



BAY WINDOWS
Hatch House,
designed by Jack Hall
for *The Nation* editor
Robert Hatch and his
wife, Ruth.

ARCHITECTURE

MODERNISM ON THE CAPE

For nearly 40 years, Cape Cod was a melting pot of innovative architectural thought and practice. Now an effort is underway to preserve its modernist homes from the threat of demolition.

BY CAROL KINO

ON A BRILLIANTLY SUNNY morning, the architect Peter McMahon is taking me on a tour of a subject dear to his heart: Cape Cod's endangered modernist houses. We've spent the past three days driving up winding dirt roads in his all-wheel-drive SUV, getting out and tromping on foot when the trail thins out, to see dozens of glass-fronted summer homes raised on stilts in the woods, often soaring above ponds and coves. Now, having visited houses designed by everyone from self-taught bohemian woodsmen to modernist masters such as Marcel Breuer, we have arrived at the place where, in 2006, McMahon figured out how to draw attention to this overlooked moment in American cultural history and preserve it for the future.

As we pull into the driveway—this time, luckily, the road reaches the house—McMahon reminisces about the day he first saw the building. Uninhabited for almost a decade, and “all covered with mold,” he says, it “looked like an electrical substation” from the driveway. But as soon as he'd rounded the side and spotted the dramatically cantilevered deck and the

long, uninterrupted glass walls, he could see clearly that it was a midcentury modern home—a poignant souvenir of the avant-garde architectural scene that started springing up on the Outer Cape during the Second World War.

For nearly four decades, the area was a haven where two different sets of designers—European modernists and local nonconformists—found common ground, working hard during the daytime, then repairing to each other's houses for cocktails and bonfires at night.

Although the decks of this particular home had rotted through, the floors had buckled and the roof had failed, McMahon knew it could be saved. It was owned by the Cape Cod National Seashore, and “everyone in the Park Service thought it should be torn down,” McMahon says. Called Kugel/Gips House, after the former owners, it had been designed by Charles Zehnder, an American with no formal architectural training who between 1957 and 1985 put up more than 50 houses on the Cape (including one for McMahon's parents). Built like a series of jaggedly

stacked boxes made of cement, glass and wood, with wooden beams and clapboard siding that recall the strong horizontals of Frank Lloyd Wright, it was not only historically important but structurally sound.

Today, the home is the flagship project of the Cape Cod Modernist House Trust, the nonprofit McMahon founded in 2007, after his visit, to raise awareness of the area's 100 or so midcentury modern homes. Sleekly restored and outfitted with Bertoia and Noguchi furniture, Kugel/Gips House also has a starring role in *Cape Cod Modern: Midcentury Architecture and Community on the Outer Cape*, by McMahon and the architectural journalist Christine Cipriani, to be published by Metropolis Books in June. Full of fascinating primary research, archival photographs and lavish color pictures of the houses today—well-preserved and not—it opens a window onto a part of Cape life that has been secreted away in the woods for years, partly because that's what its creators intended.

Think about Cape Cod and the picture that comes to mind likely involves “sand dunes and salty air,” >



as the song goes, or families that have lived and lobster fished there since the Mayflower dropped anchor. If you're culturally inclined, you might also think of the Provincetown plein-air painters of the early 20th century, or the theatrical and literary bohemia that flocked there soon after. But Cape Cod was also a stronghold of architectural experimentation, where the aesthetics of Europe's progressive-thinking designers dovetailed surprisingly well with the casually built oyster shacks, saltbox houses and seaside piers that dotted the woods and dunes.

It all began in 1937, just after Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus, decamped from Europe for Harvard. (The Nazis pressured the legendary German design school to close in 1933, by which point many of its teachers and alumni had fled elsewhere.) That summer, Gropius and his wife rented a house on Planting Island, near the base of the Cape, and hosted a reunion of Bauhausler refugees, including László Moholy-Nagy, soon to found the New Bauhaus in Chicago; the painter Xanti Schawinsky, already teaching with Josef Albers at Black Mountain College; and the designer Herbert Bayer, who would curate the Museum of Modern Art's landmark "Bauhaus 1919-1928" show the next year. Breuer, then living in London, enjoyed his visit so much that he decided to join Gropius at Harvard's new Graduate School of Design.

"He said to my dad, 'We've found Nirvana here on the Cape,'" recalls Juliet Kepes Stone, whose father,

the Hungarian artist Gyorgy Kepes, was Breuer's close friend and a member of the New Bauhaus.

Meanwhile, the Cape had its own contingent of well-born, artistically inclined New Englanders who liked designing buildings themselves. Dubbed "Brahmin Bohemians" in the book, they were motivated by the same back-to-the-land, arts and crafts-inspired impulses that had prompted Gropius to found the Bauhaus in 1919. Among them was Jack Hall, who, after his family lost almost everything in the Depression, supported himself as a carpenter (he later became an accomplished industrial designer). Hayden Walling, a wealthy Quaker pacifist who gave much of his money away, was a builder in Wellfleet.

But most important was Jack Phillips, whose vast land holdings were the linchpin for the Cape's reinvention as a melting pot for the architectural vanguard. The scion of an old Massachusetts family that had founded the Phillips and Phillips Exeter academies, he had inherited 800 acres of mosquito-ridden scrubland on the relatively deserted Outer Cape at the start of the Depression. In the 1930s, while studying painting in Paris, he became interested in modern architecture and returned to his land, which included parts of Truro and Wellfleet, to try his hand at building. He put up the Cape's first modernist house in Wellfleet in 1938, known as the Paper Palace because it was covered with pressed-paper wallboard. The design recalled Le Corbusier's

private villas, with cubelike volumes, stepped-back terraces and white walls.

Phillips, aiming to create a like-minded community, rented out his place to friends, including the Chilean Surrealist Roberto Matta, who brought along Peggy Guggenheim, Robert Motherwell, Max Ernst and Arshile Gorky (whose wife Phillips later married). A subsequent tenant invited Russian émigré architect Serge Chermayeff, a colleague of Gropius and Breuer's. Chermayeff rented a cabin from Phillips, finally buying it in 1944. Breuer, the Kepes family and the Hungarian structural engineer Paul Weidlinger soon acquired land, too, and a miniature building boom began. Gropius usually rented a cabin across the pond from the Kepeses, the better to swim over for cocktails. Nearby was the Viennese design polymath Bernard Rudofsky, who favored a shack without electricity or running water, where he did much of his reading and ruminating outdoors in the nude.

"Within a few years," McMahon and Cipriani write in the book, "the woods were thick with designers from Central and Northern Europe and gentlemen artist-woodsmen like Phillips. Avant-garde homes began to appear amid the pitch pines and sand dunes."

Those homes were usually built on the cheap, with plywood and plate glass, or salvaged bricks and lumber. Improvisation was a key principle: If an old shack stood on the land already, the new house often

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF ATI GROPIUS JOHANSEN; RAIMUND KOCH; TAMAS BREUER, COURTESY OF MARCEL BREUER PAPERS; SPECIAL COLLECTIONS RESEARCH CENTER, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES (ALL COURTESY OF METROPOLIS BOOKS)



SUMMER LIVING
Opposite page, clockwise from top left: a Breuer-designed house; the living room of the Kepes House, designed by Breuer; Gropius, Schawinsky, Breuer and others imitating the sculpture *Laocoön and His Sons* in 1937. This page, clockwise from top: Zehnder's Kugel/Gips House; Saltonstall's Kuhn House; part of the Chermayeff compound, painted in colors that recall nautical flags.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: RAIMUND KOCH (2); COURTESY OF SARA BARRETT AND WILKINSON FAMILY (ALL COURTESY OF METROPOLIS BOOKS)

went up around it. Walling was known for inventing a building's design and layout as he put it up. Among the Americans especially, the prevailing attitude, McMahon said, was "Someone's coming for the weekend, let's build another room."

Many of the Europeans treated their homes on the Cape like living laboratories, where they developed conceptual ideas for inexpensive, easily expandable modular buildings. Chermayeff, who taught generations of architects (including Richard Rogers and Norman Foster) at Brooklyn College and Harvard before ending up at Yale, eventually turned his one-room, kerosene lamp-lit cottage into a snaking eight-bedroom modern compound painted with primary colors. "Each piece was an experiment in form, function or construction methods," Cipriani says.

Breuer's own home, built on Williams Pond in 1949, became the prototype for a summer cottage that he constructed three more times nearby, with minor variations. A long box on stilts, it has plywood walls, a freestanding hearth and a cantilevered porch, and it seems to hover above the trees "like a camera on a tripod," as Breuer wrote in his 1955 book *Sun and Shadow: The Philosophy of an Architect*. He continued expanding and revising the building until his death in 1981. (Both he and Chermayeff, who died in 1996, are buried with their wives beside their homes.)

The Americans, by contrast, were usually untrained and less concerned with grand ideas. Yet

because they tended to build their own designs, experimentation was rampant. After the war, Phillips used prefab military barracks to rig up a slew of houses. Many of the others also have a breezy, thrown-together air, like Hall's 1962 Hatch House,

"AVANT-GARDE HOMES BEGAN TO APPEAR AMID THE PITCH PINES AND SAND DUNES." — FROM *CAPE COD MODERN*

the very structure of which suggests the joys of summer. All its parts—living room, bedrooms, studio and bath—are freestanding, linked by an open-slatted deck that brings to mind a boardwalk.

BECAUSE MANY OF THESE houses are hidden in the woods or present a modest face to the world, they aren't immediately conspicuous. To spot them, you need to know what you're looking for, and you have to know the Cape. Both McMahon and Cipriani—who grew up summering there—remember being fascinated by the few modernist homes they saw as children.

But McMahon didn't start to put the larger story together until 2005, after he relocated to the Cape from Manhattan and was offered the chance to curate a show on the area's modernist architecture for the Provincetown Art Association and Museum.

While researching, he became obsessed. He made it his mission to explore every road in Wellfleet he didn't already know; if he found an appropriate house at the end, he'd track down the owners and start doing interviews. (He met Metropolis's publisher, Diana Murphy, when she caught him peeking through her windows in Wellfleet one winter, thinking nobody was home. Exploring houses is "a wonderful off-season activity out here," says Murphy, who invited him in.)

McMahon's interest came at a crucial moment. Several modernist houses had been condemned, part of a shift in policy that dates back decades. In 1961, to forestall the development sweeping the Cape, much of Phillips's original 800 acres was absorbed into the Cape Cod National Seashore under legislation cosponsored by President Kennedy. Houses built before 1959 stayed in private hands, but anything constructed between then and 1961 had to be sold to the park, which let some owners stay and lease.

By the 1990s, most of those houses were slated for demolition, including Kugel/Gips and Hatch. Luckily, "budget constraints delayed the inevitable," says William Burke, the park's historian. And by the early 2000s, "the preservation community was starting to wrap their heads around the fact that some of these houses were significant."

Still, when Burke took McMahon to see Zehnder's Kugel/Gips House in 2006, it was the first time a visitor hadn't wanted to leave the premises immediately. "The overgrown vines, the mildewed walls and the broken windows—that didn't seem to bother Peter at all," Burke says. "I remember seeing his eyes light up." Burke even found himself suggesting a way to save it: If McMahon had a nonprofit, he could lease the house from the park and raise funds to restore it.

Since then, working through the Trust, McMahon has helped get six endangered houses listed on the National Register of Historic Places. He has also taken on two more restoration projects: Hatch House, completed last June, and the Weidlinger Home, a 1953 aerie

with a 16-foot-wide sliding-glass window, which should be completed by July. (All the Trust's houses are available to rent.) McMahon also has his sights on the 1960 Kuhn House, by Boston modernist Nathaniel Saltonstall, currently so compromised by mold that it may not survive much longer.

As for houses in private hands, market forces have rendered their fate only slightly less tenuous. "The change of generations is a really vulnerable point," says McMahon, who's seen heirs or new owners install granite countertops and replace fireplaces with TVs.

Yet at the same time, "a lot of people are becoming prouder of their modern houses, and less embarrassed by the plywood," says McMahon. Writers and artists regularly rent there, and brokers now use architects' names as a selling point. "There was once this amazing convergence of people here, and these houses are the only artifacts that remain." ●