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On the Ranch

Symposium shares value of Modernism

By Deanna Darr

For years, the humble ranch house has been the maligned member of the neighborhood, as ubiquitous as the suburbs themselves. But, finally, the ranch house is getting some respect—along with the rest of its mid-century architectural peers.

A combination of nonprofit and state agencies is coming together to present one of the first in-depth looks at this distinct style of post-WWII architecture known as Modernism, with "Modernism in the Northwest," a series of lectures, tours and parties Thursday, Sept. 4, and Friday, Sept. 5.



It's an idea whose time has apparently arrive.

Organizer Dan Everhart said he would have been thrilled if registration reached 50 people. At last count, the total was nearing 100, with people coming from the Northwest, as well as Colorado, Iowa, Oklahoma and Washington, D.C.

"[I'm] a little bit baffled," said Everhart, an architectural historian with the Idaho Transportation Department. "I'm not sure how they even heard about [the symposium]. We broadcast the information as widely as we could in the Northwest, but for people to register from Iowa, it just kind of blew me away.

"It's a timely topic and a lot of people are asking the same question we have: why and how important [are these buildings]," he said.

"Modernism in the Northwest" is designed to answer those questions by helping to identify what constitutes Modernism and what deserves preservation.

"The truth is that most of the public, academic material about architecture and what to look for in historic buildings is out there for properties that were constructed before the second World War. There's a real lack of resources and information about historic properties after WWII," Everhart said. "We're trying to educate ourselves and our peers about what to look for and what's important."

The hallmarks of Modernism can be seen everywhere from the '50s ranch-style homes with their long, narrow expanses, to the clean lines and abundance of windows in offices like the Boise company building in downtown Boise or the Intermountain Gas headquarters.

Phillip Mead, associate professor of architecture at the University of Idaho, said the Modernism movement is marked by designs that bring the outside into the home, through larger and more plentiful windows and entrances that lead directly into the yard rather than onto an isolated stoop. These homes also incorporated sliding glass doors for the first time.

"It was more of a connection to the landscape," Mead said. "More traditional designs were more of a disconnect, with small windows and steps leading up to the front door."

The change in architectural style came as a direct result of WWII, during which advances were made in the types and manufacturing of building materials, allowing homes to be built cheaper and faster using new developments like plywood and aluminum windows.

The building boom was also in direct correlation to the population boom following the war, when more families could afford to build their own homes.

At the time, the design style was futuristic, free of the detailed ornamentation found in earlier Queen Anne and Craftsman style homes. "It had a space-age feel," Mead said.

It was a cultural reaction as well, and early leaders in the field called it an international design, which limited regional and ethnic touches. The style first took root in the Northwest, where some of the earliest examples are still found today.

And while the best buildings are still striking, those that were slapped up as builders attempted to mass-produce similar floor plans, or cities tried to save money, haven't held up as well, either stylistically or physically.

"But if it was done right, and it was built well, it's just spectacular," Mead said.

The Modernism symposium is co-sponsored by the transportation department and Preservation Idaho, with support from the Idaho State Historical Society and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, groups that will all soon have to deal with historic designations for many Modernist structures.

With many buildings of this style still readily found across the country, it's hard to imagine they need preserving, but federal law requires that any project using federal money must consider the impact on historic properties. By definition, historic properties are anything 50 years old and older, meaning anything built in 1958 or earlier is included on the list.

"They may not be considered to be significant by the general public, or even some of the professors out there," Everhart said. "This is a way of educating the public about this particular period in our architectural history. It doesn't get a lot of credit, but it's important."

Everhart said some historians and preservationists have a lingering distaste for Modernism since many older, ornate dwellings were ripped down in the 1950s and 1960s to make room for what could be considered the first tract housing developments.

But Everhart argues that just because they seem passe now doesn't mean they are without value.

"By the time we recognize them and value them, they're lost," he said of architectural treasures. "There's a trend of the general public looking at those and thinking, 'ick.'"

"It has a lot to do with familiarity," Everhart said. "As a culture we kind of ... have a use-it-and-throw-it-away mentality. For so many of us, we've grown up in ranch houses. They're so familiar to us that they couldn't possibly be significant, and not all ranch houses or mid-century schools are significant."

Everhart said organizers knew they couldn't just host a tour to accomplish their goals. Instead, they've lined up an impressive series of speakers to help others look at mid-century architecture with a discerning eye.

While the majority of speakers will address just those registered for the symposium, there are several programs

open to the public.

The first will begin at 6 p.m. on Thursday, Sept. 4, at the Intermountain Gas building on Cole Road. Dr. Meredith Clausen will discuss Pietro Belluschi, one of the leaders of the Modernism movement. An Italian immigrant, Belluschi designed the first glass-walled skyscraper in the United States in Portland, Ore. The discussion will be followed by a public reception.

The second day of the symposium will feature Paul Lusignan, who works in the office of the Keeper of the Register—as in the National Register of Historic Places—for the National Parks Service. Lusignan is in charge of reviewing all nominations for the register from the Northwest.

"He's the horse's mouth in terms of what's important," Everhart said.

The public is also invited to join a bus tour of mid-century architecture in Boise, including the Boise company offices, the federal building on Fort Street and assorted residential examples. The two-to-three-hour tour begins at 2:30 p.m. at the ITD office on State Street.

"[They are locations] people probably drive by every day and don't think about," Everhart said.

For more information, visit northwestmodernism.org.

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