An Introduction to Making Modern Architecture Matter

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ABSTRACT: Regardless of their interest in historic architecture, Americans often dismiss Modern architecture for being too boring, ugly, or recent to be worthy of preservation. Using the author’s advocacy experience in Columbia, South Carolina, as a case study, this article offers strategies for those looking to advocate and educate for Modern buildings constructed outside of major American cities between 1945 and 1975. The essay introduces the historical context for local Modern architecture, deconstructs its most common derisions, and suggests ways to convince skeptics to move past their assumptions.

KEY WORDS: Modern architecture; historic preservation; advocacy; midcentury; National Register of Historic Places

In late 2018, HGTV launched online videos to preview a new show that cleverly combined audiences’ obsessions with home renovation and their nostalgia for the mid-twentieth century. Building Brady focused on the San Fernando Valley, California, house used as the establishing shot of the titular family’s abode during the 1969–74 run of The Brady Bunch. The show’s grown-up stars joined HGTV hosts to replace the house’s interiors with spaces that mimicked the sitcom’s sets (which were originally located in a studio). Building Brady sacrificed one of the most famous Modern houses to create a home that only ever existed on television.

This publicity stunt is a symptom of the crises currently facing Modern architecture in America. For the sake of brevity, clarity, and to appeal to a wide audience of public history professionals (and to conform with the stylistic terminology used in the National Register of Historic Places), this article does not interrogate the use of “Modernism” as a stylistic moniker, nor does it question whether or not Modernism is a style. It differentiates between movements of Modern architecture—“International Style” versus “Brutalism,” for example—without examining the historical origins or historical context.
refashioned, but not considered significant enough to be preserved with its integrity intact. The sledgehammer-wielding HGTV designers likely only ever saw The Brady Bunch in re-runs: they were re-creating something that “existed” before their own lifetimes. And true to the “home” in its network’s name, the show focused on a residential building. The single-family house is the exclusive target of audiences’ attention and desire for midcentury design.

And yet Building Brady also suggests promise for buildings just reaching the magical fifty-year age threshold for “historic” buildings in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP): Americans—especially middle-class millennials—are interested in Modern design. The popularity of West Elm and CB2’s minimalist

appropriateness of these terms. For a far more nuanced discussion of terms and the very idea of style in Modernism, see Richard Longstreth, Looking beyond the Icons: Midcentury Architecture, Landscape, and Urbanism (University of Virginia Press, 2015); Richard Longstreth, “I Can’t See It; I Don’t Understand It; And It Doesn’t Look Old to Me,” Forum Journal 27, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 35–45.
home goods and the ubiquity of concepts such as the open plan in HGTV’s renovations confirm this conclusion.\(^5\) Even Target has a Modern line in which “no-fuss design lets the functionality be the star, making pieces that transcend time & are anything but old-fashioned.”\(^6\)

But furniture and interiors are easy to change. What about the hulking concrete structures built in the same period? How can historic preservationists translate the energy and enthusiasm behind Building Brady to the tired concrete and steel buildings on their campuses, town squares, and suburban streets? How can those passionate about preservation and local history convince communities, institutions, commercial developers, municipal officials, and private property owners of these buildings’ worth when they lack the advantageous affiliation with idealized images of a cheery nuclear family?

This article provides strategies and resources for those looking to educate local publics on the history of Modern buildings constructed in the United States between 1945 and 1975. It introduces the most common dismissals of Modern architecture and suggests ways to convince skeptics to move past their assumptions. Because many of us may need to first convince ourselves of these buildings’ worthiness for preservation, it also aims to provide an introduction to their historical context. This is not to make excuses for Modern buildings, but rather to explain why they look and act the way they do. Most importantly, it focuses on preservation approaches for buildings not designed by prominent architects or built in large urban centers. This article offers ways to think about—and fight for—Modern architecture that never made the glossy pages of Architectural Forum.\(^7\)

Advocating, Teaching, and Researching Modernism

My recommendations and observations are rooted in the lessons that I’ve learned while teaching and advocating at the University of South Carolina (UofSC) for local Modern buildings. Over the past five years, my students and I have largely focused our research on the works of Lyles, Bissett, Carlisle and Wolff (LBC&W)—the firm that designed more buildings in South Carolina than any other in the decades after WWII.\(^8\) In many ways, LBC&W was typical of large architecture firms working outside of major urban centers at midcentury. Each of its four principals—William

\(^5\) Another example is the online furniture retailer Joybird. Founded in 2013, it focuses exclusively on producing Modern furniture. It explains its “style”: “We bring new meaning to throwback Thursdays, being inspired by the Mid-Century movement of the 1950s and ’60s…We live, eat and breathe midcentury modern inspired furniture and are thrilled to do what we do.” “Built to Fill a Void,” Joybird, https://joybird.com/about-us/.


\(^7\) A comprehensive overview of the theoretical and technical issues of preserving Modern buildings is offered in Theodore H. M. Prudon, Preservation of Modern Architecture (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008).

\(^8\) Each spring at the University of South Carolina, I teach ARTH 542: American Architecture, a joint graduate and undergraduate seminar. This is an architectural history and historic preservation seminar.
G. Lyles, Thomas J. Bissett, William A. Carlisle, and Louis M. Wolff—had undergraduate degrees in architecture. Founded in 1948 after they graduated from Clemson University and served in World War II, the firm took advantage of the period’s expansion of government and higher education by focusing on commissions for institutional buildings. It designed exclusively in the new, Modern modes of architecture developed over the first half of the twentieth century. It articulated its philosophy as “Total Design” and incorporated urban planning and landscape architecture to fashion integrated solutions to architectural problems. LBC&W was exceptional in its size: before shutting in the mid-1970s, it had hundreds of employees spread across satellite offices in four states and Washington, DC, a fleet of cars, and a private plane.9

Lyles, Bissett, Carlisle & Wolff designed the Brutalist office complex south of the nineteenth-century South Carolina State House in Columbia in the 1970s. Photograph by Russell Maxey, August 1979. (Courtesy of The Walker Local and Family History Center, Richland County Public Library, Columbia, SC)

9 For an overview of LBC&W, see “Lyles, Bissett, Carlisle, and Wolff: Building Modern Columbia” (ARTH 542 class report, University of South Carolina, 2015), https://www.lydiabrandt.com/#/teaching/.
LBC&W’s buildings were hardly avant-garde and would not be considered outstanding when weighed against the icons celebrated in architectural history textbooks. Instead, they fit squarely within the modes pioneered and theorized by the architectural stars of the age. The firm often chose the sleek International Style of Chicago-cum-Germany Modernist Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for its office buildings: the firm’s tall, rhythmic, steel-and-glass Bankers Trust Tower echoed Mies’s Seagram Building in New York City. The attenuated New Formalism braved by Edward Durell Stone (also called New Romanticism or the Ballet School)


gave LBC&W’s institutional buildings a boost of cultural gravitas: dramatically sited overlooking a reflecting pool at the bottom of a hill, the peripteral (columns on each side) Cooper Library at Clemson University recalled ancient Greek temples as did Stone’s John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.12 For buildings that had complicated programming requirements (spaces for multiple specific activities), the firm opted for the hulking Brutalism of Paul Rudolph: the Russell House student center on the University of South Carolina campus signaled the different interior spaces on the building’s exterior much like Rudolph’s stark Art and Architecture Building at Yale.13 In each case, LBC&W wasn’t copying these canonized monuments, but rather applying their design principles using smaller budgets and less glamorous contexts. Much like early twentieth-century architecture firms proficient in the Gothic, Classical, Colonial, and Renaissance Revivals, LBC&W offered various aesthetics to suit the needs of different clients and commissions.14 “Modernism” was both a style and an intellectual movement to which it was devoted.

Through class projects at the University of South Carolina, public education campaigns, National Register nominations, and grassroots organization over the last five years, my students and I have discovered the pitfalls of advocating for an architecture that fills our city but nevertheless remains ignored—or actively derided—by local citizens and preservationists alike. We have struggled to advocate for buildings that aren’t particularly remarkable in the history of architecture and that have not had centuries of history to host important events or people. Below I outline how we have responded to the most common reactions to our work. My hope is that this can help other practitioners to take seriously, and articulate, a rationale for preserving and interpreting Modern buildings and landscapes.

“Modern buildings aren’t worth preserving because . . . they’re cold/dehumanizing/anonymous/boring.”

Modern architecture’s grand scale and limited material palette are antithetical to what many contemporary Americans want from their built environment. Many seek the texture found in collections of buildings of varying sizes, styles, and materials. They prefer that spaces between and around structures be oriented and scaled towards the pedestrian. But we should not refuse to preserve something


simply because it isn’t what we would choose to build today. How can advocates for Modern buildings make them relatable? How can we enliven their stark concrete and glass with human stories?

A good narrative is central to any historic preservation campaign. Communities have to find a connection to a historic place in order to motivate to sustain it. Despite our contemporary perceptions of their aesthetic as imposing or indifferent, most Modern buildings have stories rooted in inspiring optimism. To grossly summarize and generalize the history of the Modern movement: pioneers like Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright sought a new kind of architecture that would clearly express and embolden the idealistic spirit of the age—the zeitgeist. They argued that the application of historical features—Greek columns, Baroque statues, Gothic arches—to contemporary buildings was antithetical to modernity’s achievements. They attempted to instill a new way of thinking about architecture that wasn’t about applying this or that style, but rather fostering a synthetic relationship between materials, form, and function. Their designs celebrated and accentuated the technologies of steel and plate glass, logically and rationally tying them to a building’s form rather than covering them up with arches or columns that supported nothing but a connection to the past. Their ambition also extended beyond individual buildings to the city at large. Declaring the existing urban fabric messy and inefficient, they replaced it with their own comprehensive visions. Complexes of coordinated buildings and monumental urban planning projects pronounced order and transformed infrastructure.

For Americans after World War II, Modernism signaled a move forward rather than backward. Cities like Columbia used the new architecture to signal their


participation in the country’s economic success and global leadership. Founded in 1786 as the capital of the newly minted state, the city burned to the ground in the Civil War and lay largely prostrate until the textile boom at the end of the nineteenth century. The textile industry brought skyscrapers, leafy suburbs, and infrastructure like streetcars and parks. But the real transformation came with the expansion of the I-26 interstate, the University of South Carolina campus, and the state government in the 1950s-60s—all just in time for Modernism.¹⁹ Acres of the city’s generous grid were reimagined all at once, and usually by LBC&W. The firm’s stylish buildings and landscapes signaled that Columbia had finally “made it” and gave character and coherence to a city that had long developed piecemeal. To adopt the parlance of the National Register of Historic Places program, the mid-twentieth century is Columbia’s major “period of significance” whether we like it or not.²⁰

In the process of telling stories about Columbia’s crowning midcentury moment, the students and I have consciously crafted narratives that try to put the human back into these “dehumanizing” places. We seek to make Modernism a local story, upending peoples’ associations of concrete architecture with the Soviet Union or big American cities like New York and Chicago. By revealing the human decisions that led to their appearance, we rally more allies to our cause. The usual historic resources—newspapers, city council minutes, period photographs—quickly expose the optimism behind the same places that we so often hear af-fronned. Simply unearthing these stories creates compatriots in places where before we had none. When researching Cornell Arms, LBC&W’s International Style high-rise apartment building, for example, students discovered how proud Columbians were upon its completion in 1949. Newspapers boasted that it was not only the tallest building between Richmond and Miami, but also the tallest in the entire Federal Housing Administration program. These details pleasantly surprised the current owner of the property, who had recently inherited it. It helped him to look differently at the building’s role in Columbia’s history and ultimately led him to support a student’s nomination of the building to the National Register of Historic Places in early 2019.²¹ We hope that it will also inspire the use of historic tax credit incentives to preserve the building’s outstanding architectural integrity.


LBC&W’s Cornell Arms International Style apartment building, constructed in downtown Columbia, SC in 1949 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in January 2019. Color postcard by Munn-Teal Studies. (Courtesy of The Walker Local and Family History Center, Richland County Public Library, Columbia, SC)
The most challenging thing about crafting compelling narratives for LBC&W’s buildings has been the lack of archival resources. As a large firm undertaking millions of dollars in projects a year, LBC&W surely produced filing cabinets full of paper records. But no one kept them. The voluminous correspondence underpinning monographs on masters like Frank Lloyd Wright simply doesn’t exist. Although we have discovered that LBC&W’s institutional buildings are often well documented in agencies’ archives, many decisions remain impossible to investigate through the usual historical methods.

This lack of traditional research materials has forced us to seek out living people, anathema to the practice of many traditionally trained historians. In LBC&W’s case, we found an ally in the family members of Louis Wolff, LBC&W’s chief designer. They were thrilled that people were interested in their father’s legacy and very generous with materials and stories collected over the years. Although this interaction did not unearth the holy grail of office files, it did expose ephemeral items like interoffice newsletters, the firm’s Christmas cards, and publicity pamphlets. This helped us to better understand not only how LBC&W sold Modern architecture to South Carolinians, but also the firm’s day-to-day operations. Off-the-cuff stories of cocktail parties and club memberships revealed the personal relationships that brought the firm its prestigious commissions and helped us to understand how jobs for private clients led to those for public institutions. The family members and former employees of the firm are an invaluable resource that we have yet to fully explore using proper oral history methodologies. 22

But of course the narrative of Modern architecture in Columbia—and America—is not entirely optimistic, nor did its historical proponents always have the best intentions for all of its users. Most notably, American Modernism’s comprehensive vision served white leaders’ desire to take over land long occupied by minority communities. 23 City, state, and university officials worked closely with LBC&W as they acquired land in the largely African American Ward I neighborhood for the rapidly expanding and only recently desegregated University of South Carolina. They took advantage of federal funding to force black Columbians out of their homes under the guise of “fighting blight.” LBC&W’s Carolina Coliseum—a massive Brutalist basketball arena floating in a sea of parking spaces—replaced hundreds of homes, churches, and businesses when it was finished in 1969. It was supposedly a temple to progress, but at the expense of the city’s disadvantaged. 24 Its survival

22 Prudon also notes the particular importance and difficulties of documenting buildings with oral histories. See Prudon, Preservation of Modern Architecture, 158.


24 Jane Campbell, Max Iberman, and Lauren Rivelli, “Carolina Coliseum” and “Urban Renewal,” in “Lyles, Bissett, Carlisle, and Wolff: Building Modern Columbia,” 118–154, 161–63; Ashley Nichole Bouknight, “Casualty of Progress: The Ward One Community and Urban Renewal,
raises questions about classism and systemic racism, values that are hardly inspirational fodder for a preservation campaign. Indeed, longing or regret for the people and historic places that occupied a site can often overshadow any appreciation for the Modernist visions that displaced them.

Cities like Columbia cannot ignore urban renewal’s ugly legacy or the problems it introduces for preservation. Its racist and classicist policies drove not only Modernism, but also the institutions that remain important in our city, including the University of South Carolina and local government. But what has been lost can also be a reason to preserve what is there today. A recent effort to remember Ward I dovetails with concerns for preserving the Carolina Coliseum: UofSC students and faculty have developed a location-aware mobile application that allows users to see the long-demolished neighborhood along with the current Modernist landscape. Former residents of the area recount their memories in audio recordings while


25 Longstreth provides an essential overview of these issues in his essay, “The Difficult Legacy of Urban Renewal.”
A page from a 1965 booklet touting Columbia as an “All-America City”: acres of the largely African American Ward I neighborhood were demolished for the expansion of the University of South Carolina, including the Carolina Coliseum and its parking lots. (Courtesy of The Walker Local and Family History Center, Richland County Public Library, Columbia, SC)

historic photographs overlap existing views in real space and time. In such a creative application, the simultaneous optimism and institutional racism that drove the Coliseum do not have to be reconciled in its historical narrative (an impossible proposition in any case). The continued persistence of the Modernist landscape is the link to what it replaced. If the Coliseum was lost to new construction, the tie to Ward One would be demolished with it.

26 “Critical Interactives: Ward One,” faculty and students at the University of South Carolina led by professors Duncan Buell and Heidi Cooley, http://calliope.cse.sc.edu/wardone/.
Sharing these compelling and often complicated narratives is essential to building a broad base of public knowledge and support for local Modern architecture. As we’ve seen in Columbia, the integration of Modern architecture into the larger story of a place’s identity generates public pressure to push back against or even pre-empt threats to buildings by public officials, property owners, and commercial developers. Advocates can disseminate Modernism’s human stories via newspaper articles, public tours, social media, web-based or mobile applications, and by reaching out to individual property owners or developers. Although often dry and hard-to-access, National Register of Historic Places nominations can act as depositories for research, incentivize preservation through tax credit programs, legitimize the historic designation of Modern buildings and landscapes, and build the knowledge bases of professional staff at the state and local levels. Where financial or human resources are inadequate for systematic survey and inventory (as is most often the case), incremental research on and advocacy for individual buildings and landscapes can slowly construct a canon of local Modern architecture that identifies major practitioners (like LBC&W), the best examples of various building types or aesthetics, and generates fans amongst the public.

“Modern buildings aren’t worth preserving because . . . they’re ugly.”

Residents who have lovingly restored their 1930s bungalows down to the door-knobs often tell me that they will “cheer” when the James F. Byrnes Building, an International Style office building that LBC&W designed in 1957, is demolished. Why does Modern architecture face such immediate and visceral aesthetic prejudice, even from educated observers? How can preservationists counter arguments that seem rooted in personal taste?

It is true that many non-residential Modern buildings have not aged particularly well. Modern buildings—along with the products of their sister arts, urban planning and landscape architecture—were often built quickly, cheaply, and with little forethought for maintenance budgets. Institutional modern buildings were especially likely to be the result of compromise or the unfortunate “design by committee” process. Buildings like those LBC&W constructed for state universities or the state government were often rushed to serve immediate needs like ballooning enrollments or expanding bureaucracies. High-quality details, materials, or features essential to the original concepts were often dropped as budgets contracted or engineering problems emerged: a marble entry became low-pile carpet or a concrete plaza replaced a reflecting pool. In the case of LBC&W’s Sumwalt Engineering Building of the 1950s—the first International Style building at UofSC—the university’s inability to purchase the entire block by the time

construction started meant that the building was built in three stages over the course of a decade. This sacrificed the coherence of the building’s plan and exterior symmetry.\textsuperscript{29}

Over time, the maintenance of Modern buildings has often fallen by the wayside—especially for those owned by the state. Whereas concrete planters might have originally been filled with a variety of indigenous plants carefully chosen to flower throughout the year, they might now sit barren and sad.\textsuperscript{30}

When spalling concrete (a mottled effect caused by water infiltration) isn’t an indication of underlying structural issues, it can cosmetically mar a wall or plaza’s smooth surface for decades as limited budgetary resources are devoted to higher priority concerns.\textsuperscript{31} Many midcentury architects also experimented with materials that have not stood the test of time.\textsuperscript{32}

Close looking is the preservationist’s most powerful weapon against these challenges and the taste prejudices they seem to confirm. It won’t instantly convince people to love Modern design, but it will help them to see past a building’s superficial maintenance issues to recognize the architect’s original intention. Once they can take a building seriously and on its own aesthetic terms, it will be easier to convince them that it is potentially deserving of preservation. Even when one-on-one attention is impossible, preservationists can engage audiences in close looking by using rich visual cues in their own advocacy (such as newspaper interviews, photo captions, even arguments at public meetings).

Modern architects usually designed their buildings to be easy to read; the problem is that most of us no longer speak their language.\textsuperscript{33} Each semester, my students at UofSC spend multiple class periods looking closely at Gambrell Hall, a Brutalist humanities classroom building constructed in 1976. Even though not an LBC&W building (it was designed by J. E. Sirrine Company), I choose Gambrell because almost all of my students have had a class in the building at some point—and seemingly all of them have negative opinions about it.\textsuperscript{34} They


\textsuperscript{32} For an overview of the material failures of midcentury architecture, see Prudon, \textit{Preservation of Modern Architecture}, 42–44.

\textsuperscript{33} See Longstreth, “I Can’t See It.”

\textsuperscript{34} On the history of Gambrell Hall, see Charlotte Adams and Margaret Pokalsky, “Gambrell Hall,” in “Bully for You: Expansion into East Campus” (ARTH 542 class report, University of South Carolina, 2018), 51–60, https://www.lydiabrandt.com/#/teaching/.
begin by walking all the way around the building’s exterior and sketching a basic plan of its footprint. This disarms their assumptions and helps them to understand the massing of the building: two square blocks connected by a tall tower. They then describe the exterior treatment and permeability of each mass, locating windows and doors and identifying walls that are blank versus those that allow light or users to access the interior. Students next explore the interior of the building and start to characterize the distinct functions of each mass, noticing the locations of lecture halls, classrooms, hallways, and offices. We end by talking through their observations as we walk around and through the building together.

Students are astonished to realize the simple elegance in the way that Gambrell’s exterior explicitly coordinates with its interior: the two are intertwined to communicate how users should navigate the building and what to expect from it. To use architect Louis Kahn’s vocabulary, the walls of the building’s central tower are windowless because they hold the “servant” spaces through which human users pass to access the “served” spaces of classrooms and offices, including the

Basic maintenance issues often make it hard to love Modernism. This is the 1978 addition to LBC&W’s Russell House student union (1955) at the University of South Carolina. (Photograph by Stephanie Gray, February 2019)
building’s elevators, atrium, HVAC, and stairs. The front mass’s lack of windows on the first story indicates the artificially lit lecture hall on the other side of the walls. The unbroken grid of windows on each side of Gambrell’s rear mass, meanwhile, expresses the identical faculty offices that line the building’s perimeter on each floor.

Such close looking builds viewers’ confidence and appreciation, but it also helps them to understand the connection between a building’s concept and its finished form. The legibility of Gambrell’s interior spaces on its exterior speaks to its role as a humanities classroom building: designers wanted students to learn of humanity’s greatest intellectual achievements in a structure that celebrated our capacity for logic and reason. This is a building in which students would reconceive South Carolina’s future: without a single Greek or Roman column in sight, its sleek right

angles spoke to the promise of the 1970s present rather than to the past. The honesty and rationality of the building resides in its relationship between interior-and-exterior as well as the smallest details. The slightly beveled corners of each of the Indiana limestone panels that cover the exterior signal their aesthetic—rather than structural—role: steel and reinforced concrete support the building so that the stone sheathing can act as a smooth, taut skin. This makes it clear that the panels aren’t doing the work of supporting the building’s exterior walls, suggesting the structure’s underlying steel frame.

Looking closely at Modern buildings can be intimidating, even for those used to writing architectural descriptions. The guides that have long facilitated the formal analysis of architecture of earlier periods have been much slower to arise for more recent forms, making finding the most accurate vocabulary to describe Modern buildings’ features or materials difficult. Primary documents like newspaper articles usually include contemporary descriptions of buildings (often offered by the architects themselves) that can be used as starting points for formal analysis. Gambrell’s designer, for example, called the building’s tower a “central service and elevator core,” confirming my students’ interpretation of the mass’s blank walls as an expression of their interior function.36 US Modernist Library (the North Carolina Chapter of Docomomo US) has recently amassed (and is still growing) an invaluable collection of midcentury design magazines and made them fully accessible online. This helps to fit local Modernism into national and international conversations and does not require the subscriptions that often put academic resources out of reach for many historical nonprofits or state historic preservation offices (SHPOs).37 Architectural drawings—whether original or those made for subsequent renovations—usually point out materials that would otherwise be difficult to identify. This is especially helpful with proprietary products no longer manufactured. Stashed in the university’s facilities management office, for example, Gambrell’s drawings specified the Indiana limestone used for the building’s exterior and the plywood paneling used in the lobbies.

Intrepid preservationists and historians have started to address the dearth of reference sources for vocabulary and material identification by creating accessible guides. The Georgia State Historic Preservation Office started a truly comprehensive project on the midcentury house that now includes histories and guidelines for the evaluation of ranch houses, split-levels, and more high-style residences.38 South Carolina’s SHPO produced a brief illustrated entitled “Why are we looking at that?,” which addresses the particulars of listing midcentury commercial buildings

36 George Curry and Lynne Mahaffey, *Displaying for the Ages the Greatly Respected Name of Gambrell on the Carolina Campus* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Information Services: 1977), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.
in the National Register of Historic Places. Recent and revised books like *Twentieth-Century Building Materials: History and Conservation*, Theodore Prudon’s *Preservation of Modern Architecture*, and Owen Hopkins’s *Architectural Styles: A Visual Guide* update the old standbys and historicize building materials like shotcrete and fiberglass that were so new to midcentury architecture.

Of course, the vocabulary used to describe classical architectural features for centuries remains very useful for Modern architecture and preservationists should not be afraid to use words or concepts already familiar to them. Despite Modernists’ attempts to conceive of new universal languages of architecture, many relied on the same basic principles of classicism. Even though Gambrell lacks columns that could be distinguished as either Doric or Ionic, it still has an entablature, axes, and symmetry. Pointing out these familiar formal qualities can help to ease the path to appreciation for those new to describing architecture of the more recent past.

Instagram has recently been extremely successful at introducing new audiences to Modernism’s aesthetic merits. Brutalism is currently enjoying a moment of glory: #brutalism had 843,196 posts in the summer of 2020. Indeed, oblique shots of sharp-angled corners, zoomed-in snaps of sills or seams, and filtered images of materials’ textures are a kind of close looking. It is also an ideal place to showcase period pictures of Modern buildings: pictures of gleaming new steel and perfect swaths of concrete make it easier to see the promise of these buildings, before time and reduced maintenance budgets took their toll. Many preservationists are already taking advantage of this: the hashtag #sosbrutalism has 27,485 posts as of August 2020.

But, as critics are starting to warn, such images isolate buildings from the surroundings that were usually very important to the designer’s intention. Some observers have also rightly noted that such an approach reduces Modernism to an aesthetic, divorcing it from its social missions and devotion to function. With awareness of these drawbacks, local preservationists can use such stylized social media as just one part of effective advocacy campaigns. Hyperlinked captions on

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social media posts can lead to rich historical narratives, more detailed descriptions, or invitations to look closely in person.

“Modern buildings aren’t worth preserving because . . . they’re not efficient.”

Built in an age when fossil fuels were assumed limitless, Modern buildings often directly confront preservationists’ long-standing contention that “the greenest building is the one already built.”44 Modern buildings’ materials or systems are usually far from efficient by the measure of contemporary “green” design, while their program-specific plans can be difficult to adaptively reuse for new functions. How can preservationists reconcile beliefs in these buildings’ historical importance with the realities of their practical inefficiencies?45

Promotional photograph of Thomas Cooper Library at the University of South Carolina, designed by LBC&W with Edward Durell Stone. Such polished images conjure a midcentury glamour ready for Instagram. Photograph by Russell Maxey, May 1972. (Courtesy of The Walker Local and Family History Center, Richland County Public Library, Columbia, SC)

45 The Association for Preservation Technology was among the first preservation organizations to address the particular technical problems of Modern architecture. See Kyle Normandin and
Modern architects’ ignorance of local climate conditions was hedonistic at worst and naïve at best. In the same year as the oil crisis, LBC&W clad the sealed box of its twenty-one story Banker’s Trust Tower in dark, anodized aluminum. The architects were confident that air-conditioning alone would brace the building against Columbia’s searing heat. We now know that the resources required to heat and cool such buildings twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year are finite. We recognize that the single-glazed windows of such International Style towers are not only inefficient, but that their inefficiencies have contributed to climate change.

In their quest for rationality and service to the zeitgeist, Modern architects also created buildings tailored to specific functions in both interior plan and exterior shape—often without concern of when and if those functions would change. This countered the practice of many nineteenth-century architects, who crammed everything from train stations to offices into the rectangular boxes of classical temples. Modernist pioneer Louis Sullivan’s turn-of-the-century slogan “form follows function” prescribed a more honest and legible relationship between a building’s exterior and its interior, such as my students recognize each semester at Gambrell Hall. This philosophy resulted in spaces designed for very specific activities or uses and exterior forms tailored to those functions.

But as the needs for Modern buildings have changed, the physical forms that expressed them remain frozen in time. In their iconic criticism of Modernism, architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown declared buildings like Gambrell “ducks.” Playfully referring to a New York store that sold duck eggs in a structure built in the shape of a duck, they identified the close relationship between form and function as Modern architecture’s greatest fallacy. A “duck” building is intransigent: its physical shape will forever proclaim its initial function. It will continue to


symbolize the sale of duck eggs even if it is later used to sell shoes or gasoline, just as the blank walls of Gambrell Hall will continue to signal the original lecture hall years after the interior is renovated to serve discussion-based pedagogies.

LBC&W’s Banker’s Trust Tower in Columbia, SC in 1974, an International Style office building with glass “curtain walls” that hang on the building’s steel frame (rather than provide structural support) and minimalist interiors that would make Mad Men’s Don Draper drool. (Courtesy of the Wolff Family Collection)

The problems presented by these environmental and functional inefficiencies lead many to declare Modern buildings “white elephants.” People claim that they’re too big, too complicated, and too expensive to rehabilitate. We’ve been down this road before: the battle over McKim, Mead and White’s Pennsylvania Station, undoubtedly the grandest of all white elephants, effectively initiated the modern preservation movement. Its Beaux Arts majesty wasn’t enough to outweigh the outdated infrastructure—or the cost—of rehabilitation. Preservationists’ claims of a Modern building’s cultural, historical, or aesthetic importance often scream into the wind of similar “white duck” diagnoses.

The enormous size of many Modern buildings leads to their dismissal as white elephants. But their sheer physical presence also provides considerable fodder for

preservation arguments focused on embodied energy, or the sum of the energy required to produce the building initially (including labor, the production of materials, and construction). In most cases, a midcentury building is far “greener” than new construction simply because of the tremendous resources required to make the building initially. When embodied energy is taken into consideration, it is virtually impossible to produce a new building with the same square footage at the same cost. When local politicians and developers say that new renovation would cost $X more than new construction, preservationists need to be ready to fight back with data estimates that are just as alarming.\footnote{The best resource for determining this data, complete with relevant case studies, is Stein, \textit{Green Modernism}.} The public is far more educated—and concerned—about environmental issues than it was just ten years ago, providing an opportunity for preservationists to shame developers and municipalities who reduce the benefits of new construction over rehabilitation to a single financial figure. In the age of LEED, environmental benefits are not only quantified, but monetized. To generate such data, preservationists need to be prepared to make new friends. Engineers, scientists, and architects can provide guidance and information that could shape preservationists’ arguments and provide invaluable context.

Preservationists can also let go of the preciousness long essential to a field that is conservative by definition: in order for a Modern building to survive, it might need to change or considerations of its integrity might need to be more flexible than for earlier buildings.\footnote{Henry Moss, “What’s It Take to Preserve a Brutalist Building,” \textit{Metropolis} (blog), July 31, 2012.} The standards by which we conserve or preserve buildings—canonized by the Secretary of the Interior in the late 1970s—might be fine for handling the materials and construction techniques of a nineteenth-century bank, but not for the experimental technologies of a midcentury one. The best option might not be to preserve them in situ and other paths should be considered.\footnote{Secretary of the Interior, \textit{Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties}, https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards.htm. See also Patrice Frey, “Why Historic Preservation Needs a New Approach,” \textit{CityLab}, February 8, 2019; and Prudon, \textit{Preservation of Modern Architecture}, 44–47, 69–75.} In finding new uses for Modern buildings, adaptive reuse can often deny their original functions and render disconnections between its use and form. And sometimes, that might just have to be the way it is. Advocates need to ask themselves critical questions of what they’re preserving and why—and recognize that the questions or standards they’d have in preserving an older building might not be the same as those for a midcentury one.
“Modern buildings aren’t worth preserving because . . . they’re not old enough.”

After the long nineteenth century’s parade of revival styles, Modern architects threw classical columns into the dustbin and set out to invent new ways of building that would better inspire and express the zeitgeist. History was deliberately dropped from midcentury architecture schools’ curricula with the belief that Modernism’s universality would make its buildings timeless. But as the spirit of the age shifted and tastes changed with it, their buildings too seemed dated. Audiences might regard midcentury as “vintage,” but not “historic” enough to merit preservation. How can advocates convince communities that Modern buildings are worthy of the same care and consideration as Art Deco skyscrapers or Classical Revival courthouses, despite their relative youth?

The centrality of “age-value” to perceptions of a building’s worthiness for preservation is long-standing and Modernism is not the first body of architecture to struggle for recognition because it was considered too new.55 Numerical age has been interpreted as a basic requirement for official designations of historical significance in the United States for most of the twentieth century. Under the National Register of Historic Places (established in 1966), resources younger than fifty years require arguments of their “exceptional significance” under Criterion G. With many preservationists lacking knowledge or confidence in reading and researching midcentury buildings, this threshold is often interpreted as difficult to prove, forcing buildings to wait for listing until they reach the half-century mark. The exception has come to define the rule.56

Outside of the NRHP’s fifty-year mark, people are often reluctant to recognize buildings constructed during their lifetimes as “historic.” Calling structures so central to their lived memories “historic” often prompts dismissal because they are too familiar or require uneasy reflection on one’s own age. I have consistently found that my students, by contrast, are more easily persuaded to regard buildings built forty or even thirty years before their births as worthy of preservation. Instagram, Mad Men, and even Building Brady sell the midcentury as something glamorous, quirky, and colorful to generations who didn’t experience it first hand—and they’re clearly buying it.57


Preservationists can use this intergenerational contrast to buoy one group and to convince the other—a kind of transfer of nostalgias between those who experienced the building’s period of significance and those who did not. When my students present their research publicly on local midcentury buildings at the end of each semester, two things consistently happen: 1) their enthusiasm and love for the buildings prompt older (and often skeptical) attendees to look more closely and think more critically about buildings they’ve previously taken for granted 2) the students benefit from attendees’ first-hand memories of the moment in which the buildings were built. The students’ idealization of an age that is close to their lifetimes—and thus usually easier to imagine than, say, ancient Greece—inspires not only buy-in from historical actors, but also real information that will further enrich their narratives. If multiple generations encounter Modernism together and at a greater scale, a much broader base to support historic preservation could result.

Conclusion

The Association for Preservation Technology lists “Evaluate Early” as the first preposition of its 2014 “Consensus Principles for Practice on Renewing
Modernism.” It reminds preservationists of the importance of knowing what’s historic before a threat emerges. All working in the field know that this is usually wishful thinking: funding and time for the completion or maintenance of comprehensive surveys can be hard to find. But as the recent social media buzz about Brutalism might be starting to suggest, education can do a lot to inspire the kind of enthusiasm that will fuel a preservation campaign when a threat sneaks up. It creates interest and knowledge of local resources that, over time, can build a canon of local buildings that are important to a place’s long history. Groups like the regional chapters of Docomomo US or Historic Columbia in South Carolina are increasingly leading tours of midcentury homes and hosting lectures of living architects, building bridges between the current rave for midcentury residential architecture and Modernism’s more mundane applications. By engaging with an audience before a developer strikes, they are building appreciation and a base for advocacy: promoting goodwill for the buildings people love to hate. Convincing wide publics to think of Modern architecture as historically significant—or historic/significant at all—is the first step to its preservation.

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59 As of the final editing of this piece in summer 2020, the author is conducting a survey of downtown Columbia focusing on its midcentury resources with Staci Richey of Access Preservation. The “Columbia Downtown Historic Resource Survey” is funded by the City of Columbia and a grant from the National Park Service (administered by the SC Department of Archives and History/SHPO).
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