



MODERN URBANA HOME TOUR 2012



Urbana has a rich architectural heritage dating back to the 1800s when the City was first settled. Architecturally, Urbana is known primarily for its Victorian buildings. However, the city has another significant architectural heritage in its mid-century modernist houses. The aim of Urbana's modernist home tour is to raise public awareness about this architectural heritage both locally and as part of an important genre on the national and international level. **MODERN URBANA: a home tour** is the result of collaboration between the City of Urbana and *CU-Engage*, a Spring 2012 seminar course at the University of Illinois that connects the design currency and critical thinking abilities of graduate students in the School of Architecture to design projects in the community.

History of Modernism

Modernism is a design movement that began at the turn of the twentieth century combining new ideas about architectural design with technological advances. Modernism, also known as International Style, first emerged in Europe with key architects such as Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius. These figures rejected the use of unnecessary ornament in design, creating instead ornament through structure. Fascinated by new technologies, they often used concrete, glass, and steel because their increasing strength allowed more freedom in the design of buildings. This led to the idea of the open plan house.

As we see in the Farnsworth House, an icon of twentieth century modern architecture, the steel structure allows for an entirely open living space surrounded by glass, giving residents views into the trees and a strong connection to nature. As Corbusier famously wrote in *Towards A New Architecture*, the "house is a machine for living," meaning that every component of the house should have a functional use designed in a simple manner. Pure utilitarian structures came to be seen as beautiful. Previously, buildings were enclosed and functions were sacrificed to achieve style. The modern movement allowed interior spaces to open up.



Farnsworth House, Plano, Illinois by architect Mies van der Rohe

Relevance for Today

Modernism created a new approach to architecture still relevant today. This design genre remains because its ideals of simplicity, rationality, and functionality are still applicable. Residential houses become sanctuaries by reducing the number of choices and decisions down to basic needs. The modern buildings we see today express their purpose, serve their functions, and take advantage of the site and the surroundings.

The idea of reducing architecture to basic needs ties directly into ideas of sustainability and the green movement. Sustainability is about reducing water, waste, and energy. Through streamlining architecture to basic needs, waste, water, and energy can all be reduced as well. Another ideal of Modernism is creating a physical connection to nature through materials such as glass and steel. This connection to nature is also an ideal of sustainable design. An additional similarity between Modernist architecture and sustainability can be found through the use of building materials: steel and concrete are heavily used because of their ability to be recycled and to be constructed with little waste. These connections between Modernism and sustainability are another reason for Modernism's relevance in the 21st century.

Modernism in the Local Context

Following World War II, returning soldiers fueled the demand for affordable housing in Illinois. The Chicago area, often called the birthplace of Modernism in America due to the influence of Mies van der Rohe at the Illinois Institute of Technology and Frank Lloyd Wright in Oak Park, enjoyed a robust period of mid-century residential building during this time. Urbana, like other downstate communities, was not a booming city for architectural construction during this time.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, however, made an impact on architectural modernism in this region. During the mid-century time period, the University's College of Fine and Applied Arts espoused an integrative approach to architectural design and arts and was fortunate to bring three exceptionally gifted designers to the area as faculty: Jack Sherman Baker, A. Richard Williams, and John G. Replinger. This group is responsible for the majority of modernist homes in the city of Urbana. As educators and professional architects, they confronted the contemporary architectural context. They focused on achieving design solutions through the use of materials, sites, spatial organizations, and numerous other considerations unique to central Illinois. Their settlement in Urbana-Champaign was a significant influence on bringing modernist architecture to central Illinois.

Selection Process

As a first step in the selection of homes for the MODERN URBANA home tour was to search for homes built between 1950 and 1970 in Urbana. While the style of Modernism extends from the early 1920's into today, this 20-year mid-century range best represents the period of construction closely tied with the post-war residential housing period. We looked for houses that translate well the Modernist aesthetic in terms of materials, simple geometries, lack of ornamentation, and open floor plans. Using existing research from current University faculty, interviews with local architects, and city records, we formed a list of Modernist homes in Urbana. Our research returned an impressive number of homes, nearing 40 that fit the criteria. We then went about the task of conducting a design inventory – looking at home condition, location, and design – in order to conceive of the best possible collection of homes to include on the tour.

The Tour

The collection of homes on the tour reflects the selection process above as well as their accessibility, proximity to one another, and parking availability. All the homes are bonded by their modernist aesthetic. The most noticeable common characteristics in these homes are the use of transparencies and natural materials such as wood, the relationship between indoor and outdoor, and simple geometry with open floor plans. All the homes express these commonalities differently. Some have attached garages and some have carports. More contrasts include gable versus flat roofs. Most of the houses on the tour open to face the sun and landscaping in the back gardens by using floor-to-ceiling windows. By contrast, the fronts of some of these homes have a private front entry with minimal windows. Others have a good openness with high transparency in the front entrance. These characteristics are found in Richard William's and John Replinger's designs by creating a brick wall at the main entrance and making a private outdoor area. On the other hand, Bruce Goff uses big windows in the front of his design, creating transparency.

As a collection, the houses show a sampling of the mid-century modernist style homes, while also providing contrasts in the specifics of this design genre. They provide a framework for discussion about modernism regionally, and about the mid-century post war housing movement in the United States. It is our hope that this tour will serve to inspire and educate, and help you get to know our city, Urbana, just a bit better.