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Polishing The Relics of A Recent Past

Often Derided, Modernist Design Can Be Remade to Last

By Benjamin Forgey
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Washington is often said to be a conservative architectural town. And that it remains, up to a point.

But let's pause to think about all the modernist buildings in the city. Better yet, let's take a look around.

Much of the "new downtown," west of 15th Street NW roughly to Georgetown, is composed of buildings constructed since the late 1940s, most of them in a modernist style. Much of the old downtown, east of 15th to, say, Union Station (and now called "the East End" by real estate agents), has been rebuilt in the past two decades. Increasingly of late, these are modernist structures, too.

Then, not counting the exemplary modernist cul-de-sacs in the suburbs -- such as architect Charles Goodman's Hollin Hills, nestled in tall stands of trees in southern Alexandria -- there's a goodly number of first-rate modernist houses scattered throughout the city. We don't see them much because they, too, are largely hidden by trees.

Many postwar churches, schools, embassies and other institutional buildings have been built in various modernist styles. For goodness' sake, we don't even have to look beyond the Mall, where Gordon Bunshaft's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (1974), Gyo Obata's Air and Space Museum (1976), I. M. Pei's East Building of the National Gallery (1978) and Douglas Cardinal's National Museum of the American Indian (2004) occupy so much prominent territory.

I suppose you could say, too, that the National Museum of American History (1964) is a modern building -- although with its distant recall of a classical colonnade, it's a halfhearted sort of mix, the sad last gasp of McKim, Mead and White (by then reconstituted as Steinman, Cain & White), once one of the nation's premier classic revival firms. The same sort of superficial, half-here, half-there recipe afflicts Edward Durrell Stone's 1971 Kennedy Center -- that, and its gargantuan size.

"The Kennedy Center is the box the Watergate came in," goes the quip. Come to think of it, faults and all, Luigi Moretti's 1971 Watergate complex, with its dramatic curves and concrete-teeth balcony railings, is a notable modernist not-quite masterpiece. The mixed-use complex was supposed to come with public walkways through to the Potomac waterfront, but instead it became an impassable, but very interesting, wall.

Mixing styles and references is not necessarily a bad thing, as we see in James Ingo Freed's design of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. But by 1993, when the building opened, savvy architects such as Freed had learned that modern architecture and powerful metaphors were not mutually exclusive qualities.

This meandering tour was occasioned by "D.C. Modern," a fascinating two-day conference held recently under the leadership of the D.C. Preservation League and the city's Historic Preservation Office. (Full disclosure requires that I admit to volunteering as moderator for one of the panel discussions -- probably the most

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interesting of all, if I may say so, in that it brought together seven of the most prominent surviving practitioners of the '50s, '60s and '70s to tell their firsthand stories.)

It is, of course, immensely ironic that such a conference was held under preservationist auspices. The modern-day preservationist movement, after all, was fueled by hostility to modernist architecture. The contempt went both ways, of course. What rightfully activated preservationists was the penchant of modernist planners and their architects to tear down anything that got in the way of their vision of a new urban future.

In Washington, it was the fate of a particular building -- the Old Post Office on Pennsylvania Avenue -- that stimulated preservationists to hit the streets and, equally important, to mobilize lobbying efforts in Congress to help save the building. But the idea to destroy the Old Post Office was, in fact, a holdover from the days of triumphant classicism -- planners of the becolumned buildings of the Federal Triangle had penciled the Old Post Office out of existence back in the 1920s.

By the time of the 1970s protests, of course, much of the new downtown had been erased by modern office buildings, many of them quite mediocre by any standard. Even more critically, a huge, lively swath of Southwest Washington had been wiped out in favor of modernism's typically open plan of mid-rise apartments in green gardens.

In popular lexicon, the social dislocations caused by this government plan properly transformed the upbeat phrase "urban renewal" to "urban removal." Yet it was a conflict three years ago over proposed demolitions and additions to the Capitol Park Apartments, completed in 1959 as heralds of the new Southwest, that forced preservationists to deal with the long-ignored issues of Washington's modernist architectural past.

Preservationists basically lost that fight -- the developer tore down key parts of the original setting and built additional apartments. Yet the controversy raised awareness, and that is what the "D.C. Modern" conference was all about. (The fight also raised money: As part of a legal settlement, the developer, Monument Realty, agreed to pay for most of the conference.) Our modern heritage is getting old, and conferees dealt with a host of questions raised by the very idea of preserving relics of the recent past.

What's worth saving? That, I suppose, is the principal issue in all preservation discussions, and, in terms of modern architecture, it remains very much an open question. Architectural historian Judith Robinson reported on the results so far of an inventory of modern buildings she is preparing for the Office of Historic Preservation -- a worthy list, reminding a listener of how many really good modern buildings there are in this conservative city.

The other side of the coin, however, is that a lot of the modern stuff ranges from bad to mediocre. On my panel, structural engineer James Madison Cutts bluntly opined that maybe 50 or so of the 141 buildings on the incomplete list were worth saving, and he might have been being a tad conservative.

Still, the fact remains that on environmental grounds most of these buildings ought to be preserved in some form, simply to avoid the significant energy costs of tearing them down. How one treats a sorry specimen whose structural systems remain sound, but whose mechanical, heating, cooling and other systems are vastly out of date, is a challenging issue.

The answer ought to be, I think, that one should treat them sympathetically, in a modernist vein, when applying a new skin to the solid old bones. Postmodernist makeovers, from what we've seen so far, generally are unconvincing and unsatisfactory. One ought to treat the bad buildings, in other words, as if they were good. The idea is, just make them better.

As for the good modern buildings, you simply treat them with respect -- as with good buildings of any era. Washington architect Heather Cass showed the way with her adroit addition to the 1968 Richard Neutra house in the trees at 3005 Audubon Terr. NW. So, too, did Einhorn Yaffee Prescott with its complete redo of the 1956 International Union of Operating Engineers headquarters at 1125 17th St. NW. It was a little gem of a glass box when it was built, and today, completely renewed, it remains a gem.

Basically, the whole range of issues concerning the renewal of our modern buildings should be viewed less as a problem than as a great opportunity. True, with its slew of regulations and review boards -- and its unsurpassed array of lawyers ready to fight it out -- Washington remains a tough town for innovative architecture.

But the city has a lot going for it, too. It remains one of the most beautiful urban settings in the world, even today with its terrorist-induced Maginot line mentality. And modern architecture and building technology have made great strides in recent decades. We're clearly ready for more high-quality modern buildings and, as far as I can tell, architects are better than ever able to respond.

If we are just beginning to realize that much of Washington's architectural past is modern, we must also acknowledge that modern is the city's future, too. As ever, we're likely to get the quality we demand.

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