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# What happened to Modernism?

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*Mid-Century Modernism was set to transform how we build, but most of today's buildings are boring and traditional. Did Modernism fall?*



Modernism week is an annual event held every February in Palm Springs, California. Thousands of people descend on the Coachella Valley to tour some of the incredible examples of Mid-Century Modern buildings that exist here. To call them fans of modernism is an understatement. Most that I met had some deep, near fanatical, obsession with this particular period of Architecture – a period in which the term "modern" meant what it should.

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Before it referred to that period of art history from 1920 to 1965, the word "modern" used to refer to a departure from traditionalism using cutting edge technology. It seems we have forgotten the beautiful power of the concept of something being truly modern. Practically all of the events around Modernism Week treated the past as something belonging to a bygone era, and a past that needs to be preserved. The general sentiment seemed to be that the unique conditions that gave rise to the Modernist movement is long gone and never to return.

While I agree the original examples of Mid-Century Modernism (1950's and 60's) that remain should be preserved, I found myself wanting more. One would think that Modernism itself should be so prevalent by now that we all live in our own Modernist house.



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The reality, of course, we know to be much different. Truly modern buildings are reserved for special occasions: a new high-rise or maybe a new public library. In the last decade, even public buildings and schools are starting to embrace modern designs. The US General Services Administration (GSA) (<http://www.gsa.gov>) has committed to truly modern designs in its' new buildings. While this progress is wonderful, the daily buildings we use are being overlooked.

Most of the houses being built today are adamantly NOT modern. Unlike the rare Mid-Century Modern examples here in Palm Springs, most existing homes are shy about doing anything beyond the traditional. In fact most subscribe to a style that could best be called, "Spaniterranean," a hodgepodge of romantic, traditional styles that have little to do with the area in which they are built, and even less to do with the people living in them.



One of the pioneers of this Mid-Century Modernist movement is architect William Krisel. At 86 years of age, he is a wealth of architectural history. In a public conversation lecture held during Modernism Week, Krisel shared some stories of the feeling going on at the time.

"I found a group of likeminded developers and clients who felt the time had come for modern designed tract housing," he explained.

Yes, the time HAD come. But then did it end? Today, the vast majority of tract housing (housing for the masses) is far from modern. The Tuscany-inspired, Mediterranean villas that blight our landscapes are uninspiring, boring and, worst of all, fake.

Krisel was able to convince clients to build a modern building, in part, because there was a movement going on around him helping to encourage others to join in. He told stories about looking for clients open to modern designs. Nearly 60 years later, architects are still having the same conversations.

Did Modernism fail in its' mission? Perhaps we need a second Modernist movement.

A fact demonstrated clearly in Palm Springs. Surrounding most of these historical modern buildings are brand new, suburban sprawl, Spaniterranean buildings. New, modern buildings are still considered rare.



PHOTO CREDIT: Behr Browers Architects

While driving along the 101 Highway in Southern California, I almost got into an accident when I caught a glimpse of the Calabasas Shopping Center. Here was a new, everyday building that was clearly modern. Digging around, I was also pleased to discover it to be the first LEED Certified (<http://www.usgbc.org/leed>) building in the county and the debut project of the Calabasas County Green Development Standard.

Project manager Jason Oliver, from Behr Browers Architects (<http://www.behrbrowsers.com>) spoke to me about how it came about. With project designer was Francisco Behr, they began by involving the community into the design process. The community's initial reaction was reluctant to embrace something different, and expected a more traditional design.

"Once the community members started getting educated about the goal of increasing daylighting and opening up to view corridors," Oliver continued, "they got excited about a modern aesthetic." By including them in the thinking that goes into the design, the community stopped seeing something modern as being imposed upon them, but rather as a clear design solution.

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"Towards the end [of the process]," says Oliver, "the community was almost unanimous in their desire for a modern design."

That this particular modern building is also the greenest in Calabasas County further helped sell the community and officials on the final design.

"Spec[ulative] developments are primed for modern, sustainable design as they are already designed to cut out the fat and superfluous spaces," Oliver explained. Could this model be repeated in other areas?

A few hours from here, the small city of Elk Grove, California is facing their own challenge with a modern design. This Sacramento suburb, which the Census Bureau once proclaimed America's fastest-growing city, decided to establish itself as a destination spot.

Back in 2006, they set a bold vision for the future ([http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/us/01hadid.html?\\_r=3&ref=us](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/us/01hadid.html?_r=3&ref=us)) of their city by holding an international design competition to create a master plan for a \$159 million civic center complex on 78 acres.

As told in the *New York Times*, this town of only 153,000 people saw a bold, modern building as the solution to their relative anonymity.

*The council hoped that an iconic piece of architecture could vault the young city to higher heights, à la Bilbao in Spain and its Guggenheim museum.*



PHOTO SOURCE: *New York Times*

To this end, the City selected the more often visionary than practical architect, Zaha Hadid.

Ms. Hadid's resulting design is a fluid, organic and bold piece of Architecture. She is, after all, the first woman to receive the Pritzker Architecture Prize. Although most of her designs have been on paper and unbuilt, the last decade has put her in high demand.

*The mayor was thrilled that they had landed such a big fish. "We hit a home run on this one," gushed James Cooper, the mayor at the time. "The citizens are so excited. The big thing is to let her be an architect and not stifle the process. We want her to think of something different. This is a new chapter in Elk Grove's life."*

The community loved it when selected back in 2006, but now in a recession, the usual lack of vision is taking over. A new Mayor and new council members vehemently oppose the design, for no reason other than a fear of the new.

*So perhaps it was no surprise that the council members did not attend any of the meetings — some of which included very positive comments from the public — over the nine months of planning until the final presentation of the master plan last week.*

So, why this unfounded fear of Modernism?

It would be understandable had modern buildings been shown to destroy communities, bankrupt cities or prove structurally inferior... but cities did that through traditional planning, not through Modernism. Instead, modern buildings have been shown to attract visitors, revitalize cities and push the art of Architecture forward. We can't afford to not build them.

The secret lie in learning from the past without copying it. Most town planners cling to traditional vernacular styles in the hopes of getting the good stuff they like in traditional styles (i.e.: maintain the street frontage, human scale awnings, etc.) in spite of the bad stuff they don't (i.e.: an anachronistic collection of uninspiring repetition.)

Let's study the styles of the past, learn from them and move on. Open our eyes to what worked in those approaches and adapt it to our modern sensibilities. Let's have a new Modernist Movement. And this time, let's make it a green one.

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