

Revolution in the Dunes:
Modernism on the Outer Cape

by David N. Fixler AIA

The Modern movement came selectively to New England, taking root among the progressive enclaves of artists, intellectuals and technological visionaries that this region has nurtured since the 17th century. Cape Cod was home to two such communities: Woods Hole and the dunes of Wellfleet and Truro. Woods Hole can lay claim to two of the first Modern residences in the eastern United States: the 1912 Prairie Style Bradley House by Purcell and Elsmilie, and a 1929 experimental functionalist villa for G. Lyman Paine on Naushon Island by J. C. B. Moore. But it is among the remote dunes and scrub-pine landscape of the Outer Cape that Modern architecture developed a unique variant that flourished in the years immediately following World War II.

In the early 1940s, Jack Phillips – a young Boston Brahmin acolyte of Walter Gropius and one of the largest land owners on the Cape – established a Modernist outpost in Wellfleet and Truro, building a series of small residences known locally as “paper houses” – lightweight, functionalist pillboxes that raised suspicions among some locals that these foreign objects were somehow being used to signal German U-boats lingering offshore. After the war, Phillips persuaded many prominent members of the Boston intellectual and artistic community to join him, making land available to colleagues and mentors from MIT and Harvard, who were lured by the seductive light and the quiet of the Outer Cape.

By the end of the decade, this remote stretch of sand had become a laboratory for internationally recognized architects such as Marcel Breuer and Serge Chermayeff, as well as local Modernists with deep roots in New England, including Phillips, Nathaniel Saltonstall, and his partner Oliver Morton. Far from being foreign – or arbitrary – architectural impositions, the houses and small community buildings they designed are a sensitive, enlightened response to building in harmony with the ephemeral, delicate ecology of the Outer Cape. Through research in the structural and weathering characteristics of wood, and through the use of inexpensive, often recycled materials such as Homasote, a “sub-regionalist” local vernacular emerged, an architectural vocabulary that managed to fuse the rustic simplicity of the local dune shacks with the high style of international Modernism – and all with the lightest possible touch on the land. These simple structures still offer lessons addressing some of today’s great architectural challenges: sustainability and environmental fragility, affordability, and appropriate response – to name just a few.

It is particularly telling that Breuer and Chermayeff – two designers later associated with the Modernist interpretation of regionalism as an environmental and cultural phenomenon – would choose to use this area as a laboratory to explore fundamental ideas about shelter and to expand their early dedication to craft. Chermayeff purchased a cottage in Truro in 1947 and continued to expand and tinker with it until 1972. He built a separate painting studio in 1952 and several additional houses that expand on his explorations into the expressive possibilities of the post-and-beam frame; these structures also contributed to his ongoing research into the psychology of space and social interaction that would eventually lead to his seminal 1963 book, *Community and Privacy*. [Breuer built a home for himself in Wellfleet in 1948 and at the same time designed one for MIT professor, visual theoretician, and fellow Hungarian Gyorgy Kepes. These are also simple structures, casual and appropriately regional in appearance, but sufficiently rigorous in their formal arrangement, proportions, and expression to be unmistakable icons of Modernism.

While the presence of such luminaries attracted many in the architectural community (and produced some legendary parties), much of the tangible work that inextricably tied Modernism to this landscape was done by regional practitioners such as Saltonstall and Morton, and Olav Hammarstrom, a Finnish architect who worked on MIT's Baker House with Alvar Aalto, stayed in America to work with Eero Saarinen, and settled in the mid-1950s in Wellfleet (where his Chapel of St. John the Fisherman is a local landmark). Saltonstall was from an old New England family, attended Harvard, and was an early patron of Modern art as one of the founding members of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art in 1936. By 1940, with the design of a seaside house in Camden, Maine, Saltonstall had defined a quiet, regional Modernism with strong affinities to the contemporaneous Bay Region Style pioneered by William Wurster in California. At the same time, architect Gunnar Peterson was also attempting to show that the Modern movement had a place in the lexicon of appropriate building on Cape Cod, with the building and subsequent publication of a cluster of houses along the beach on Bywater Road in Falmouth that became the Cape's first Modern development.

In 1949, Saltonstall designed and built The Mayo Colony (now known simply as The Colony) as an artists' retreat in Wellfleet, where he invited guests to stay in minimal functionalist cottages clustered in the woods around a communal gallery where they could socialize and exhibit their work. The Colony is a rare example of a compound built specifically as a Modernist response to a delicate landscape and regional vernacular – in its own way, it is as innovative and sensitive a retreat as Frank Lloyd Wright's early camp in the Arizona desert that eventually became Taliesin West. Despite the robustness of the construction in

order to withstand the rigors of the New England climate, the buildings still retain an air of lightness and impermanence that are both their charm and the source of their current precarious status.

Today diverse pressures are endangering the Modernist legacy of Wellfleet and Truro. The integrity of The Colony is threatened by the tremendous appreciation in land values that has resulted from the universal discovery that there are few nicer places on earth than Cape Cod in summer, and by the expectations of those who invest large sums of money to savor this ambiance from the comfort of new houses that match their means and aspirations. The scale and character of the proposed replacement for a Colony cottage that is for sale as of this writing threaten to overwhelm the compound's remaining structures and landscape, destroying the Colony's unique and delicate sense of place. Other structures face different challenges. Many small works tucked into remote areas, such as a cottage by Saltonstall for the family of Thomas Kuhn – the author of the classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* who popularized the phrase “paradigm shift” {E: nice addition} – have been absorbed into the land set aside for the Cape Cod National Seashore. The National Park Service, as the steward of the National Seashore, does not have sufficient means in the present political climate to care for these properties as they revert to government ownership under the terms of the original legislation establishing the Seashore. Moreover, the Park Service is presently under no obligation to evaluate and preserve buildings less than 50 years old as cultural resources. This situation is exacerbated by the difficulty of building broad support for the legacy of Modernism in New England – a by-product of a larger popular cultural shift in architectural values toward houses with a more traditional appearance.

Collectively these issues have motivated local advocates, the Cape Cod Commission, and groups such as DOCOMOMO to focus on the possible creation of an historic district or districts to foster the preservation of these resources. Perhaps more significantly however, this effort has also opened and encouraged healthy debate about why these houses are important, why Modernism was and remains an important part of our cultural heritage, and what constitutes an appropriate, realistic preservation strategy that may actually have a chance of succeeding in this time and place. And with some luck, this effort might even offer clues as to what constitutes an appropriate, realistic new architecture in this very special environment.

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