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## Minnesota Modern: Era of Innovation

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# Minnesota Modern

ERA OF INNOVATION

The Minnesota Modern event and booklet are part of the Modern Module program, a two-year endeavor in four cities, aimed at building public support for and engaging in discussions focused on the study and protection of America's modern architectural resources. The series of events is coordinated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Modernism + Recent Past Program and funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Henry Luce Foundation.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation's Midwest Office hosted Minnesota Modern in close partnership with the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, Preserve Minneapolis, DOCOMOMO-US/MN, and the Minnesota Historical Society.

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## Modernism + Recent Past Program

Significant sites come in all shapes and sizes, and from all eras of American history. The architectural and cultural resources of the Modern movement and the recent past are an important chapter in our national story, encompassing innovative ideas in architecture and planning, as well as places that demonstrate the influence and impact of the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and urban renewal. Day by day, however, a steady campaign of demolition is eroding the physical fabric of the recent past, with little consideration of its community importance, design significance, or role in creating a sustainable future.

In order to address what many consider to be a growing crisis, the National Trust for Historic Preservation inaugurated its Modernism + Recent Past Program, also known as TrustModern, in 2009. Headquartered at the Western Office of the National Trust in San Francisco, TrustModern seeks to reacquaint Americans with their living history by reframing public perceptions about Modern and recent past architecture; creating stronger federal, state, and local policies to protect these sites; promoting contextual studies; and fostering an action network of individuals and organizations interested in resource preservation and rehabilitation. The National Trust is also breaking ground in the conservation of modern architecture at its own sites, including two of the most significant residential designs in the US: the Philip Johnson Glass House (1949) in New Canaan, CT, and Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (1951) in Plano, IL.

Preserving our "familiar past" is a complex and sometimes controversial undertaking. Thoughtful conservation of the built environment, however, not only informs our collective history, but provides innovative opportunities for planning and stewarding our landscapes. The National Trust is working to lead on this issue and moves forward with the firm conviction that these places matter. We welcome you to join us in this conversation.

**ON THE COVER** St. John's Abbey Church, Collegeville; Marcel Breuer, 1961. Photo: Christine French.

**FACING PAGE** Spoonbridge and Cherry, Minneapolis Sculpture Garden; Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, 1988. Photo: Gregg Felsen.



## Minnesota's Modern Legacy

Throughout the twentieth century, Minnesota nurtured an impressive assembly of modernist buildings and landscapes, informed by its remote northern-border geography as well as the independent nature of its people. Minneapolis and St. Paul, as well as Duluth—a shipping center along the coast of Lake Superior—developed as regional transportation hubs that attracted commerce to rival any major American city. By the 1960s, businesses and private patrons had attracted internationally known architects to the area who, along with local designers, contributed trend-setting skyscrapers, boundary pushing suburban office complexes, and landmark sacred spaces. Minnesota's modern architectural heritage, innovative in spirit and bold in its expression, confirmed the identity of Minnesota as a competitive economic center and helped to expand the state's prominence nationally and worldwide.

With the exception of the local Prairie Style tradition, Modernism arrived in Minnesota much as it did in the rest of the country—evolving from late Moderne through postwar International Style and into the structural expressionism of the late mid century. However, the School of Architecture at the University of Minnesota played a special role in the development of modern architecture locally and regionally. Under the leadership of renowned architect Ralph Rapson, head of the program from 1954 to 1984, the University produced a host of new architects who created finely executed works in the tradition of the Bauhaus. Rapson's influence on the architectural character of Minnesota can scarcely be overstated, as he cultivated in the citizens a comprehensive appreciation for progressive design, through practice as well as pedagogy.

To the rest of the country, Minnesota is an unlikely place to find such range and depth in architectural designs. To the state's residents, the buildings and landscapes of Modernism and the recent past are essential to understanding their own heritage and cultural legacy.

 COMMERCIAL

As the economic center of the Upper Midwest, Minnesota experienced waves of development reflective of national trends. In the 1950s, an exodus to the suburbs inspired efforts to “save” downtown Minneapolis. Urban renewal, new business construction, and the incorporation of modern planning principles dramatically reshaped the central core of the city.

The 1960 First National Bank Tower brought engineered modernity to a skyline once dominated by Art Deco streamlining. Gunnar Birkerts’ design for the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank won international acclaim for the engineering of its dramatic catenary structure. Interior floors are supported on two sets of cables, similar to the construction of a suspension bridge. And, in 1973, Philip Johnson broke the mold with the 57-story IDS Center, the tallest structure in the city then and now. The prism-like mirrored glass



-  First National Bank Building, Minneapolis. Holabird & Root/Thorshov & Cerny, 1960. Photo: Pete Sieger.
-  IDS Tower, Minneapolis; Philip Johnson, 1973. Photo: Alexandria Easter.
-  Federal Reserve Bank, Minneapolis; Gunnar Birkerts, 1972. Photo: Alexandria Easter.
-  F&M Bank Building, Minneapolis. McEnery & Krafft, 1941. Photo: Alexandria Easter.







skyscraper introduced a model for public atriums across the nation with the trend-setting Crystal Court shopping and performance area on the main level.

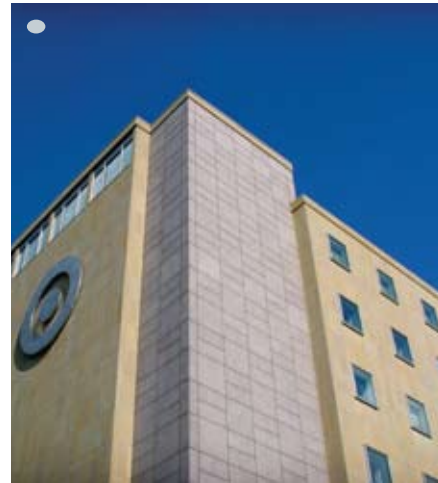
Designers introduced innovative streetscape changes throughout downtown in an effort to improve—and modernize—the relationship between people and buildings. Developer Ed Baker created the skyway system in 1962 to shelter workers and shoppers from the area's harsh winter weather and windy streets. Today, with eight miles of corridors, it is the largest skyway system in the world. In 1967, the Lawrence Halprin-designed Nicollet Mall debuted as the second downtown pedestrian mall in the country. The city banned automobile traffic on this major shopping thoroughfare, reserving the gently curving route through downtown for people and service vehicles. Peavey Plaza, at the south end of the Mall, was added nearly a decade later, to provide a multi-level urban park space for lunch-time lounging and outdoor concerts.



- Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis; Lawrence Halprin, 1967. Photo: Nancy Miller.
- Peavey Plaza, Minneapolis; Paul Friedberg, 1975. Photo: Alexandria Easter.
- Skyway System, Minneapolis, 1962. Photo: Nancy Miller.

Downtown St. Paul experienced similar growth patterns. Dayton's Department Store opened in 1963, with patterned, windowless walls that emphasized the building's orientation inward, away from the street and away from the city. Not surprisingly, the building was designed by architect Victor Gruen who is also known for Southdale, the world's first climate-controlled shopping mall opened in 1956 in nearby Edina.

Commerce in the suburbs thrived at mid century, both for shopping and as the new home for corporate campuses. Golden Valley, outside of Minneapolis, welcomed General Mills after the food giant left its headquarters in downtown. Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill designed an elegant, minimalist structure that projected a progressive postwar image, both for the company and for its icon—the fictional Betty Crocker.



- Northwestern National Life Insurance Company Building, Minneapolis; Minoru Yamasaki, 1965. Photo: Pete Sieger.
- Dayton's Department Store (Macy's), St. Paul; Victor Gruen, 1963. Photo: Alexandria Easter.
- General Mills Headquarters, Golden Valley; SOM, 1959. Photo: Alexandria Easter.
- Prudential Building, Minneapolis. Magney, Tusler & Setter, 1954. Photo: Alexandria Easter.





Providing the services and resources needed for a rapidly expanding population at mid-century fed a building boom for new community resources, an important cultural commodity and source of pride for Minnesotans. The firm of Jyring and Jurenes completed the Itasca County Courthouse in Grand Rapids in 1950. The building was connected to the landscape and regional identity through its design, which featured Mankato limestone and Cold Spring granite. Highland Park Junior High School in St. Paul is representative of the many new school buildings that were constructed across the state, typically to replace aging buildings or serve expanding neighborhoods. Hammel, Green and Abrahamson used brick and porcelain-enameled metal panels to create a vibrant, multi-colored structure that well suited the open, liberal educational theories of the era.

The Mayo Clinic, an internationally renowned medical practice and research facility located in Rochester, enlisted the clean-lined appeal of Modernism for the design of its 20-story



- Mayo Clinic Diagnostic Building, Rochester; Ellerbe Associates, 1953. Photo: Alexandria Easter.
- Highland Park Junior H.S., St. Paul; HGA, 1958. Photo: Alexandria Easter.
- Itasca County Courthouse, Grand Rapids; Jyring & Jurenes 1950. Photo: Alexandria Easter.



Minneapolis Skyline. Photo: Gregg Felsen.





Diagnostic Building. Ellerbe Associates clad the cruciform-shaped structure in aluminum and variegated white stone panels. Other smaller private clinics around the state followed suit, engaging architects to create modern designs that suggested the medicine practiced inside was as progressive as the architecture outside. Among these is the 1959 Fasbender Medical Clinic in Hastings—a rare exercise for Frank Lloyd Wright.

Bauhaus-inspired architect Edward Larrabee Barnes gave the Walker Art Center (established in 1927) its first modern structure in 1971, with a minimalist, dark brick building that is both reserved and dynamic in its geometry. At the time of its opening, the center complemented its famous neighbor—the 1963 Guthrie Theater designed by Ralph Rapson—which was demolished in 2006. The architect also designed the nearby Minneapolis Sculpture Garden in 1988, home to Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's water sculpture Spoonbridge and Cherry.



● Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Edward Larrabee Barnes, 1971. Photo: Alexandria Easter.

● Fasbender Medical Clinic, Hastings; Frank Lloyd Wright 1959. Photo: Alexandria Easter.

● State Capitol Credit Union (SE Public Library), Minneapolis; Ralph Rapson, 1964. Photo: Nancy Miller.



**BITS & PIECES**

**PUT TOGETHER  
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OF A WHOLE**



Minnesotans' playful spirit flourished through a proliferation of vernacular structures representing the widespread appeal of trips to the lake, vacations up north, and the annual State Fair. Bena hosts one of the state's most recognizable roadside icons, the Big Fish, built in the 1950s as the Big Muskie Drive-In. Another pair of beloved roadside residents includes Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox, who have welcomed tourists to Bemidji since 1937. At the intersection of State Highways 33 and 45 in Cloquet, the 1956 R.W. Lindholm Service Station is the only gas station designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, and the only structure built from the architect's conceptual Broadacre City project, originally intended as a four-square mile suburban community. Back in St. Paul, an unlikely collection of modern vernacular buildings occupy the 320-acre grounds of the Minnesota State Fair. More than 1.5 million visitors wander through this eclectic collection of mid-century and Art Deco delights every year.



- **Big Fish (Big Muskie Drive-In), Bena; ca. 1950. Photo: Alexandria Easter.**
- **Main Gate, Minnesota State Fairgrounds, St. Paul; 1971. Photo: Gregg Felsen.**
- **Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox, Bemidji; ca. 1937. Photo: Alexandria Easter.**



## RESIDENTIAL

From pre-fabricated steel Lustron homes to utopian skyscrapers, Minnesota modern residential architecture comprises an impressive collection of affordable homes and technologies developed for the new mid-century American middle class as well as high-end designs catering to the wealthy businesspeople who helped the state prosper.

Frank Lloyd Wright created the Usonian House as a creative concept designed to foster a new way of life, free of traditional architectural conventions, and priced within the means of most American families. A.H. Bulbanian, a physician at the Mayo Clinic, brought the aging master to Rochester in 1947 to complete his one story house of concrete block and cypress wood. The McBean house, built ten years later, is one of only two Usonian model #2 homes designed by Wright. The 1951 S.P. Elam House in Austin is one of the largest examples of a Usonian home designed by Wright. Together, these buildings represent a residential collection unique in the Midwest.



- Lustron Home, Minneapolis; Lustron Corporation, 1948. Photo: Alexandria Easter.
- McBean House, Rochester; Frank Lloyd Wright, 1957. Photo: Alexandria Easter.
- Elam (Plunkett) House, Austin; Frank Lloyd Wright, 1951. Photo: Alexandria Easter.





A notable ensemble of modern houses is located in University Grove, a planned community for University of Minnesota faculty and administrators in St. Paul. Established in 1928 and largely built-out by 1970, every home is architect-designed, with the local firm of Close and Associates and Ralph Rapson responsible for the designs of over 20 of the many high-style modern houses in this closely knit neighborhood.

Cedar Square West (now Riverside Plaza) opened near the West Bank Campus of the University of Minnesota in 1973. Ralph Rapson designed the fifteen varied-height structures using rough concrete and multi-colored panels, in part, as an homage to Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation housing concept. Cedar Square West is one of a few examples of a "New Town-In Town," an urban version of the Federal New Town program. The full plan for Cedar Square West—mostly unbuilt—would have included 12,500 housing units, as well as retail and community functions across four connected neighborhoods.



- Cedar Square West (Riverside Plaza), Minneapolis; Ralph Rapson and Associates, 1973. Photo: Alexandria Easter.
- Keys House, Rochester; Frank Lloyd Wright, 1950. Photo: Alexandria Easter.
- University Grove, St. Paul; Ralph Rapson and Associates, Close and Associates, 1949-1970. Photo: Alexandria Easter.





Minnesota's finest expressions of Modernism can be found in its religious structures. Architects at mid-century challenged traditional notions of church design and construction while congregations embraced important liturgical changes. The two combined forces created an enviable collection of buildings.

After World War II, the congregation at Christ Church Lutheran in Minneapolis abandoned plans for a Gothic-style structure and turned to Eliel Saarinen with a request for what they called, "an honest design." In 1949, Saarinen delivered a simple horizontal rectangle balanced by a bold, rectilinear tower. Inside the sanctuary, light functions as a spiritual element. Undulating, curved walls and non-parallel surfaces assist in the attainment of perfect acoustical clarity. The space is as dramatic as it is tranquil.



- Christ Church Lutheran, Minneapolis; Eliel Saarinen, 1949. Photo: Pete Sieger.
- St. John's Abbey Church, Collegeville; Marcel Breuer, 1961. Photo: Christine French.
- Detail, stained glass window; St. John's Abbey Church, Collegeville; Marcel Breuer, 1961. Photo: Christine French.

The local firm that collaborated with Saarinen on this design—Hills, Gilbertson and Hayes—completed the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Edina soon afterward within a similar aesthetic. The congregation at Mount Zion Temple attracted one of the great modern architects, Erich Mendelsohn, to design a modern synagogue on St. Paul's Summit Avenue, one of only four synagogues the German-Jewish immigrant designed in the U.S.

The Benedictine monks of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, north of the Twin Cities, brought in internationally renowned architect Marcel Breuer to create Minnesota's masterpiece of modern sacred space: the Abbey Church at Saint John's University. The award-winning exposed-concrete design features an enormous honeycomb patterned stained-glass window and abstract bell tower, along with a number of nearby buildings on this rural campus.



● Mount Zion Temple, St. Paul; Erich Mendelsohn, 1955. Photo: Pete Sieger.

● Pilgrim's Chapel, Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Hibbing; Gilbertson and Hayes, 1958. Photo: Alexandria Easter.

FACING PAGE Christ Church Lutheran, Minneapolis; Eliel Saarinen, 1949. Photo: Pete Sieger.

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