

by Carla Valencia

"The Modern Movement was an artistic and architectural movement that embodied the unique early twentieth century notion that artistic works must look forward to the future without overt references to historical precedent. Modern design emphasized expression of functional, technical or spatial properties rather than reliance on decoration. Modern design was conscious of being modern: it purposefully expressed the principles of modern design."

source: **DOCOMOMO**

Houston Mod's goal other than saving the Prudential Building – is to increase awareness of preservation of modern buildings. Formed in 2003 by architects, designers and concerned Houstonians, Houston Mod is dedicated to preserving the cultural legacy that Houston's modern architecture provides. Through programs including classes, lectures, tours, publications and preservation advocacy, the Mod Squad seeks to promote knowledge, appreciation and preservation of modern architecture in Houston.

Although Houston Mod is a relatively young non-profit, they are a fast growing organization with a mission. At the beginning of this year, the group announced eleven leaders of Houston's architectural, preservation, arts and real estate communities as members of the "Master Mod" advisory board.

Among the "Master Mods" are William F. Stern, Lynn Edmundson and Barry Moore who will play a valuable role in spearheading Houston mod's efforts, all having amazing backgrounds, perfect to guide Houston Mod in the right direction.

William F. Stern, principal of Stern and Bucak Architects, has been published in *Texas Architect*, *The Architectural Review*, *Architecture and House Beautiful*. Lynn Edmundson is the co-founder and executive director of Historic Houston, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving Houston's architectural and cultural heritage through scholarly research, documentation and advocacy for sustainable design and conservation. Barry Moore is a senior associate at Gensler architects specializing in the design of theaters, historic preservation, and non-profit and educational facilities. Other influential leaders in "Mod Squad" include Minette Boesel, Stephen Fox, Wyatt Frantom, Carrie Glassman Shoemaker, Anna Mod, Stuart Rosenberg, Daphne Scarborough and Rhonda Walls.

Houston mod has been on a quest to save the Prudential Building since October of last year, having dubbed it their "Momentous Mod Mission." The Prudential Building is posted on their website – [www.houstonmod.org](http://www.houstonmod.org) – as one of their 10 mod presentations.



houston mod  
preserving our modern legacy

When it was dedicated on July 29, 1952, the Prudential Building was only the second skyscraper of modern design to be built in Houston. Houston Magazine declared the last week of July 1952 would "long be marked as one of the most important milestones in the exceptional progress of Houston and the large area that it serves." Designed by Houston architect Kenneth Franzheim and chief designer Anton Skidlewicz, architectural historian Stephen Fox considers the building to be "Kenneth Franzheim's office at its best." The Prudential Building represents urban style and suburban comfort in perfect harmony.

Now owned by the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center and called

the Houston Main Building, the neglected building has lost much of its original splendor. The walls of the interior are clad in Texas limestone accented with dark red polished Texas granite. The interior design was meant to reflect Prudential itself – massive, solid and permanent. The exterior boasts a fountain adorned with bronze nautilus shooting water into a limestone sculpture of a man and woman holding a child symbolizing the future. The sculpture was made by noted American artist Wheeler Williams. The lobby is home to a mural painted in tempera on plaster by famed American artist Peter Hurd. The mural depicts a group of Texas farmers gathered about an oak tree with produce of the land arroyed around them and is titled: *The Future Belongs To Those Who Prepare For It*.

Already the Olympic-size pool surrounded by a terrazzo deck and lush subtropical garden are gone. All of this making the Prudential Building a sentimental relic for Houston Mod who now fear the building is in danger of facing the fate of so many others in Houston: demolition. Making room for parking garages, surface lots or lesser buildings. While current officials of M.D. Anderson say that they are in the business of saving lives not architecture, they overlook the founding trustees' understanding of a building's impact on human health and happiness. "Every time a building is razed, Houston loses a bit of its identity – a city once known for its progressive modern architecture," says Michael Brichford, a Houston Mod co-founder. "Our aim is to educate the public and the UT Board of Regents about the importance of the Prudential Building with the goal of saving a wonderful building for future generations to enjoy."

To get involved, log onto [www.houstonmod.org](http://www.houstonmod.org). For a peak at Houston Mod in action there will be lecture at 6PM on Thursday, August 19, at MFAH Brown Auditorium. Leo Marmol, AIA, managing principal of Marmol Radziner and Associates of Los Angeles, will give a talk about the preservation of modern architecture. Marmol Radziner and Associates are responsible for the highly recognized restoration of Richard Neutra's Kaufmann House in Palm Springs.