



modern 101

a beginner's architectural guide

BY SUE GOLDBERG

Modern homes are easy to spot: simple lines, large expanses of glass, flowing open-space floor plans, an integration of the design into its landscape. Flat or low-pitched roofs and repetition of exterior materials used in interior spaces are dead giveaways, too.

The bigger challenge, however, is knowing what to do with a Modern once you've found one. These architectural gems are scattered throughout Cincinnati in areas such as Amberley Village, Anderson Township, Clifton, Hyde Park, Indian Hill and Wyoming. And because most of them date back to the middle of the last century, many either are in need of repair or have fallen victim to unfor-

tunate encounters with the '70s and '80s. Respectful restoration, according to local experts, is a matter of understanding what Modern is—and what it really isn't.

WINDOWS

Moderns often open themselves to the landscape with large areas of windows. Skylights, horizontal rows of clerestories (rectangular windows between the top of a wall and the ceiling) or frameless corner windows are used to infuse these homes with natural light. Common materials include steel casement, aluminum sash and large plate glass.

“The reason why architects did that—and still do today—is that you can be inside and feel that you’re outside,” says José García, a local architect noted for his own Modernist work.

Unfortunately mid-century manufacturing processes limited contractors to single-pane plate glass—brrrrrrr! Today, heating, cooling and environmental considerations call for a change. García recommends the addition of high-performance, Low-E glass coatings on insulating glass for energy savings.

While replacing vast expanses of glass can be costly, you may find that replacement windows with mid-century Modern’s clean, simple lines cost less than other styles with more architectural detail.

MODERN DON’T...

“Never put white vinyl windows in a Modern house. That’s the No. 1 thing that’s going to totally change the look from the outside,” cautions Susan Rissover, a realtor with Huff Realty and co-founder of Cincinnati Form Follows Function (cf3), a non-profit, mid-century Modern preservation and education forum. “They often look fine from the inside, but you do not want to dramatically alter the look of the outside of your house by changing your windows.”

Also, avoid double-hung windows in place of casements. “It really does damage the value of the house,” Rissover notes, “[and it] kind of ruins it for the next person who comes along.”



ROOFS

Chris Magee, an architectural designer with FRCH Design Worldwide and a co-founder and co-president of cf3, kids that the Modern flat roof is, to some extent, a testament to humanity’s quest to defy Nature.

Unfortunately, older flat roofs may create some difficulties. “[Flat roofs] typically are designed to shed water at the perimeter of the house,” Magee says. “But a lot of the time, settling in a house that was built with poor construction techniques creates low spots.”

Low spots are a problem because they collect leaves or



pools of water that don’t drain properly. So Magee and García recommend inserting tapered insulation beneath today’s newer rubber-membrane roofs to create a very gentle slope.

Critics of flat roofs mistakenly believe that maintenance is difficult and that the roofs are prone to leaking. That’s not true, García says, of properly installed new rubber-membrane roofing, which often carries a 20-year warranty.

“There’s a misconception because people think of a flat roof in terms of ’50s or ’60s technology (tar and pitch) when in fact, today, the problem’s been solved,” García says.

MODERN DON’T...

Don’t change your Modern’s roofline.

“Some people come in and build a whole, pitched roof system right over [their mid-century Moderns],” Magee says. “It’s unfortunate because it’s not copacetic with the style. It takes away something that the house once had.”

BATHS AND KITCHENS

Rissover’s latest mission is to save the mid-century bathroom.

“If the bathroom has the original cabinetry, the original Formica countertops, the original ceramic tile and the original fixtures, for heaven’s sakes leave it alone. It may be pink and blue, and you may think the colors are the most hideous thing in the world, but these are the classic bathrooms. They are an endangered species,” Rissover laments.

The craftsmanship and the sturdiness of the bathroom fixtures are what really turns her head. “Why not take the great retro bathroom that was so well-built and just build upon that? Maybe add a bit of fun and whimsy with some artwork, with some of those crazy colors to go with it,” she suggests.

If you must start over, find fixtures, sinks and tubs that follow the simple, straightforward mid-century Modern design. Mike Keifling, a principal at Dimensions Design Build, proposes simple, vessel-type sinks or vanities that appear to float and hang off the wall. Walk-in showers designed with tile evocative of classic Modern textures and colors, and simple, hat-box toilets are popular bath features, too.

For kitchens, the experts agree that clean, slab-like cabinetry surfaces and sleek countertops paired with appliances in black, white or stainless steel are good classic, timeless choices. And many suggest, because of the age of the home, it’s best to start from scratch unless the old space features superior quality materials.

“There are some surviving kitchens that are still good, but most of them don’t have the nice modern amenities: doors with glides on them, adjustable shelves, sliding shelves, all the things that people can get in a modern kitchen,” Keifling says. He notes that many manufacturers are now producing Modern-specific lines, including IKEA and Formica, making it easier to find just the right materials.

MODERN DON’T...

Raised-panel doors typically won’t work, Keifling notes, and filigree detail or crown molding just won’t fit in. Those high-polished granite countertops are not the best choice for this style, either.



LIVING SPACES

The home’s living areas are where you’ll find Modernism at its best, suggests Patrick Snadon, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Interior Design at University of Cincinnati.

Usually incorporating both living and dining areas, these spaces are wide, open and often have beautiful views. They look best with flat, smooth finishes and natural materials, with stone or wood from the exterior brought inside for application as walls, flooring or fireplaces. Flooring such as wood, stone or cork in clean, simple designs are great choices.

The experts agree that the hardest decisions new homeowners will make about this area of the home is just what pieces of vintage or new Modern-designed furnishings to choose.

“As far as living spaces go, I think half the fun of having a mid-century Modern home is developing a furniture

collection for it,” Magee says. His advice: Start a collection of pieces that you like and feel comfortable with, and don’t buy things just because you think it will look good in the room.

MODERN DON’T...

Remember to keep the lines clean and simple. Modernism rejects history in a sense, according to Snadon. “It’s sort of anti-history, so that you don’t have historical ornament, and historical moldings, like crown moldings in rooms or cornices on exteriors,” he says.

Snadon also encourages homeowners to hire a good interior designer or architect when considering changes.

“Generally, they will save you as much money as their fees cost,” Snadon notes. “By the time you flounder around and make a few mistakes and get in a squabble with your contractor, you’re probably better off to have hired a professional.” Owners may even want to consider bringing in a professional for an hour or two of consultation before beginning any do-it-yourself projects.

BEDROOMS

Bedrooms may feature large glass expanses or exterior access to a private deck, hot tub or garden, according to Magee and García.

An important feature not common in the traditional home is a huge window or floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall glass that changes the bedroom from a secluded area to an area that participates with what’s going on outside—that is, “within the parameters of privacy of course,” García says. García has designed bedrooms that evoke a private oasis with curtains drawn. With curtains open, the space transforms into a Great Room with access to a garden area.

MODERN DON’T...

Lavish and spacious master suites aren’t typically part of the mid-century Modern mix, according to enthusiasts. Bedroom size is one concession Modern homeowners must make.

“When you’re looking at a house that was built 50 years ago, you’re not going to find master suites most of the time. You’re not going to find walk-in closets,” Rissover says. “You’re going to find houses that had creative, well-designed storage for the time.”

EXTERIORS

Materials such as natural redwood siding are found using Modern-style’s vertical application. Brick and stuccoed-brick exteriors are also part of the mix, along with wood, stone and/or glass. Alternative materials, such as metal, are used occasionally.

García and other Modernist architects use these organic materials to create clean walls with a straightforward sensibility.

“It doesn’t have any interruptions,” García says. “It’s not ornate. It doesn’t have any fancy trimwork or additional stuff to it. That makes it look Modern. It has a different flavor.”

MODERN DON'T...

Traditional vinyl siding just doesn't fit that Modern flavor. "You'll see original stuccoed homes covered with vinyl siding," Magee observes. "There are other ways to remediate stucco. You know, a paint job can do miraculous things for the aesthetics for the outside of a Modern home. Sometimes it's all that's needed," he says.

MECHANICAL SYSTEMS

Mechanical systems, such as heating and air conditioning, need replacing about every 15 years, according to Snadon. A little math means that a new owner today is likely looking at the home's second or third set of systems.

Radiant floor heating, used in some Frank Lloyd Wright homes, may still be operable in some instances. "If you can find somebody to rework it, great," Keifling says. "If not, you can abandon the system."

Keifling notes that most mid-century homes did use forced air for cooling. With duct work already in place, it's best to focus on getting the most efficient heating and air-conditioning systems when updating.

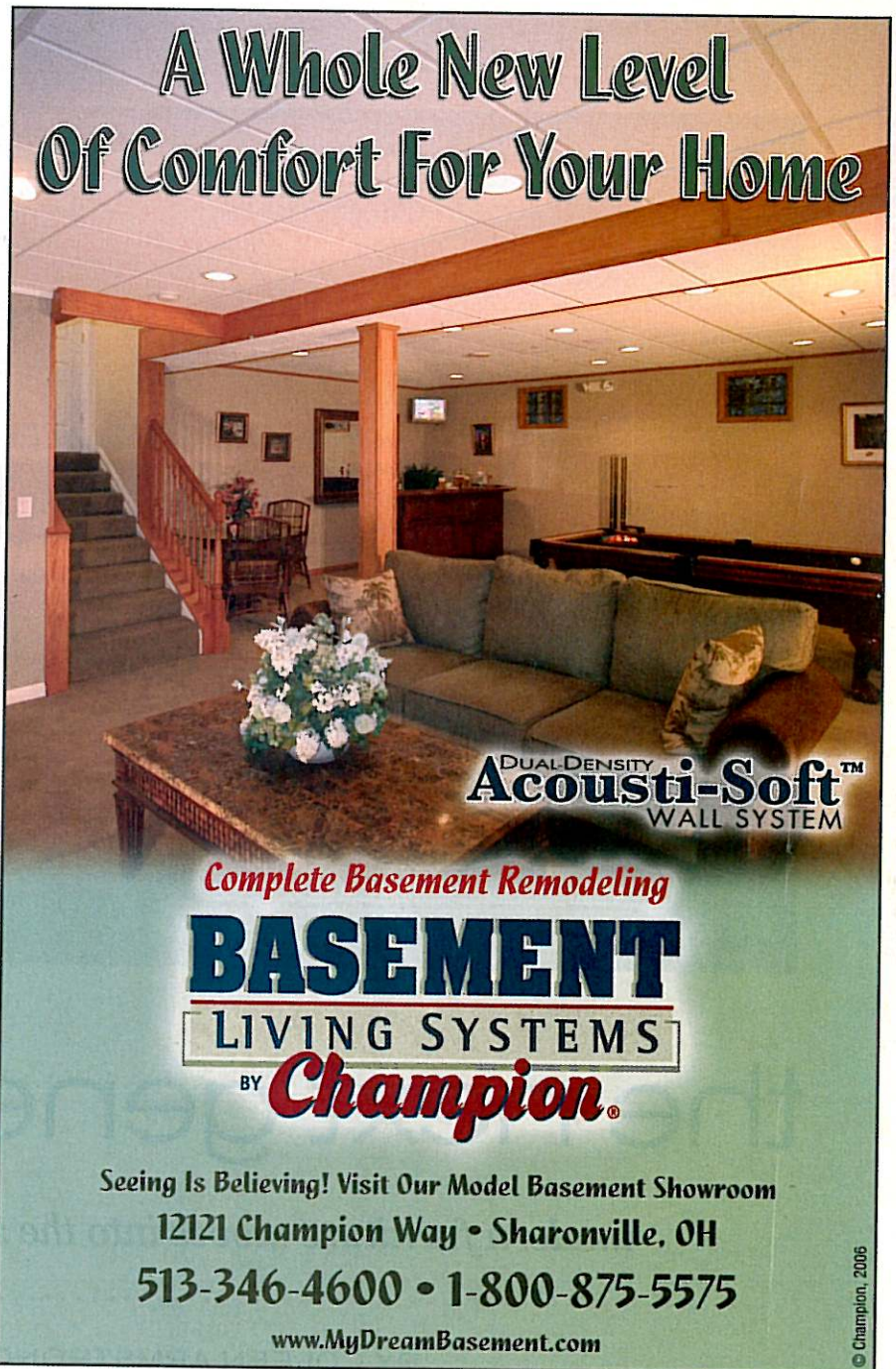
MODERN DON'T...

Snadon cautions that installation of new mechanical systems should be monitored carefully to ensure that structurally important floor joists aren't cut for new plumbing or HVAC systems. If this has already happened from an earlier renovation, Snadon suggests finding a qualified contractor or carpenter to rebuild the jack posts. It may be necessary to re-engineer a home's structures as new mechanical systems go in.

One of the most outstanding features of the Modern home, most experts agree, is the link between its inherent functional livability and the owner's lifestyle. While it's great to consider preservation aspects for these mid-century treasures, it's also great that these homes exude a certain practicality.

"Truth be told, from a preservation point of view, these Modernist buildings, like any historic building, have to adapt over time to changing lifestyles or they'll get torn down," Snadon says. "These buildings have to change, have to learn; they have to adapt to survive. And survival is the highest goal, I would say. So knocking down a wall, if the house survives, is a relatively small thing. They can't be museums. People have to live in them." ❁

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