

WESTPORT

REAL INTERIOR
DESIGN ISSUE

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CHRIS BYRON

Wall Street's
Feared Pit Bull

EDGE CITY

Why Bridgeport's
Problems Are Also
Your Problems

DECORATORS' SECRET

Consignment
Shops, Really.

AMAZING
ARE YOU BRAVE
ENOUGH FOR MODERN?
SPACES



TRACY TAYLOR WANTED TO SEE THE SOUND AND SUNLIGHT IN HER FAIRFIELD HOME. ARCHITECT ROGER FERRIS SUGGESTED GOING TO A MODERN DESIGN. NOT ALL HOMEOWNERS ARE BRAVE ENOUGH TO TRY IT.



SOME BAD DESIGNS IN THE SIXTIES LEFT PEOPLE
WARY OF MODERN. BUT SOME HOT ARCHITECTS
HAVE WARMED UP THE GENRE AND PROVED THAT
THERE'S LIFE AFTER THE BRADY BUNCH

GETTING OVER THE FEAR OF MODERN

BY TIMOTHY DUMAS

In 1968, when I was seven years old,

the Dumas family moved to a brand new contemporary house in backcountry Greenwich. I must have been perplexed by my parents' decision to build modern, for they had always struck me as pretty old-fashioned people. But here we were, late of a snug forties brick box, hauling our stuff into this many-angled thing with windows like vertical slits and stucco walls painted a flat, cold, institutional white. I thought our house was incredibly ugly. By winter, however, I had made some felicitous discoveries. A patio recessed into the angles of the house proved so adept at collecting snow that we could leap off the balcony into the heaping drifts. The interior held even greater promise for an exuberant child: The open floor plan encouraged football (when you stepped off the rug onto the bare wood floor you were out of bounds), and the loftlike second floor let you drop cocktail peanuts onto the impervious bouffant hairdos of arriving party guests. This contemporary business wasn't so terrible after all.

The hard exterior of our house has softened gracefully over the years, attributable mainly to maturing birch and willow trees and a coat of subtle peach-rose paint that neatly catches the waxing and waning of daylight. As with most contemporaries, the decisive interior feature is glass: Some windows are wall-sized panes facing onto fruit popsicle-colored sunsets. Though my parents' sole expensive art purchase, an oil painting of bare trees in the snow, cracked and faded in the gushing sunlight, this seemed an acceptable price to pay to be able to doze blissfully over the morning paper in the glass-magnified heat.

Our house remains the only contemporary on Crown Lane, and my parents know that it's a tear-down-in-waiting. This makes them sad. A house that is loved and improved seems to acquire a soul. Yet they can hardly miss the drift of architecture in Fairfield County: Everything new seems to be a supersized Georgian, Colonial or shingle-style house, or else some inept amalgam of traditional styles. Perhaps this was inevitable. A spate of dumb contemporaries in the sixties and seventies badly wounded the genre, then the influx of eighties money-filled rich Americans with a nostalgia for Gatsbyish twenties splendor — what Tom Wolfe would call “the hog-stomping Baroque exuberance of American civilization.” Thus was delivered into our midst the McMansion.

All styles get ground down, cheapened, commodified — at present we see this happening to the lovely shingle-style — but the contemporary was singled out for special abuse. “When you hear a real estate broker refer to a house as a contemporary,” says Frederick Hoag of the Westport architectural firm Atmosphere, “you immediately think of something that was done in the sixties with the cheapest material possible.”



IN A MARRIAGE OF FUNCTION AND BEAUTY, THE TAYLOR HOUSE FEATURES HORIZONTAL CYPRESS LOUVERS THAT PERMIT YOU TO SEE OUT WHILE RETAINING PRIVACY FROM THE OUTSIDE.

WOODRUFF/BROWN PHOTOGRAPHY

Never mind the bastardized contemporary; even the originals held out as masterpieces got little respect among the hog-stompers. Did you know that New Canaan circa 1950 was a hotbed of contemporary house design? A modernist cabal known as the Harvard Five (Philip Johnson foremost among them) settled there and dotted the landscape with sleek, flat-topped little boxes. "These homes were like pariahs," notes Joeb Moore of Kaehler & Moore in Greenwich. "We like to think that the Harvard Five somehow integrated into the history of New Canaan. Not the case. They were looked on with a great deal of suspicion: 'These don't look like Connecticut Colonials!'"

These days architects and historians consider them jewels that must be saved from the backhoe, while homebuyers mostly can't wait to let the backhoe at them. To homebuyers, sometimes less is just less. Which brings us to the question that hovers godlike over all: What about resale value? The classic contemporary, with its emphasis on using space well, tends to be quite small. If you were to buy one, knock it down and build a McMansion in its place, you'd be able to send any number of kids to college with the money you made on the resale.

So contemporary architecture carries

major baggage: If it's not poorly done, then it's cold and unwelcoming or a bad investment. Is it any wonder that we in Fairfield County stave off the contemporary house with everything short of garlic and crucifixes? "I am building classical homes because I have no other choice," says Jean Baptiste Ducruet, Hoag's partner at Atmosphere. "I would prefer to build a modern house, but you have to go with the market."

In the last decade, however, contemporary stuff has seeped almost unnoticed into everyone's lives. First we saw exciting new product designs. Your coffeemaker, your computer and your car may well be contemporary groundbreakers, even if your house is Georgian. And suddenly, according to Roger Ferris, who heads an eponymous Westport architectural firm, "Even in those houses where people

want a traditional container, whether it's neoclassical or Georgian or shingle style, they ask if one room can be contemporary. Usually, it's the kitchen. Now kitchens are contemporary machines almost." Kitchens today, total homes tomorrow? Are we seeing the leading edge of a third- or fourth-wave modern-design revolution?

The answer may turn on how contemporary architecture redefines itself for a new generation of homebuyers. "The classic question is, can contemporary be cozy? Of course it can!" Ferris says. "Frank Lloyd Wright designed very contemporary houses that could be too cozy. You have to convince clients that they can have warm woods, that they can have a sense of craft, evidence that workmen made this. Then it's approachable — not severe, not like living in someone's architectural statement."

"Things are turning around," says Gisue Hariri, who, with her sister, heads the renowned New York firm of Hariri & Hariri. "Modernism today is not the same modernism practiced in the twenties and thirties. There were flaws. The office that was trying to be a house — that sort of thing. But we have become smarter and have learned and corrected these things. We are moving toward the poetic, the artistic, the cultured."

THE CLASSIC QUESTION IS, CAN CONTEMPORARY BE COZY? OF COURSE IT CAN! FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT DESIGNED VERY CONTEMPORARY HOUSES THAT COULD BE TOO COZY.
— ROGER FERRIS