides a well-organized artery for traffic, and everything is close to everything else.”

In other words, you can’t hide from the people you live with. These homes beg for a game of Twister in the den. Maybe that explains why Smart often sees people break into tears recalling their childhood in a mid-century modern home.

“People remember these homes with incredible fondness,” says Smart. “They’re just so comfortable and relaxing. Because of the way light is brought in and the way space is used, you just feel at ease most of the time you’re there.”

Love ‘em or leave ‘em

Nevertheless, the Triangle’s collection of mid-century modern homes is at risk.

“The fact is that the Triangle is an area of high growth, and a lot of these houses weren’t very big,” says Claudia Brown, survey and planning branch supervisor at the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office. “They also tend to sit on large lots and on prime parcels. A good number of modernist houses are in Country Club Hills in Raleigh — and they’re threatened.”

Brown doesn’t know how many modernist homes still exist, because history considers them relatively young. Buildings nominated for the National Register of Historic Places must be at least 50 years old. North Carolina, however, was one of the first states to list younger buildings when, in 1998, it included six residential properties designed by NCSU School of Design’s first faculty (see sidebar).

The homes’ easy adaptability creates another issue. New owners move in, add walls and doors, and expand kitchens, and suddenly the house’s personality is completely different. Smith has dealt with several clients who were unaware they lived in a mid-century modern design because the house had been so altered.

Then, there are the aesthetics. People either really love them — or they really don’t.

“It’s a niche thing,” says Smart. “Most people are still in love with the sort of Colonial Williamsburg look.”

But then there are people like Smart, DeFeo, and Smith, who have devoted their time and money to raise awareness of the Triangle’s mid-century modern homes.

“These homes are in jeopardy,” says Brown, “but the good thing is that there are people who love these houses, and they are committed to restoring and preserving them. They’re taking steps to ensure their future.” □