

By Jean West Rudnicki

There's no room for the past on the freeway to the future, and Houston with its foot firmly on the pedal zooms endlessly forward with never a glimpse back.

"Houston is such a '50s town," says Ben Koush, president of Houston Mod, a non-profit organization founded to help preserve the city's endangered modern architectural legacies. Houston grew up in the '50s with its freeways but has never been interested in its past, he laments, noting that Houston once had more Victorian homes than Galveston, though few survive today. And now, much of the city's finest examples of modern architecture from the '50s and '60s era face a similar vanishing fate.

Concern for these architectural treasures of the recent past brought a group of architects, designers and concerned professionals together to form the organization dedicated to promoting knowledge and appreciation for modern architecture and design. Houston Mod focuses on structures not typically protected by historic standards, and includes the works of such Houston notables as Donald Barthelme, Howard Barnstone, Burdette Keeland, MacKie & Kamrath and Taylor & Neuhaus. Sadly, many of these classics have already met their date with the wrecking crew.

The Postwar years were a time filled with optimism for the future. The Great Depression was over; the good guys had won the war; and tomorrow held unlimited promise. Architecture of the time embraced

that optimism and faith in the future, discarding old elements and seeking to find a better way to build, incorporating new technologies.

Houston, steadily growing since the establishment of the oil and gas industry in the '30s and '40s, virtually exploded in the postwar years. In one ten-year period (1950–1960) the city advanced from being the nation's fourteenth largest city to its seventh largest. While some of the growth is attributed to an aggressive annexation policy by Houston officials, it is also attributed to the city's newly developing freeway system and its wholesale embrace of air conditioning. In the early '50s, the Chamber of Commerce declared Houston "the most air-

Houston's preservation ordinance is so weak, especially compared to cities such as New York, Chicago and Dallas, it amounts to little more than a 90-day delay in the demolition process.



Facing page and below: A 1950s era house gets new life thanks to growing interest in mid-century modern (MCM) homes.



conditioned city in the world.”

Buildings and homes popped up everywhere including the first modern skyscraper to be built outside downtown. In July 1952, the 18-story Prudential Building took its place on an expanding Houston skyline three miles from the downtown business district.

Owned today by the University of Texas, it was designed by renowned Houston architect Kenneth Franzheim, and is described as being a masterpiece of local 1950s architecture. “Imbued with a sense of urban style and suburban comfort,” its ground level walls are clad with deep red polished Texas granite, while its upper floors’ walls are Texas limestone. A fountain at its front features a sculpture by American artist William Wheeler entitled *Wave of Life*, depicting a “recumbent man and woman holding aloft a child symbolizing the future.” The lobby is fitted with curved walls featuring tropical hardwood veneers and marble revetments. Opposite the front doors is a mural by famed artist Peter Hurd entitled, “The Future Belongs To Those Who Prepare For It.” Despite efforts by Houston Mod and others, the building is slated for demolition.

Other battles lost include: the sprawling George Mitchell House deemed a “Masterpiece of Organic Modern Design;” the HISD Central Administration building, Houston’s best example of “New Brutalism”; and the Bousquet-Wightman House in River Oaks, designed by Barthelme, who is called a “Master of Modern

Architecture” alongside Frank Lloyd Wright.

Houston’s preservation ordinance is so weak, especially compared to cities such as New York, Chicago and Dallas, it amounts to little more than a 90-day delay in the demolition process, according to Koush. In August 2005, the city did pass a modification to the ordinance establishing a Protected Landmark designation. This status prevents a building from being torn down or altered. The catch, though, is that the city cannot impose the designation, rather the owner must apply for it.

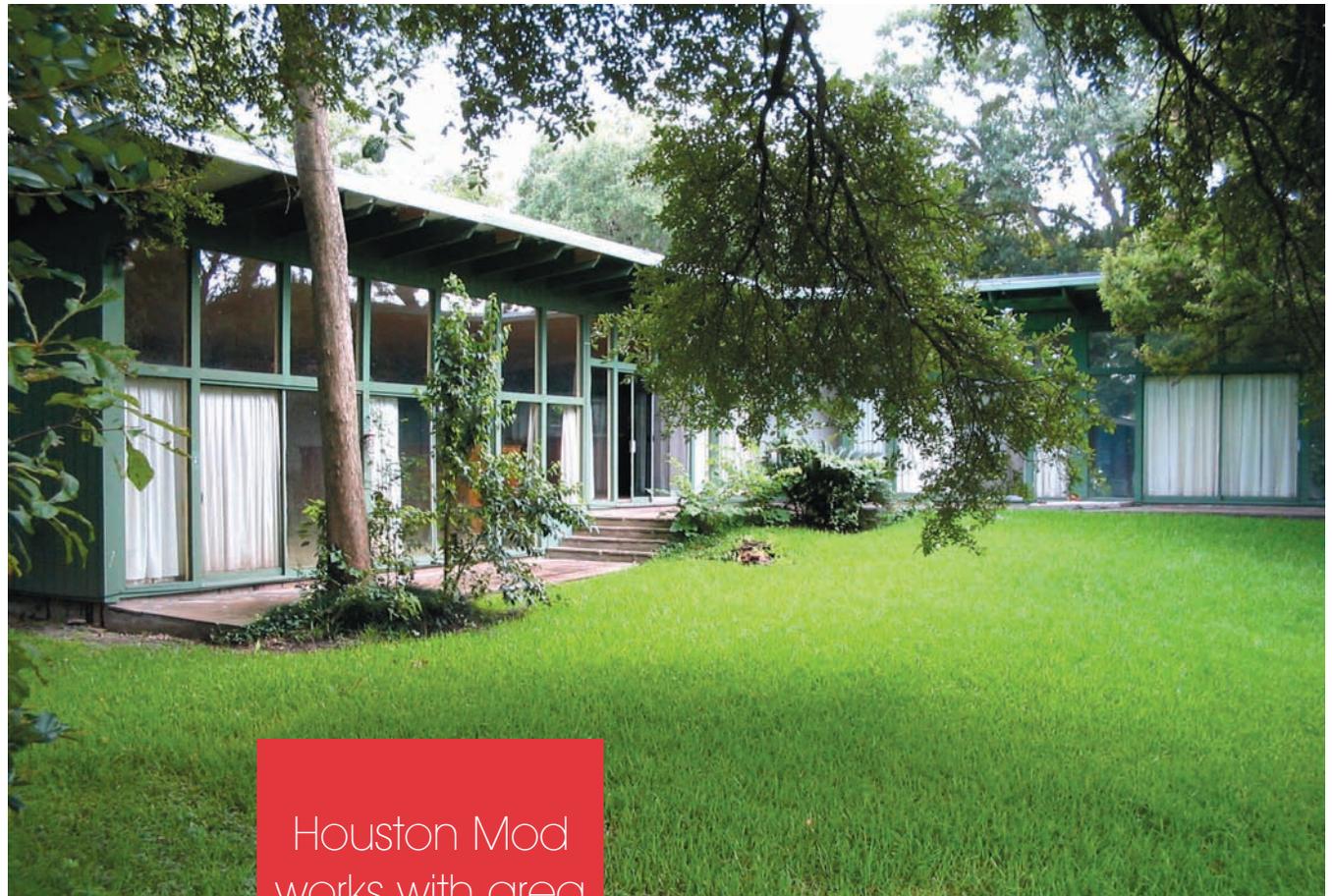
Discouraged that little can be done to stop the corporate world’s wanton destruction, Houston Mod continues its educational campaign but with an emphasis in the residential arena, finding it more efficient to work with single buyers than corporations.

The GI Bill of Rights (1944) opened the door for millions of returning soldiers to purchase homes, and in 1950 alone, more than 1.5 million homes were built nationwide. Architects and designers began careers designing small office buildings and single family dwellings, and according to Koush, one finds outstanding examples of classic mid-century modern homes (MCM) throughout Houston, with such trademark features as flat or butterfly rooflines, front facades, open floor plans, windows, walls of glass, atriums and patios.

Houston Mod works with area realtors and buyers to not only save

CONTINUED...

An MCM home in Glenbrook Valley attracted the attention of four eager buyers.



Houston Mod works with area realtors and buyers to not only save these homes but to also protect their design integrity during remodeling efforts.

....CONTINUED

these homes but to also protect their design integrity during remodeling efforts. Koush purchased a modest 1950 “Century Built Home” from the daughters of the original owner. Constructed of lightweight concrete tiles it features sleek lines, flat roof, enameled steel cabinets and flagstone fireplace, and will soon bear the Protected Landmark designation – the first such home in Houston to do so.

Interest in MCM homes has increased dramatically in recent years amid a “modern mania” trend. There is even a new development in Dallas featuring all mid-century modern homes ala Frank Lloyd Wright designs.

Robert Searcy, realtor and Houston Mod board member (aka, the Mod Squad) first encountered the phenomena with a listing in Glenbrook Valley, a '50s neighborhood off of I-45 and Broadway, which includes homes featured in the 1955 Parade of Homes. One particular green house attracted the interests of a UH professor, an architect, a designer and a mid-century modern furniture collector/dealer. Searcy quickly recognized the interest and has since taken Glenbrook Valley under his wing.

The challenge is finding enough available MCMs to accommodate the demand. He reports one home listed on Craigslist (a web-based site) was snatched up within 24 hours of posting.

The modern homes of yesterday appeal to young adults disenchanted with the McMansions of today. For Tim Glover, a 45-year-old applied physicist, the MCM he purchased represents an era that “embraced an enthusiasm for progress” reflecting his personal philosophy. He also enjoys its connection to the outside via an expanse of glass at the back that overlooks a rich, verdant yard extending out to Sims Bayou.

Attorney Trace Morrill and wife, Jessica, both 30, weren't even in the market for a house, let alone an MCM. But when Searcy showed their friend the 3,900 square foot home, the Morrills fell in love. Its one-of-a-kind design, along with prolific windows and bright light captured their hearts. “It has huge,

huge windows,” Morrill says, “and a ‘corridor of light’ that goes from the living room through the hallway to the dining room.”

So maybe in the end, it proves you can go home again after all, and with a finer appreciation for the vision of a future past.