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Fifty and Proud of It

Standards for preservation are changing to take account of modern treasures.

By Christine Kreyling

"Warning: Objects in this mirror may be closer than they appear." This phrase, familiar to every driver, is an

increasingly apt metaphor for preservationists grappling with the products of the post-World War II building boom.

When the National Register of Historic Places was created in 1966, buildings and districts had to be 50 years old in order to be considered for listing. For a long time, that ruled out the modern icons of the 1950s and '60s. But now time has caught up with "the recent past," leaving local preservationists and planners with a special set of problems. The enormous amount of construction during those decades has preservation commissions searching for money and staff to document what's out there.

Deciding what's worth saving has also led to a philosophical debate. Some preservationists view the recent past as a threatened era that merits special emphasis. Others say it deserves no special attention. Meanwhile, some planners say they are uneasy about the implications of preserving districts that, in their view, are based on unsustainable design principles.

It's important to note that the National Park Service, which administers the historic registry, established the 50-year cutoff for eligibility as a guide, not a hard-and-fast rule. The point was to ensure that in considering nominations, both state and local governments and federal evaluators were not merely responding to current popular trends and fads.

In 1979, the park service's National Register division issued a how-to paper that specifically addressed the issue of younger properties. Renamed *National Register Bulletin 22* in 1990, it was revised several times to give guidance on post-WWII properties. The bulletin sets forth "Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties That Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years."

To qualify for the register, a property less than 50 years old is expected to have achieved a significance "of exceptional importance." This standard, because it is so labeled in the bulletin, is known in the preservation trade as "Criterion G."

Bulletin 22 outlines the factors that can be used to establish exceptional importance:

- Association with historic persons: Elvis Presley's Graceland (placed on the register in 1991), or political or social events or movements like the New Jersey community of Radburn (added in 1974, five years shy of its 50th birthday) "because of the exceptional influence its plan has had and continues to have on the planning of suburban communities."
- Threatened structures like the 1950s and '60s Doo Wop motels on the Jersey shore, which

were named to the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 2006 list of "11 Most Endangered Places."

- Significant architectural or engineering sites: Eero Saarinen's Dulles International Airport terminal, built in 1962, was determined to be eligible for the register as early as 1976 because it was considered by the design community "as an architectural masterpiece and one of the most innovative airport designs."

A site's significance may be local or regional, not necessarily national, says Daniel Vivian, a historian who reviews National Register nominations for sites in the Southeast. As an example, he points to a 1959 modernist gymnasium in Greensboro, North Carolina, designed by local architect W. Edward Jenkins, that, with its older companion high school, was listed on the register in 2003.

A National Register listing is advantageous to owners of income-producing properties. They are eligible for a federal tax credit equal to 20 percent of the cost of rehab if it is done according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Rehabilitation of Historic Buildings. (Some states also allow owner-occupants to claim tax credits.)

But being listed doesn't protect structures from demolition unless the federal government is somehow involved in the threat to their survival. If a road expansion using federal funds would require demolishing a listed property, for example, the agency widening the road would have to demonstrate that there is no alternative to demolition.

"Listing on the register is really a starting point for protection," says Claudette Stager, who handles nominations for the Tennessee Historical Commission. "Many cities require that a building be at least eligible for the register before they'll consider local legal protection" such as landmark designation.

L.A. takes the lead

National magazines like *Dwell* and *Metropolis* have mainstreamed the modernist style, particularly for younger readers. "Younger people are very keen on the modern aesthetic," said Heather MacIntosh in an interview that appeared in the summer issue of *Common Ground*, a publication of the National Park Service. "Growing up in the '80s, when it was in our rooms and dorms, the stuff seemed kitschy and fun and funky. Now we are professionals, we have money, but we carry the same aesthetic sense." MacIntosh is the president of the national advocacy group, Preservation Action.

It's also true that the recent past seems more historic in younger cities where preservationists have less building history to cover. Los Angeles and Las Vegas are notable examples.

"Los Angeles leads in the awareness of the historic value of newer places," says Diana Painter, a preservation and planning consultant in Petaluma, California. The Los Angeles Conservancy, the nation's largest historic preservation organization, received the 2006 Daniel Burnham Award from APA for its advancement of planning principles and contributions to the region's quality of life.

The conservancy's Modern Committee successfully fought the demolition of the 1961 Theme Building at the Los Angeles International Airport. It also helped to save the McDonald's restaurant (the oldest of the original designs) in suburban Downey, along with other restaurants and gas stations from the '50s and '60s. Members have also established the

subdivisions developed by Joseph Eichler, the merchant builder who in the '50s and '60s employed modernist design on a large scale, and they are currently working on a local preservation zoning overlay for an Eichler tract in Granada Hills.

Las Vegas is also noted for its modern focus — not surprising for a town whose "historic housing stock is primarily from the 1940s through the early 1960s," says Courtney Mooney, the city's historic preservation officer.



Las Vegas has used state grants to hire consultant Diana Painter to conduct four surveys of resources from this period, including wedding chapels on the Strip. However, the chapels were deemed ineligible for the National Register "because they had lost too much integrity," Painter says.

Another survey, of properties in Berkley Square on the city's historically African American west side, looks more likely to lead to listing, she says. The neighborhood, planned in the late '40s and built out by the end of the next decade, exhibits the architectural and historic significance that could qualify it as being of "exceptional importance," Painter says.

Berkley Square was designed by Paul Revere Williams, the first African American member of the American Institute of Architects, known for his movie star houses and public buildings in Los Angeles as well as his award-winning designs for small houses. The name came from Thomas L. Berkley of Oakland, a distinguished African American attorney, civil rights advocate, and partial financier of the development. Mooney says the city plans to use another state grant to prepare a National Register nomination for Berkley Square next year.

Learning curve

The perennial problem faced by preservation commissions — finding the funds and the staff to inventory historic properties — is made especially acute by the huge numbers of structures encompassed by the term "recent past."

"There are just so many more buildings from the '50s and beyond," says Philip Thomason, a preservation consultant who recently wrote a register nomination for the Route 66 Steak n Shake in Springfield, Missouri. The 1962 structure is the only remaining example of the franchise's post-World War II corporate design.

Many preservation commissions are still struggling to document their pre-1945 resources. And those lucky enough to get state grants for surveys "tend to spend them on the most threatened areas with the greatest likelihood of local designation," says Drane Wilkinson, program coordinator for the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions, an advocacy and training group based at the University of Georgia.

A second problem is convincing the public of the value of preserving the recent past. "Getting people to understand why you even want to survey this period takes a very long learning curve," says Wilkinson.

Here's how a local preservation group in Texas solved this problem. When a citywide architecture survey was expanded in 2004 to include properties built up to 1969, Preservation



Jones and Katherine Seale in the summer 2005 issue of the National Trust's *Forum Journal*, some volunteers walk through the neighborhoods with residents, while others meet at the library to research neighborhood history. The process is labor-intensive, but it results not only in information and images but in a group of residents who appreciate historic buildings and have become advocates to save them.

Preservationists in North Carolina had a relatively easy time convincing owners of significant modern houses of their value. That's particularly true of the international style houses

designed between 1950 and the late 1960s by faculty and alumni of the School of Design at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Owners of some of the houses used their own funds to commission individual and multiple property nominations, and by 1996, six houses were listed on the National Register and five had local landmark protection.

"We didn't have to rely on a big public education campaign to have the historic significance of these buildings recognized, because the owners knew they had something special," says Daniel Becker, the executive director of the Raleigh Historic District Commission. "So we saved the cream of the crop, but we still have much work to do to protect the broader body of work inspired by these prototypes."

Nashville is perhaps more typical. The Metropolitan Nashville Historical Commission has just begun the National Register nomination process for a 1956 house — its first from the postwar period.

Nashville isn't quite there yet, according to historical commission executive director Ann Roberts. "Even in 1930s neighborhoods I hear, 'I grew up in a house like that so it can't be historic.' When we get to the '50s and '60s and '70s, I hear that even more." To change that mind set, local architect John Teselle shows images of '50s and '60s architecture to any community group that will have him. "I orient my presentation to lay people who've never thought about this stuff except to think it's ugly, to create an awareness that at least some of it might be historic," he says.

Asbestos, too?

Modernist buildings often used materials that today are viewed as questionable. Should those materials be preserved? That's a good question, says Drane Wilkinson of the National Association of Preservation Commissions. "It's easy to figure out how to deal with wood on a Greek Revival, but what about plastic, fiberglass, and asbestos? Do you use an asbestos look-alike instead? Preservation guidelines must take these kinds of materials into account."

Preserving the integrity of the original materials was not a question in Arapahoe Acres, built between 1949 and 1957 in Englewood, Colorado. In 1998, it became the first post-World War II residential subdivision to be listed as a historic district on the National Register. The 124 houses are all inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian designs.

Builder Edward Hawkins, who designed the houses with architect Joseph Dion, placed restrictive covenants on the entire development and created an architectural control committee that approves all new structures and additions to existing ones, as well as fences, retaining walls, and most landscaping. The standards even address interiors, stating that "original interior materials such as built-in furnishings, mahogany and teak paneling, exposed

beams, exposed brick or stone, plywood ceilings and cork floors should be retained," or, if necessary, "replaced in kind."

But strict adherence to such standards can be difficult when it comes to the adaptive reuse necessary to preserve many structures. "You may like the aesthetics of a '60s office tower," says historian Daniel Vivian. "But what do you do if you're converting to residential and trying to get the 20 percent federal tax credit, and the Secretary of the Interior standards pretty much say preserve as is — including keeping the hermetically sealed windows? People want windows that open, and balconies, too."

Wilkinson counters that "preservation and adaptive reuse have always called for creative solutions." In his view, "retrofitting so that windows open is really no different than figuring out how to put ductwork into an 1886 house."

There's also the question of how much to protect. Wholesale preservation, without the justification of design values, can create unwanted conflicts between preservationists and property rights advocates. "Here in Washington, a lot of communities want to be historic districts to block the McMansions," wrote Tomika Hughey, deputy project manager for urban planning for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, in *Common Ground*. "They're trying to use the designation as a NIMBY tool, without the architecture to support it."

Some critics see some irony in these efforts. They note that modernist advocates are seeking to protect the very past that gave birth to the modern preservation movement in the first place: the "blight removal" of urban renewal and the depredations of the interstate highway system in the 1950s and '60s.

"The last 50 years don't represent another step in an evolutionary process of cities; the last 50 years represent an aberration from 3,000 years of urban history," wrote Donovan Rypkema in "Saving the Recent Past — A Philosophical and Practical Dissent," an article that appeared last year in a National Trust publication.

Richard Bernhardt, FAICP, executive director of the Metropolitan Nashville Planning Department, takes a middle view. He supports protection for individual postwar buildings on the basis of merit, but he's less sure about entire districts. "Most '50s and '60s neighborhoods are not particularly good examples of desirable development patterns," he says. In his view, it might be better to redevelop those areas in a "more urban-friendly way, with greater density, sidewalks, and mixed use."

Drane Wilkinson says we can do both — save the buildings and improve the neighborhood. "I fail to see why you can't install sidewalks and add a community market to a '50s neighborhood, as long as it's done sensitively and respects the existing pattern — curving streets, not a grid — and the character. That's what preservation has always done, and will continue to do."

Christine Kreyling is the architecture and urban planning critic for the Nashville Scene.

Sidebar: Mies Library: Eyesore or Modern Masterpiece?

Resources

Images: Top — Colorado's Arapahoe Acres was the first post-World War II residential subdivision to be listed as a historic district in the National Register of Historic Places. Photo by

late Victorian Broadway Historic District. Photo by John Teselle. Bottom — A likely candidate for listing: Berkley Square in Las Vegas, designed by Paul Revere Williams, the first African American member of the AIA. Photo by Diana Painter.

Organizations. DOCOMOMO-US is a national group dedicated to the documentation and conservation of buildings, sites, and neighborhoods associated with the modern movement: docomomo-us.org. The Recent Past Preservation Network (recentpast.org) offers such publications as *A Recent Past Glossary* and *A Historical Bibliography of Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urbanism in the United States Since World War II*. It also has links to more whimsical preservation efforts like "Save the 76 Ball!" — the gas station spheres that ConocoPhillips has threatened to replace.

Conference proceedings. In 1995 and 2000, the National Park Service and other groups sponsored conferences on "preserving the recent past." Case studies and technical essays related to the second conference are included in *Preserving the Recent Past II*, edited by Deborah Slaton and William Foulks. For information on ordering, go to www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps.
