for these houses were the academics and professionals largely responsible for the birth and flowering of the post-industrial information revolution, and there is growing historical evidence that the Modern house was both a symbol and a key component of the lifestyle aspirations of many in this group.

Both the architects and the patrons of these houses believed that their designs constituted an appropriate response to the question of how to lead a contemporary life — a life fully cognizant and respectful of the unique history, character and environment of New England — without denying the proper place of their homes as a reflection of the United States at mid-century. The first of these houses were not, as previously assumed, simply a reaction to the coming of Walter Gropius to Harvard in 1937; in fact, the decision of Gropius and the Storrs family (his patron) to build his house in Lincoln was probably reinforced by the existence of a culture in the western suburbs of Boston that was receptive to these ideas. The first Modern house in New England had already been designed and built in Belmont by Eleanor Raymond in 1932, and in 1934, Edwin (Ned) Goodell, an MIT-trained architect recently converted to the cause of European Modernism, designed a house for a law professor and an art historian in neighboring Weston (a recent preservation cause célèbre). Even in Lincoln itself, architect Henry Hoover had built his own Modern house around 1934, the first of some 60 highly site-sensitive houses that he would author in the region over the next 50 years.

The period of World War II saw both the creation of a significant demand for housing and the solidification of the cultural changes necessary to create the desire for a modern way of life. In 1940, Carl Koch began the Snake Hill development of Modern homes in Belmont, and by 1948, the young partners of The Architects Collaborative (TAC) developed residences for themselves and a few friends at Six Moon Hill in Lexington, one of the most significant planned neighborhoods of the Modern Movement in the US. Espousing Bauhaus rhetoric softened to reflect the new realities of building in a progressive and prosperous corner of the world, this community represents a successful augmentation of the American pastoral ideal with some common amenities and a common governing purpose that continues to serve as a model for high-quality, low-density suburban development.

Why attach this significance to the single-family house? American social and architectural theorists, from Jefferson to Wright, have repeatedly championed the idea of the house as the mainstay of the family and the land, a very different notion from that commonly accepted in post-Enlightenment Europe. Therefore, while many of the iconic symbols of Modernism in Europe are social housing projects such as the Siedlungen of Frankfurt and Stuttgart, some of its most important manifestations in this country are to be found in the suburban single-family house. Much has been written, starting with Siegfried Giedion in the 1940s, about the Modern house in the Northeast as a regionalist response to the principles and the iconic forms of European Modernism. But it is misleading to assume that these architects were seeking merely to develop a contemporary interpretation of the traditional New England saltbox. In a profound cultural shift, nature, traditionally regarded as an adversary in our harsh northern climate, was now something that could be embraced as a result of the tempering effects of modern building technology. The seductive notion of “the machine in the garden” — that is, an artifact co-existing with but independent of nature — reached its residential apotheosis with Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House of 1948-51; in New England it became softened and delicately attuned to the local environment. Even Philip
Johnson’s canonical Glass House of 1949 (clearly the result of a careful study of Mies) was a step in this direction, with its stout brick hearth and plinth rooted firmly in the American earth. However, the early houses of Marcel Breuer (who co-authored the Gropius House) offer even stronger examples, with their use of natural fieldstone, vertical board siding, and the occasional low-sloped pitched roof. New England began the conscious embrace of the alternative, regionally sensitive Modernism that began with architects such as Alvar Aalto in Europe and William Wurster in California before the war.

The layout and material palette of these houses showcased a relaxed efficiency, an integral accommodation of contemporary technology; an appreciation of transparency to foster a sympathetic dialogue with nature, and the visual and tactile qualities of natural materials. They were site-specific, carefully oriented to sun and topography, and generally disturbed little of their surroundings — their informality welcoming a more natural and less manicured setting. Far from being cold, hard-edged temples of glass and steel, most of the Modern houses in New England are still warm and wonderful places to live. The best tend to be at once spacious and intimate, and even the most luxurious underscstand their elegance, without ever indulging in the soulless excess so unfortunately evident in the ubiquitous “mansions” of the new suburban landscape. In addition, their open-plan layouts anticipated many of the requisite amenities of today’s houses, making them easily adaptable for 21st-century use.

This flexibility and ease of adaptation renders the Modern house a prime candidate for preservation and adaptive re-use. The houses of Six Moon Hill admirably showcase this flexibility. Each of the original houses has been enlarged and renovated at least once, sometimes substantially increasing the original size. In all cases however, the character of the original spatial relations and material ideas continue to glow through the alterations, and the houses remain as unmistakably Modern today as they were in 1948. Intelligent preservation should always foster a holistic vision that is based upon enhancing the character-defining features of the structure rather than focusing upon slavish restoration or replication of original materials and details. In addressing the architecture of the Modern Movement in particular, preservation should foster fidelity to the treatment of the social, technical and aesthetic idea embodied in the work as much as (if not more than) to the physical fabric of a building. The Modern Movement, after all, was never intended to be a style. It was a way of building — a way that still has relevance today.

The Modern House in New England

Chamberlain House, 1940
Wayland, Massachusetts
Architect: Marcel Breuer with Walter Gropius

House at Six Moon Hill, 1949
Lexington, Massachusetts
Architect: TAC

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