

The housing boom that followed the Second World

War took many forms, but 15 years of depression followed by war created a widespread desire for new forms of community. In this country, the impulse to build in harmony with the progressive social, technical, and aesthetic promise of Modernism was coupled with the urge to find uniquely American expressions of the new spirit. The Modern Movement in America was never about the kind of collective housing estates that proliferated throughout Europe in the interwar and immediate postwar years. In the agrarian tradition that runs from Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright, Americans remained in many ways distrustful of cities and sought the ideal of a single-family house on one's own tract of land (however small). The notion of the Modern community first began to take shape in the Progressive era and is best illustrated in the English-style garden suburb developments of the 1920s and '30s (America's soft answer to the housing estates of Central Europe). By the postwar era, it had evolved to include a new model of the single-family house and its attendant community as an alternative to the ubiquitous suburban tract development that simultaneously arose to meet the tremendous demand for housing.

Modern neighborhoods are found throughout the United States, though they are concentrated on the east and west coasts. Although California has the largest of these with the vast developments undertaken by builder Joseph Eichler with architects such as A. Quincy Jones and Anshen and Allen, Massachusetts in fact has the richest and most diverse variety of Modern neighborhoods, some of which are the most architecturally influential and significant to be found anywhere in the world. These neighborhoods stood out in several ways. First, they were conceived as developments of *modern* houses:

of the most stable communities in America.

Massachusetts is home to the first (and only prewar) Modern house neighborhoods in this country, of which the earliest and one of the most significant is Snake Hill in Belmont, developed by architect Carl Koch. *Progressive Architecture* noted in a 1945 article on the expansion of Snake Hill that the five original 1940 Snake Hill houses were "one of the best known and most significant groups of contemporary houses in the world," by virtue of their planning and architecture, and their success in creating a strong sense of community on what had previously been considered an unbuildable rocky hillside. Snake Hill was as innovative technically as it was in social terms; Koch experimented with new materials and construction techniques that enabled the houses to be built cheaply and quickly, without sacrificing aesthetics or the quality of the interior space. The steep road accessing Snake Hill was even fitted with radiant hot-water pipes to melt snow and ice. The enduring coherence of Snake Hill's identity is underscored by the relative obscurity of a contemporary development, undertaken by architect Gunnar Peterson in 1941 in Falmouth. This was unfortunately not conceived as a protected community, and has therefore had a considerable number of its houses replaced with mammoth contemporary structures that have severely compromised the character of the neighborhood.

The western suburbs — arcing out from an intellectual heart in Cambridge through Belmont, Lexington, Concord, Lincoln, and Weston — formed the locus of the Modern neighborhood. Each was a place that attracted progressive intellectuals, most of limited means, in search of space and good schools for growing families. A culture receptive to Modernism had already established itself in this area before the war: the first Modern

Hipsters in the Woods

The Midcentury-Modern Suburban Development A half century ago,

by David Fixler FAIA

as anything besides what they were — appropriate mid-20th-century responses to the challenge and exhilaration of living in the modern world. Second, they were consciously formed with community in mind, usually by members of the academic and research communities who were particularly enthusiastic about the possibilities that Modernism held for leveraging minimal means (these were small and very economically built houses) to enable a gracious, satisfying lifestyle. Most of the neighborhoods constructed communal facilities (some more elaborate than others) and established boards that set guidelines for the future development and maintenance of the neighborhood. These commitments fostered an identity and a sense of common purpose in the neighborhoods that have over time reinforced their unique character and contributed to their becoming some

they look forward to the future without nostalgia or the desire to be seen

houses in New England were the 1932 Eleanor Raymond House in Belmont, the 1933 Field House in Weston, and several houses including architect Henry Hoover's own house, in Lincoln — all prior to the arrival of Walter Gropius in 1938.

The explosion of Modern neighborhoods began after the war in 1948 with the construction of Six Moon Hill in Lexington by seven of the original partners in The Architects Collaborative (TAC). Intended to house their families and a group of friends in 28 houses on half-acre lots, the development arguably constitutes the gold standard for the Modern suburban neighborhood in terms of planning and architectural quality. The siting of these houses, integrated into a wooded landscape that is left as natural and undisturbed as possible, imparts a far more rural quality to the neighborhood than can be found in other developments of comparable density.

By the time the wave of Modern development finally subsided in the 1960s, Lexington could count nine new Modern



Identity and a sense of common purpose in these neighborhoods has contributed to their becoming some of the most stable communities in America.

young members of the creative class left the city in search of, yes, neighborhood.

Midcentury-Modern Neighborhoods in Greater Boston: Snake Hill, Belmont :: Conantum, Concord :: Nut Meadow Crossing, Concord ::

neighborhoods. The first of these was Five Fields, developed by the TAC partners as a speculative neighborhood almost simultaneously with their own houses at Moon Hill. As TAC and its work were largely seen as a product of Harvard under Gropius, the MIT response soon followed. The Peacock Farms community was developed and designed by MIT-trained Danforth Compton and Walter Pierce FAIA in 1952. White & Green were brought in as builders in 1955, and the development eventually grew into a community of 68 households with an elected board of directors, common land, and deeded design controls.

Carl Koch was also behind the development of Kendal Common in Weston, also founded in 1948 by a group of Cambridge-based young married academics and scientists who, in the words of Weston historian Pamela Fox, “shared a common

vision...were ready to experiment with new architectural concepts...were environmentally conscious...[and] above all wanted to create a sense of community.” Advertising brochures created to promote the development to a wider audience promised “Land and an Idea, Community and Modern Architecture,” with notions of “an adventure in living...building towards a better life...modern homes with all their freedom and color and sun...among neighborly people who appreciate the advantages of doing things together.” Prospective owners at Kendal Common were given a list of architects who were pre-qualified to design houses in the neighborhood, and were subsequently encouraged to find ways to participate in the activities of the community — they even helped each other on the construction of their houses in the time-honored barn-raising

These neighborhoods remind us that Modernism still has much to teach us.

tradition. The houses at Kendal Common were thus designed by a consortium of the best young architects in the area at the time including Koch, Robert Woods Kennedy, Walter Bogner, Hugh Stubbins, Carleton Richmond, and TAC.

Koch was also the architect for a second development in Weston at Spruce Hill, which features a number of his Techbuilt experimental houses. However Spruce Hill, like Peterson's development in Falmouth, was not a chartered community and

eclectic mix of 22 houses (this seems to be a charmed number for these neighborhoods, as it is the same as Kendal Common), including a very early version of a passive solar trombe-wall house. In reinforcing the quality of life that this community has developed, Ruth Wales, a founding member and the historical conscience of the neighborhood, notes that in her first 45 years at Brown's Wood, all of her neighbors, once settled, stayed put.

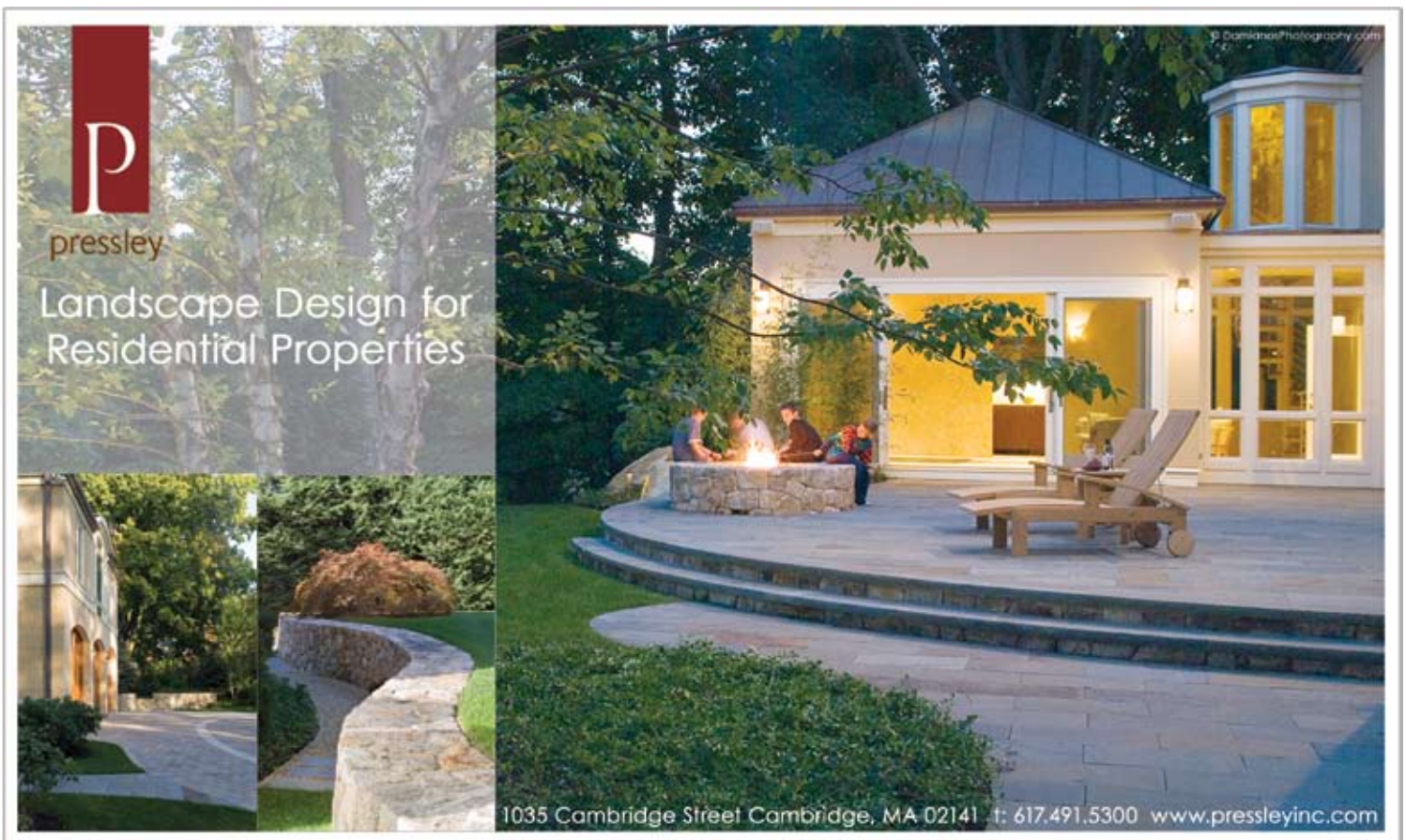
The largest local Modern house development — and the one that perhaps more closely resembles its counterparts such as Arapaho Acres in Denver and the Eichler developments in

∴ Five Fields, Lexington ∴ Peacock Farms, Lexington ∴ Six Moon Hill, Lexington ∴ Turning Mill, Lexington ∴ Brown's Wood, Lincoln

it has also been prey to rapacious overdevelopment that has just within the last five years effectively compromised the simple, bucolic character of the neighborhood.

Lincoln has become much more famous for its individual Modern houses, but even the Gropius House is part of what might loosely be termed the first Modern neighborhood (though not an intentional development) with the houses that Marcel Breuer and Walter Bogner constructed for themselves between 1939 and 1941 on Wood's End Road. Brown's Wood in Lincoln, however, was founded as another response to the early Harvard-centric TAC-based developments by a group of MIT professors who created a highly successful and architecturally

California — is Conantum in Concord. The brainchild of MIT professor W. Rupert McLaurin and the ever-present Carl Koch, Conantum has 100 houses on 190 acres, 60 acres of which are held in trust as common land. Designed specifically with the preservation of a sizable wetland in mind, Conantum takes the name given to the Kalmia Woods area by Henry David Thoreau in honor of Ebenezer Conant. This nod to the enlightened thinkers who fostered appreciation of this land was reinforced with the establishment of an anti-discrimination statute in its 1951 by-laws, one of the first of its kind in the country. Conantum also provided Koch with the opportunity to further develop his building technology systems — which went on to



become Techbuilt, which later merged with similar early efforts, becoming the Deck House system that was developed for use on a large scale.

These communities and their houses have renewed relevance in our present circumstances. They embody the American dream of a commodious single-family home in a supportive community without material excess and in maximum harmony with its environment — a minimal touch on the land. It is rare to find a house in these early developments that originally exceeded 2,000 square feet in size (many are closer to 1,000



∴ Wood's End, Lincoln ∴ Valley Spring, Newton ∴ Kendal Common, Weston ∴ Spruce Hill, Weston

square feet), and yet most if not all of these houses — even those that have not been expanded — feel airy and commodious, not small or constrained. They also serve to remind us that Modernism still has much to teach us. Ironically, the failures of Modernism are sometimes attributed to a loss of sensitivity to scale in later large-scale urban development, but it is precisely the mastery of human scale — a sensitivity that has been completely absent from the outsized, neo-traditional homes that have taken over our suburbs — that is the key to the magic and success of these developments. Driven by disgust and exhaustion in contemplating the excess of the last two decades, as well as economic need, more people are discovering the full

panoply of values that are inherent in these neighborhoods. And to my sons, and many of their generation, they're just cool. ■

David Fixler FAIA is a principal of Einhorn Yaffee Prescott in Boston, president of the New England chapter of DOCOMOMO (an international organization promoting the documentation and conservation of Modern Movement buildings and sites), and co-chair of the Association of Preservation Technology (APT) Technical Committee on Modern Heritage.

▲ Peacock Farms, Lexington, Massachusetts. Photo by Walter S. Pierce FAIA.

 **fire** made modern
modern fires

www.sparkfires.com p 866.938.3846