

THE **MEDALLION** TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
WINTER 2022



**MIDCENTURY MASTERPIECE THEATERS
ENJOY A HISTORIC NIGHT OUT IN THE METROPLEX**

MOD ANSWERS

RENOWNED MIDCENTURY PRESERVATIONIST DISCUSSES STATE OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE

By Andy Rhodes
Managing Editor, *The Medallion*

What is your current job title and what preservation organizations are you affiliated with? I am a partner with MacRostie Historic Advisors, where I run our Texas practice. I am one of the founders of Houston Mod and am on the board of directors of Docomomo/US. I'm also a member of Preservation Houston, Preservation Texas, Preservation Austin, Preservation Dallas, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. That's a lot of Preservation.

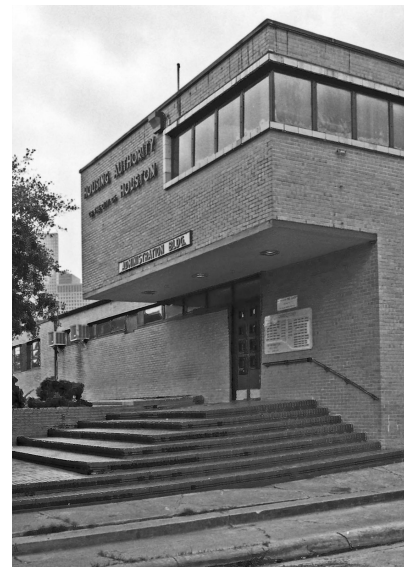
Do you have a preservation success story with Houston Mod that you're especially proud of? I think the award-winning Mod of the Month is a great preservation success story. It's a collaborative effort between Modern/preservation-minded realtors and Houston Mod.

The program is simple: hold open houses and encourage their purchase by preservation-minded buyers rather than a teardown. It's a low-cost program and has been modeled in other cities. It was able to continue during the pandemic with social distancing. Also, it's an informal way for Houston Mod members to socialize and see Modern-era houses.

What sets Midcentury Modern architecture apart from other design styles in Texas? The stylistic part of your question is directly related to the economic context. Let's use Houston as an example: Following World War II, the city had everything it needed to become a large American city, with leaders that were interested in bringing that to a reality. Houston is a port



Anna Mod



city and had a well-established transportation network. With the discovery of oil at Spindletop in 1901, the surrounding area became an instant boomtown, and many of the new oil companies located in Houston for the well-established trading infrastructure, cultural amenities, and new neighborhoods.

So, Houston had it all—a booming economy, city leaders wanting to grow the city upward and outward, and visionaries inspired by national and international architectural trends. Stylistically, there were a smattering of Modern-era buildings in Texas and Houston before World War II, but the style really didn't take off until after the war. The new oil economy and the locally based technological expertise that related to the space

program were a perfect storm. What better a style—new and visionary—for a city that would land a man on the moon.

What is a common misconception about Midcentury Modern architecture? That the buildings are all dumb modern boxes. One of the first Modern buildings I formally analyzed was the First Security National Bank, designed by Beaumont architect Llewellyn W. Pitts, for the National Register program.





The bank is New Formalist in style and aligned itself into the traditional streetscape of the downtown central business district.

It retained a classical three-part composition: base, shaft, and capital, expressed in the Modern idiom with support columns and glass infill (base), a sculptural concrete screen (shaft), and a recessed clerestory with dramatic cantilevered roof overhang (capital). It also included a parking garage, an urban necessity by the early 1960s, neatly accommodated inside the overall building form. When the bank decided to locate downtown, it was competing against suburban locations. That's a big program to accommodate, and this building checked all the boxes.

Tell us some of the challenges facing Midcentury Modern preservationists. I think we are mostly past the heckling many of us received during our early lectures on the importance of studying, understanding, and preserving Modern buildings. Time marches on, and our firm has recently prepared National Register nominations for early 1970s buildings. I think there will always be those advocates and practitioners that cannot accept that Modern-era buildings are important.

What are some of your favorite sources for information about Midcentury architecture? There is really no one source. One of the reasons I wrote the book *Building Modern Houston*



was to consolidate magazine articles, guidebook entries, student survey work, and Houston examples compared to the oeuvre of a national or international architectural firm's work. The can-do spirit of the city led to a consortium of local firms designing the Astrodome. Sheer tenacity and technical fearlessness. Sort of like going to the moon.

How can people help preserve these resources in Texas?

It really starts with understanding what you have, and a survey is a great way to do that. Survey work has gotten easier to crowdsource and conduct with a phone if you have a mastermind in the background managing the data.

Delaney Harris-Finch and I managed such a survey of vernacular Modern resources. The survey turned into "Houston: Uncommon Modern," an exhibit, catalog, tour, and panel discussion sponsored by Architecture Center Houston, the nonprofit associated with AIA Houston. We are still a way off from saving all our vernacular Modern buildings, but we've started the conversation. That project has been replicated in other cities nationwide as a good exercise for engaging volunteers to get out and see what kinds of buildings are in their communities. The donut shops, clinics, and trade union halls—they're all important.

Learn more at houstonmod.org.

OPPOSITE, TOP: San Felipe Courts, 1944. © Gerald Moorhead, FAIA. BOTTOM: Durst House, 1958. Courtesy Houston Mod. TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: Kamrath House, 1951. © Gerald Moorhead, FAIA. Allen House, 1937. Courtesy Houston Mod.

WHERE ON EARTH...IN TEXAS

KNOW YOUR TEXAS HISTORY? Put your skills to the test by identifying the pictured site! The first three people who correctly identify the location will receive a prize and be named in the next issue of *The Medallion*. Send your answer to: *The Medallion*, P.O. Box 12276, Austin, TX 78711-2276 or email to medallion@thc.texas.gov. Limit one prize annually per contestant.

NEED A CLUE? This magnificent home in the Texas Tropical Trail Region was designed by an architect who was nationally acclaimed for his modernist work.

ANSWER TO THE PHOTO FROM THE LAST ISSUE: The photo at left is the 1903 St. Mary's Church in Victoria. Considered one of the most prominent Gothic Revival structures in Texas, the church was named a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark in 1964.



Congratulations and eventual prizes go to the first readers who correctly identified the site: Dianna Bartosh of Cuero, Johna R. Childers of Lufkin, and Andy Maag of Austin. Thanks to all who participated!



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