

Bauhaus in the Breeze

Modernist Architecture on Outer Cape Cod

By Christine Cipriani



Photo by Bill Lyons

Toward the end of a narrow spit of land about two hours from Boston, through dense woodlands and pitted dirt roads, lie almost 100 midcentury houses that have come to define their era – yet not their surroundings. Their designers ranged from lauded academics to well-heeled dabblers, but theirs was an unusual architecture: it strove for neither monumentality nor permanence. Because so many of us still associate the Cape with shingled salt-box cottages, it can be startling to learn how many modernist homes are hiding in Cape Cod's outback, and, in turn, how quickly they have become relics of a more adventurous time.

In the wake of World War I, left-leaning writers began to settle in the wilds of Wellfleet, Massachusetts, at the wrist of the arm that is Cape Cod. Much of the town's land belonged to Jack Phillips, scion of the old Massachusetts family that founded Phillips Exeter Academy, who had studied with Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer at Harvard's new design school. During World War II, Phillips began selling plots to fellow intellectual travelers, and before long Wellfleet had a summer community of architects, writers, painters and scholars from Boston, Cambridge and Europe. By the late 1940s, the world's most progressive design

schools were represented here, including the Bauhaus, Cranbrook, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

The level of architectural ferment at midcentury in this 300-year-old fishing town is hard to overstate. From colonial times onward, the Cape Cod house had been set in a hollow to shield it from winter weather; the modernists turned that practice on its head, building summer homes on high sites to command sweeping landscapes. But they respected their predecessors' environmental awareness, and some made a point of incorporating local materials or motifs into their avant-garde work. Bound by both cost and principle, the Cape Cod modernists were early practitioners of what we now call green building. Wherever possible they used off-the-shelf lumberyard materials, including plywood, sheet glass and a paper-based wallboard called homasote – the first construction product made from post-consumer waste. Outer Cape modernism took many forms, but it was ultimately defined by its extraordinary engagement with this rugged Atlantic terrain, where scrub pines jostle with oak trees, holly bushes and beach heather on sandy, needle-strewn soil.

Above With its weathered siding and unsurpassable site on Cape Cod Bay, Jack Hall's Hatch House (1960) is a showpiece of Cape Cod modernism. Freestanding units within the grid layout contain living, sleeping and bathing rooms.

Opposite, top The bay side of the Hatch House can be opened to the elements by flipping a series of seven-foot-square panels up to shade the deck. The narrow, widely spaced slats of the deck pull the breeze underfoot.

Opposite, bottom The Hatch living room as it looked for much of the late 20th century, when it played host to summering artists and intellectuals. Screened *shoji*-style doors allow varying degrees of interaction with the outdoors.

Photo by Bill Lyons.



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Courtesy Noa Hall / Cape Cod Modern House Trust.



Photo by Jack Hall, courtesy Noa Hall / Cape Cod Modern House Trust.

Above A skeletal grid extends the planes of the Hatch House into the landscape, blurring its edges and lightening its profile among the heather and dune grass.

Top Jack Hall and Camille L'Engle, the first of his four wives, at their 18th-century home. A dashing, independently wealthy figure on Cape Cod's party scene, Hall overcame alcoholism to dabble in architecture, design, painting, fiction writing and commercial fishing.

Opposite One of Cape Cod's first modern buildings was a studio designed by bohemian landowner Jack Phillips (1938), so exquisitely sited that it washed into the Atlantic in the 1970s. A social nexus in its early years, it later held an art school run by painter and sculptor Xavier Gonzalez.

"These little summer shacks...seemed so easy," recalls Ati Gropius Johansen, who first visited Wellfleet in the 1930s with her parents, Walter and Ise Gropius. "They seemed as though you could put them up in a day-and-a-half and just live a simple life there." Johansen "could never forgive" her father for not buying land in Wellfleet, she says, because "you could buy it for a song."

Brahminical Huts

The most dramatic modern house on the Outer Cape was conceived by a man with no training in design. Over the 1930s and '40s, John Hughes "Jack" Hall, a writer and painter with an English degree from Princeton and a pair of Rolls-Royces, accumulated 180 acres in an area called Bound Brook Island. In 1960, on a windswept site with heart-stopping views over Cape Cod Bay, Hall built for *Nation* editor Robert Hatch a peerless modernist dune shack: a cluster of tiny, rustic free-standing rooms measured in seven-foot-square modules within a grid. Narrow beams extend the modules outdoors, creating a delicate exoskeleton that lightens the house's profile. Outside the screened wall of the living room, the narrow wood slats of the deck invite the breeze to tickle the toes. "It's just such an amazing response to the site," says architect Peter McMahon, executive director of the Cape Cod Modern House Trust, which promotes awareness and preservation of local modern architecture, "and the building itself is so uncompromising and rigorous and beautiful." K. Michael Hays, professor of architectural theory at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, calls the Hatch House "the perfect modern primitive hut." Ironically, while Hall built himself a modern cottage in the 1950s, he lived most of his Wellfleet life (with a famously long succession of wives) in a series of classic 18th-century Cape Cods.

Wellfleet's most overtly patrician modernist was Nathaniel Saltonstall, whose family traced its lineage to the ship carrying Puritan governor John Winthrop to Massachusetts in 1630. In 1936 Saltonstall co-founded Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, and in 1948 he and Oliver Morton designed a private club in Wellfleet called the Mayo Hill Colony Club, anchored by a gallery on scenic, undulating Chequessett Neck Road. Patrons of up-and-coming artwork — a crowd that at one point included Elizabeth Taylor — needed social and bank references to stay in one of 13 tiny modern cottages spilling down a pine-dappled hillside near Cape Cod Bay. Cross-shaped in plan, with Miesian protruding walls, the houses were painted brown, red or stone and furnished with pieces by Harry Bertoia, Marcel Breuer and Charles and Ray Eames. "I think [Saltonstall's] greatest talent was that he could discern between the ordinary and what was special...in both architecture and art," says Eleanor Stefani, who bought the cottages in 1963 with her late husband, Loris, renamed them The Colony, and has rented them out ever since.

Saltonstall's work stands out for its luxurious use of materials, resulting in what Peter McMahon calls "upper-crust New England modernism." Saltonstall was an "odd duck," says McMahon, because "he was openly gay but incredibly conservative, into modernism but not into modernism; his own house was filled with colonial furniture. His relationship with modernity was complicated." The Kuhn House (1960), built for the science historian Thomas Kuhn, is wrapped in diagonal stained siding that contrasts elegantly with white trim; the interior is paneled in birch,



illuminated by skylights framed in raw timber and anchored by a sheer wall of Shaker-style cabinetry.

As a student at the University of Virginia, Charlie Zehnder had a life-changing meeting with Frank Lloyd Wright. Zehnder's many Cape Cod projects include Prairie-style homes that open dialogues with their sites through horizontal planes and multiple decks; the Kugel/Gips House (1970), anchored in concrete but defined by cantilevered cedar protrusions, centers on its hearth. Zehnder's Hopkins House (1976), a three-story column in poured concrete, exemplifies the experimentation of Wellfleet's later modernists: corners jut out at 45-degree angles, and light comes not from windows but from angular decks that give even the smallest room a way outdoors.

Transatlantic Currents

Starting in the 1930s, cultural and financial austerities drove many ambitious European architects toward the United States, and one by one, via the grapevine, several found their way to the Outer Cape. Even more than their American counterparts,

the Europeans maintained a scrupulous simplicity of form in their holiday homes. Armed with the principles of what was then crystallizing as the International Style, they played with local building methods and materials, such as the balloon frame (wood studs with cladding) and cedar siding. And they partied: Ati Gropius Johansen, whose family vacationed at the Marcel Breuer and Serge Chermayeff cottages, recalls, "On Saturday night different families would have a big bonfire [on Newcomb Hollow Beach], and there was singing and roasting and it was very, very nice...that's where I think all the great love affairs sprang from. It was juicy living, believe me."

Of all the Cape Cod modernists, architect, theorist and painter Serge Chermayeff was the most aggressively conceptual. Born in Russia, Chermayeff worked in England — partnering with Erich Mendelsohn on the 1935 De La Warr Pavilion, the U.K.'s first modernist public building — before leaving for the U.S. in 1940. From 1946 to 1951 he directed Chicago's Institute of Design, founded as the New Bauhaus, and knocked back drinks with Chicago neighbor Mies van der Rohe; in later



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years he taught architecture, art and urban planning at MIT, Harvard and Yale.

Chermayeff and his wife, Barbara, discovered the Cape in the early 1940s and bought land on Slough Pond, near the Wellfleet/Truro border. Enconced in the existing gabled house (complete with hand pump and outhouse), Chermayeff built a separate prototype studio in 1952 and gradually added a studio and library to the house itself. His nearby Wilkinson House (1953) is a long rectangle made up of eight-foot bays; by breaking long façades into segments, Chermayeff preserved the illusion of a more vertical composition, less disruptive to the landscape than a straightforward shoebox. Each bay is filled with painted homasote crossed by diagonal battens, or with a tic-tac-toe board of nine windowpanes. Chermayeff's local structural signature was diagonal bracing that skewed portions of the roof; open bays were topped with X-shaped "bowtie" trusses, forming a porch or pergola. Ever the painter, Chermayeff felt that aping the woods' palette was a fool's errand, so he effectively honored his surroundings by painting exteriors the colors of maritime signal flags: red, white, black, blue and yellow.

Marcel Breuer, like Jack Hall, was not formally trained as an architect. Born in Hungary, Breuer first made his name as a furniture designer at the Bauhaus, where Gropius appointed him master of the woodworking workshop in 1925. He then expanded into architecture, working in Berlin and London before following Gropius to Harvard in 1937.

Despite his eventual renown for such monumental works as the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Housing and

Urban Development building in Washington, D.C., Breuer never stopped designing houses. At Chermayeff's urging, Breuer and his wife, Constance, came to Wellfleet in 1943 and bought land the following year on Williams Pond. Breuer's four Wellfleet houses exemplify traits that run through his residential work: they have railroad plans, with rooms strung along an axis, and they float above the ground on stilts, leaving the landscape intact and the form exposed. (Breuer actually sketched his prototype as it would appear through the windshield of an oncoming car.) The low silhouette is introverted on the approach, scored only by ribbon windows, while bursting open to the scenery through plate glass in back, where a screened porch forms the dining area. Adamantly informal, Breuer left the plywood and studs in his own cottage (1948) exposed for years; he later added homasote walls and, in a nod to climate and custom, vertical cedar siding. Breuer's Kepes House (1949) remains a plywood box on Long Pond, an astonishing reminder of the rawness of the Bauhaus ideal.

Finnish architect Olav Hammarström worked with Eero Saarinen after stints with Alvar Aalto (including MIT's Baker House) and The Architects' Collaborative. Hammarström and Marianne Strengell, the renowned Finnish textile designer who headed Cranbrook's weaving department for almost 20 years, came to Wellfleet in the late '40s, married there in 1949 and bought land near the ocean. To avoid cutting down trees, the architect bent the couple's summer house (1952) on a diagonal, and connected the wings with a slate-floored breezeway that



Photo by Bill Lyons

Above Marcel Breuer's original summer home (1948), on the right, centered on a screened dining room overlooking Williams Pond. The wing on the left was added in 1961, when the family wanted more living and studio space. Breuer and his wife, Constance, are buried here.

Opposite In the house Olav Hammarström built for himself and his wife, weaver and textile designer Marianne Strengell, in 1952, a signature breezeway connects the living room to the rest of the house. Marked by a slate floor and rimmed by sliding barn doors on two sides, this becomes a fully outdoor space.

Right The Mayo Hill Colony Club (1948), now The Colony, was designed as a private club by Nathaniel Saltonstall and Oliver Morton. The main house, originally an art gallery, hides behind a sculpted relief by Xavier Gonzalez.



Photo by Bill Lyons



Photo by Bill Lyons.

Above On the 12-acre grounds of his new summer home, Serge Chermayeff built a prototype studio (1952) made up of eight-foot bays that helped relieve the uniformity of the long rectangle. Most of the original homosote is now clapboard, but its colors and spirit remain.

Right Chermayeff designed the studio in two parts, with complementary diagonal bracing, to maximize light in each room. Private spaces, he wrote in his 1963 book *Community and Privacy*, "must be in immediate contact with nature."



Photo by Bill Lyons.

could be opened with sliding barn doors. To capture the water view, Hammarström gently raised the living room from the breezeway, sinuously curving the edge of its wooden floor.

Hammarström's house for Lillian Swann Saarinen (1960), near Breuer's property, applied similar principles to a high site on Herring Pond. A member of the first American women's Olympic ski team in 1936, Swann became a sculptor and was married to Eero Saarinen from 1939 to 1953. "It is the most famous house in Cape Cod. They call this Saarinen House because everybody thinks Eero designed it," said the mild-mannered Hammarström, laughing, in a 1990 interview. "I designed it about six years after Eero died, but nobody believes me." Its back to the road, the ice-gray house draws the eye down to the sparkling pond through a breezeway that served as Swann Saarinen's outdoor studio. The flat-roofed rectangle is built onto an old, gabled, one-room fishing cabin, which forms a half-timbered nook off the living room of the new house. On the pond side, the living room spills through glass doors onto a deck carved around the elm trees, an intimate, forested space for entertaining.

Peeking over the highway on Wellfleet's outskirts, a pyramidal bell tower sheathed in cedar shingles announces Hammarström's Chapel of St. James the Fisherman (1957), built *pro bono* for a summer-only Episcopal congregation. Designed on non-hierarchical principles, the church embodies an early Christian practice of worshipping in the round, with choristers among the congregants and no one more than six seats from the altar.

The structural engineer for St. James — and for myriad larger projects, including Eero Saarinen's CBS Building and Gropius's University of Baghdad — was Paul Weidlinger, who apprenticed with Le Corbusier. A friend of Breuer, Weidlinger followed his fellow Hungarian to Wellfleet and built a house in 1953 on Higgins Pond, at the bottom of a long, rutted driveway that grants tantalizing views of the house through a stippling of scrub pines. Suspended over a hillock, the square house is rimmed on three sides by a roofed narrow balcony framed in white wire mesh.

The boxy lines of the International Style raised both eyebrows and security concerns in midcentury Wellfleet: old-timers allegedly wondered if the eerie new structures were signaling German U-boats in the North Atlantic. But in one sense it is a testament to the success of the Cape Cod modern aesthetic that Wellfleet never came to be identified with this style: its painstaking discretion in materials, siting and design kept it under the stylistic radar. So recently a departure from all that was comfortably familiar, these "modern primitive huts" are now throwbacks to a time when people who took their houses seriously were content — indeed, determined and proud — to live on a very small footprint.

The Tide of History

Peter McMahon has been called a one-man historical society, but that doesn't mean he works in isolation. With a scholar's

unflappable manner and a 20-year-old pickup truck, McMahon is the driving force behind the effort to preserve the Cape's mid-century architecture. Most of the modernist homes are privately owned, but the Cape Cod National Seashore, established by the Kennedy administration in 1961, contains seven of architectural significance and lacks the means to relieve them of advanced dilapidation. McMahon is working to restore these homes by leasing them from the National Park Service, starting with the Kugel/Gips House. Due in part to his advocacy, five homes have been declared landmarks by the Massachusetts Historic Commission.

McMahon founded the Cape Cod Modern House Trust in 2006 after co-curating the exhibition "A Chain of Events: Modernist Architecture on the Outer Cape" at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum and realizing that the depths had yet to be plumbed. "We started interviewing people, we started collecting drawings and plans and digitizing them, collecting photographs and promoting awareness [through tours]," he says. "The main thrust of the organization is research and documentation — trying to collect data before it disappears." Restoration will not only preserve the buildings, but will strengthen research efforts through rental revenue and a scholar-in-residence program.

The prize is to preserve in the public memory not only a remarkable group of houses, but the international design culture that spawned this critical mass of progressive architecture in such a rural area. "You can't imagine how many [designers live here]," said Marianne Strengell in a 1982 interview, 30 years after she and Olav Hammarström joined their ranks. "They are all in the woods. They're very subtle." ■

Christine Cipriani is a Boston-based writer on architecture, design and culture. Having vacationed in Wellfleet for more than 30 years, she is newly preoccupied with the area's modernist history.

Courtesy Tom Weidlinger / Cape Cod Modern House Trust.



Above Structural engineer Paul Weidlinger apprenticed with Le Corbusier, who, according to legend, advised him not to pave the dirt road leading down to his Wellfleet idyll on Higgins Pond (1953). A wraparound balcony grants access to the house on three sides.

Below Once a model of alfresco modernism, the Weidlinger House is now on the National Register of Historic Places, but is also in severe disrepair. The nonprofit Cape Cod Modern House Trust aims to restore it.

Courtesy of Bill Burke, National Park Service.

