Aspen Modern: America’s International Resort

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Modernism + Recent Past Program

Significant sites come in all shapes and sizes, and from all eras of American history. The architectural and cultural resources of the Modern movement and the recent past are an important chapter in our national story, encompassing innovative ideas in architecture and planning, as well as places that demonstrate the influence and impact of the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and urban renewal. Day by day, however, a steady campaign of demolition is eroding the physical fabric of the recent past, with little consideration of its community importance, design significance, or role in creating a sustainable future.

In order to address what many consider to be a growing crisis, the National Trust for Historic Preservation inaugurated its Modernism + Recent Past Program, also known as TrustModern, in 2009. Headquartered at the Western Office of the National Trust in San Francisco, TrustModern seeks to reacquaint Americans with their living history by reframing public perceptions about Modern and recent past architecture; creating stronger federal, state, and local policies to protect these sites; promoting contextual studies; and fostering an action network of individuals and organizations interested in resource preservation and rehabilitation. The National Trust is also breaking ground in the conservation of modern architecture at its own sites, including two of the most significant residential designs in the US: the Philip Johnson Glass House (1949) in New Canaan, CT, and Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House (1951) in Plano, IL.

Preserving our “familiar past” is a complex and sometimes controversial undertaking. Thoughtful conservation of the built environment, however, not only informs our collective history, but provides innovative opportunities for planning and stewarding our landscapes. The National Trust is working to lead on this issue and moves forward with the firm conviction that these places matter. We welcome you to join us in this conversation.
Aspen’s mid 20th-century renewal as a high-end vacation resort coincided with the widespread adoption of modern architecture in America. Wealthy patrons sought out innovative design solutions to attract attention, and global tourists, to the scenic mining town. Adherents of two differing approaches—Wrightian/Organic and Bauhaus/International—augmented the Victorian-era character of the community with a richly defined collection of modernist buildings. Entrepreneurs also erected a number of contemporary Swiss-style ski chalets, rustic lodges, and pre-fabricated log buildings to entertain and house a growing numbers of visitors.

World-renowned architects and young idealists were attracted to the area by Aspen’s economic potential and its one-of-a-kind mountainous surroundings. Their architecture communicated both a distinct sense of place and a sophisticated level of design, whether in the organic treatment of natural wood and rock walls or the machine-like precision of glass, concrete, and steel. Modernist buildings and landscape features characterized the new Aspen Institute campus, and alpine, vernacular, and manufactured structures were interspersed among extant buildings downtown and along neighboring streets.

As Aspen matured into a noted sports and arts destination, builders introduced a new type of building to accommodate visitors: the condominium. “Condos” made a major impact on Aspen’s townscape, economy, and demographics as affordable housing, traffic, and planning priorities became important concerns. Today, retaining the picturesque historic character, including the “new” modern heritage of the area, is a pre-eminent preservation issue in this close-knit community.
Commercial development slowed dramatically in Aspen after the Silver Crash of 1893, when the local mining economy fell to ruin. Yet, the community came back strongly in the mid 20th century, when the rise of the ski industry in the West brought new opportunities, people, and ideas to the area. The city welcomed a league of imaginative architects and builders, who revived the downtown core with innovative office, retail, and recreational buildings.

Taliesin fellow and expert skier Frederic “Fritz” Benedict designed the Bank of Aspen at a prominent downtown corner in 1956. The flat-roofed building, composed of wood and recycled brick, evoked Frank Lloyd Wright’s influence in its dramatic use of cantilevering, overall horizontality, and massing of chimney and piers. This deep respect for natural materials, composed with an eye towards modernity and an organic style, informed many works of the period, including the 1976 Aspen Athletic Club and the

Each of these architects delighted in exploring new ways to manipulate materials (wood, concrete, brick, glass, tile, and stucco), light, and scale to create buildings that maintained a unique relationship to nature and the surrounding community. Deep overhangs protected citizens from the summer sun glare as well as the massive winter snowfall, while expansive glazed walls allowed people to communicate with the outdoor landscape even while indoors. Artfully controlled window and door openings presented a changing sense of light and shade throughout the day, enhancing the architectural experience.
In January 1947, the world’s longest ski lift opened on Aspen Mountain. A rush to develop the area for a plethora of visitors soon followed, with an eclectic assortment of ski lodges, motels, and vacation homes rising throughout the valley.

Rocky Mountain resorts at mid-century often relied upon Alpine imagery to attract tourists who identified downhill skiing only with the Swiss Alps. Aspen promoted this European link (with a distinct 20th century slant) in a number of exuberantly-styled ski buildings. The Skiers Chalet, adjacent to the chair lift, featured broad sloping roofs, an abundance of wood, wrap-around balconies, and Tyrolean decorative motifs.

Pan-Abode buildings are a distinctive feature of the mid-century landscape. The company produced pre-fabricated “Lincoln Logs” that could be formed into a variety of structures (all wood, including walls, ceiling, and floor). This affordable option thrived in Aspen, with
more than fifty Pan-Abode buildings erected, including vacation housing, commercial buildings, and lodges, such as the Christiana.

The 1956 Boomerang Lodge was the creation of Charlie Paterson, who escaped Nazi Germany and settled in Aspen in a one-room cabin. He designed the modern lodge, one of the oldest in Aspen, while studying architecture at the Taliesin studio. Paterson incorporated unique uses of glass, including mitered corner windows looking towards the mountains and an underwater window for views into the pool from the lounge.

Nearby is the Hearthstone House, designed in 1961 by Robin Molny, another Taliesin fellow. Sited deep into its corner location, the handsome wood structure has two angled wings projecting from a central hearth; the wide, shingled roof and horizontal scale of the building create a home-like atmosphere for the guests.
Although Aspen hosts a number of year-round residents, housing in this area caters primarily to those who arrive seasonally to enjoy the snowy winters or the pastorally-green summers. The Swiss-style is a favorite, with a range of homes tucked into neighborhoods like little Alpine cabins. Yet, this traditional look (such as the 1946 single-family chalet at 945 W. Smuggler Street, possibly Aspen’s oldest example of this style) mixes easily with the more contemporary versions, referred to locally as “Modern Chalets.”

First appearing in the 1960s, the Modern Chalet is less decorative and more robust in scale than its forebears. With low-to-moderately pitched roofs based on a 3:12 ratio and broad façades of rectilinear glass and solid panels, these homes opened up to the outdoors and were considered more conducive to the mid-century resort lifestyle. Excellent examples can be seen in the West End, on Francis Street and along Bleeker Street.
In 1967, Fritz Benedict designed a modern twist on the Alpine cabin for *Ski* magazine; clients from Denver later built the house in Aspen. This shingled variation of the humble A-frame effectively shed the snow, fit well in its mountain landscape, and epitomized affordable ski housing.

Newcomers to Aspen brought their admiration of modern design to the mountains. Their International Style single-family homes, designed by Herbert Bayer and others, are, however, becoming increasingly scarce. One-story, with flat roofs, glass walls, and small footprints, the buildings are often targeted as teardowns. An exception is the well-preserved 1972 residence designed by modernist Victor Lundy for himself and his artist wife Anstis, next door to an extant Bayer-designed residence. Lundy cantilevered the roof of the vacation home/studio to extend over the floor-to-ceiling windows that frame the 20-foot-high great room and towering trees that line the property.
The Pan Abode log cabin on Hopkins Avenue was erected in 1956. Ordered from a catalog, the kit was delivered by train or truck and assembled on site. The company, still in business today, produced only about 100 buildings a year at that time. These simple structures are considered locally significant in Aspen’s architectural history.

Shadow Mountain Condominiums, built in 1965 at the top of Aspen Street near Lift No. 1, signaled Aspen’s enthusiastic embrace of a new housing model. Designed by Texas engineer Donald W. Kirk, the buildings step up the mountain, the many gable roofs appear stacked like traditional chalets in an Alpine environment. The saw-tooth roofline also paid homage, in the modernist sense, to the peaks behind. Condominiums changed the small-scale residential atmosphere of Aspen and altered patterns of development throughout the 20th century.
Soon after World War II, Chicago industrialist Walter Paepcke arrived in Aspen with the singular dream of transforming the sleepy town into a center for exploring the arts, culture, and life. He started the Aspen Skiing Company and quickly followed that enterprise with the founding of the Aspen Institute of Humanistic Studies on the open meadows west of town.

Paepcke supported the work of the Bauhaus in Europe and the U.S., and hired architect Herbert Bayer, with colleague and brother-in-law Fritz Benedict, to create an idyllic campus distinguished by Modern buildings and landscapes. Curving paths connected the structures, with a series of artworks and sculpture augmenting panoramic views of the mountain range beyond. Contributors to the Aspen Institute included Eero Saarinen, in his 1949 Music Tent (now demolished), and Buckminster Fuller’s 1952 Geodesic Dome (rebuilt in xxxx).
The Aspen Institute campus was designed without a master plan but loosely organized in three main areas—housing for guests, institute administration and activities, and affiliated institutes. The first permanent building was the 1953 Seminar Building, designed by Bayer and Benedict. Bayer also created environmental sculptures, the 1954 Green Mound and 1955 Marble Garden, early examples of the “earthwork” and environmental sculpture movement. Paepcke hoped to expand further and build an entire neighborhood of modern homes next to the Institute, featuring the work of Walter Gropius and Philip Johnson among other notable designers, but the plans died at his passing in 1960.

Benedict and Bayer went on to design the Pitkin County Public Library at 120 East Main Street, now converted to offices. The pair of architects created a low-pitched hip roof, red brick building with deep overhanging eaves. Veteran newsman and American icon Walter Cronkite dedicated the structure in 1966.
The architecture and landscapes of the “recent past,” those built within the generational memory of our own time, are particularly vulnerable to untimely destruction. Too young to be appreciated for their historic contributions, many of these structures are targeted for the bulldozer before reaching the venerable age of the antique. Unfortunately, Aspen has recently suffered its own major loss.

In October, 2011, the University of Colorado demolished the Given Institute, once determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its “exceptional significance.” In 1972, Chicago architect Harry Weese, also known for his vaulted concrete Metro Stations in Washington, D.C., created a serene conference center intended to promote advanced thinking in molecular biology and medical research. The Given Institute was named “one of Aspen’s finest modernist works” in Buildings of Colorado and placed on the 2011 Most Endangered Places list for Colorado Preservation, Inc. Advocates nationwide fought for its re-use. Now it is gone.
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