HISTORY OF MODERNISM IN HAMMOND

A Comprehensive Guide to the History of Modernism and John Desmond’s Architectural Impact on Hammond

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WHAT IS MODERN ARCHITECTURE?

Modernism in architecture is characterized by its emphasis on form over ornament; appreciation of materials and structure instead of idyllic revival constructions; and the adroit, methodical use of space. Several different styles of modern architecture in the United States developed between 1930 and 1970 such as the International, Expressionist, Brutalist, New Formalist, and Googie movements. The roots of modern architecture can be traced to the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, which was composed entirely of cutting-edge buildings and cemented the United States’ role as a world leader in art, architecture, and technology. The head architect was Daniel Burnham, who recruited the most prominent American architects, including Louis Sullivan’s firm Adler and Sullivan, to design the temporary buildings for the Fair. Louis Sullivan is most well-known for his aesthetic philosophy “form follows function,” which became the rallying cry for the modern movement. Sullivan’s rejection of ornamentation and clarity of structural function embodied the value of democracy, the importance of nature, the autonomy of the individual, and the earnest expression of function without extravagance. One of the many young architects inspired by the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair was Frank Lloyd Wright, the leading force in shaping modern American architecture in the 20th century. At the Fair, Wright encountered Japanese architecture in its traditional form at the Japanese government’s official pavilion. The building featured a half-scale reproduction of a Japanese temple. The open plan, horizontality, broad roofs, carefully wrought craftsmanship, and non-structural walls used in the temple would inform Wright’s design aesthetic for the rest of his career.

Young European architects were enraptured by Wright’s bold abstract forms stripped of ornament. In addition to the bevy of young American architects influenced by Wright and practicing in the Prairie Style, European Modernists Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, who would become major fixtures of the Bauhaus, began to incorporate some of Wright’s more abstract forms into their own work. Staatliches Bauhaus, known simply as the Bauhaus, was the epicenter of the modern movement in Europe. The Bauhaus was a German school of architecture, sculpture, painting, design, and craft, led by Walter Gropius, in operation from 1919 to 1933 that brought the modern movement to international prominence. Bauhaus leaders Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe left Germany in the late 1930s to escape growing Nazi aggression against its European neighbors. Gropius and Breuer began teaching at the Harvard University School of Design, where
Gropius was chair, and Mies van der Rohe became a professor at Chicago’s Armour Institute, now the Illinois Institute of Technology. Prior to the arrival of other European modernists dispersed by escalating tensions in Nazi Germany, Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra came to the United States and began working with Frank Lloyd Wright. Schindler and Neutra became well known on the West Coast for their expert blend of European rationalism with Wrightian organicism. These expats greatly influenced generations of American architects, popularizing the European modernist aesthetic throughout the United States. Architects such as Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, IM Pei, Edward Durell Stone, and were educated with modernist ideals which evolved into regional iterations of modern architecture.

**IS THERE MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN LOUISIANA?**

*YES! While Louisiana is well-known for its French, Spanish, and Acadian architecture, Louisiana is also home to many beautiful modern buildings. Modernism first began to take hold in Shreveport, Louisiana with the construction of 3 Samuel Wiener International Style homes in the early 1930s. By the 1950s, Shreveport was home to dozens more Wiener buildings, a Richard Neutra home, and Edward F. Neild skyscrapers. Modernism began to become popular in New Orleans in the 1950s. The greatest practitioners of modernism in New Orleans were Curtis & Davis, who designed the Superdome, and Albert Ledner, who designed many houses in the area. New Orleans was a little slow to catch on to modernism, but its popularity soared as architects developed conscientious methods to blend modern architecture with historic streetscapes. Scale, local materials, and the natural environment were important factors in the design of modern buildings in New Orleans. Over in Baton Rouge, architect John Desmond designed buildings like the Student Union at Louisiana State University and in his hometown of Hammond he designed dozens of homes, churches, schools, and other civic buildings. Desmond incorporated local historic design elements into his New Formalist modern designs in Hammond. Louisiana modern architecture is distinct because of its keen relationship to the Louisiana historic built environment and natural surroundings.*

![Shreveport: Samuel Wiener. The Samuel Wiener House, Shreveport, LA, 1937. Louisiana National Register of Historic Places Database.](image1)


HAMMOND: John Desmond. St. Albert Catholic Student Center at Southeastern Louisiana University, Hammond, LA, 1962. Photo by Anna Marcum.

HOW DO I SPOT A MODERN BUILDING?

It’s easy! First, look for the big 3 modern characteristics:

1. **Clean lines** lacking ornament
2. Emphasis on **low, horizontal** massing with **horizontal** planes and **broad** roof overhangs
3. Generous use of **glass** to allow **natural light** into **open, flowing floorplans**

Got it? Here are a few more common features of modern architecture:

4. Emphasis on well-defined, **rectangular forms**
5. Use of **modern materials and systems** like steel columns, exposed concrete block, stained concrete floors, column-free spaces, and radiant heating systems
6. **Innovative use of traditional materials** like wood, brick, and stone in simplified ways that showcase their natural features and are installed in large smooth planes
7. A **thoughtful relationship between the site and the building** where interior space is planned to best compliment the surrounding natural environment
WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT HAMMOND MODERNISM?

Beginning in the late 1950s, John Desmond designed over 100 modern buildings in his hometown of Hammond, Louisiana. John Desmond (1922-2008) was born in Denver, Colorado and raised in Hammond, Louisiana. Desmond graduated from Hammond High School in 1937 and Tulane University with a degree in architecture in 1941. He earned a Master of Architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he studied under W.W. Wurster and Alvar Aalto. Desmond worked at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in New York City and with A. Hays Town in Baton Rouge before starting his own practice in Hammond, Louisiana in 1953. In the early 1970s, John Desmond closed the Hammond practice and began operating John Desmond & Associates exclusively out of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Desmond retired from architectural practice in 2002. John Desmond was awarded numerous professional honors throughout his career, most significantly the American Institute of Architects Fellowship for Significant Contribution to Design and the Louisiana American Institute of Architects Gold Award Lifetime Achievement Award.

John Desmond’s modern buildings in Hammond differ from the pure modernism of the International Style in that they incorporate the decorative elements and design concepts with historical precedent. Architectural historians refer to this style of modernism as New Formalism since many architects incorporate the rational, streamlined principles of classical architecture. John Desmond adapted New Formalism to southern Louisiana by incorporating features and materials popular in regional architecture. Desmond’s early career Hammond buildings can be described as Acadian Modernism – New Formalist structures that conspicuously incorporate Acadian architectural features and materials such as pitched roofs, galleries, pavilions, large overhangs, timber framing with brick, and wooden columns. John Desmond expertly fuses Acadian design elements with the clean lines and broad forms of modernism in his residential and commercial architecture.
Two of John Desmond’s Hammond buildings, Miller Memorial Library and First Christian Church, are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is remarkable for any city to have such a great density of one architect’s work. In southern Louisiana, it is unique to have so many residential and commercial works of high modernism in one place. Louisiana is well known for its many iterations of French Creole architecture. Modern architecture of the quality and concentration of John Desmond’s work in Hammond is truly unparalleled in the American South.
WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT MODERN ARCHITECTURE?

There are a wide variety of organizations and publications that offer diverse perspectives and histories on modern architecture in the United States. Here are a few resources to get started:

1. **National Trust for Historic Preservation:** https://savingplaces.org/modern-architecture#.WmgQIPjwZ-U
2. **Docomomo US:** http://www.docomomo-us.org/
4. **New Orleans Architecture Foundation:** http://www.noaf.org/

HOW CAN I HELP SAVE MODERN ARCHITECTURE?

The most effective preservation efforts begin with passionate people just like you. There are so many ways to help save modern architecture in Hammond and Southern Louisiana. Here are a few ways to get started:

1. **LEARN:** Start with the above resources and learn a little bit more about modern architecture and its relationship to your community. Understanding the significance of modern architecture is crucial in preserving modern buildings.
2. **SHARE:** Get the word out! If you see a cool modern building, snap a picture and post it to Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat. If you loved reading this crash course in modern architecture, share the link with your friends and family. Anything you can do to make your community more aware of modern architecture will be so helpful in advocating to save and maintain modern buildings.
3. **JOIN:** Become a member of the New Orleans/Louisiana Chapter of Docomomo US to learn more about modern architecture in Louisiana and kept abreast of any possible threats to modern gems in the region.
4. **RENOVATE:** Do you own a mid-century modern home or thinking about buying one? If so, be sure to renovate thoughtfully with architectural integrity in mind. Be sure to check out our Guidelines for Modern Preservation brief to assist in developing your renovation plan.
REFERENCES

What is modern architecture?


Is there modern architecture in Louisiana?

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http://20x49.shreveport-bossier.org/2013/09/18/if-i-said-you-had-a-beautiful-wiener-house-would-you-hold-it-against-me/
http://www.knowlouisiana.org/entry/john-jacob-desmond/

How do I spot a modern building?

http://www.a2modern.org/2011/04/characteristics-of-modern-architecture/
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What is special about Hammond modernism?
