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Cape Cod Modern: Midcentury Architecture And Community On The Outer Cape



Synopsis

In the summer of 1937, Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus and a professor at Harvard's new Graduate School of Design, rented a house on Planting Island, near the base of Cape Cod. There, he and his wife, Ise, hosted a festive reunion of Bauhaus masters and students who had recently emigrated from Europe: Marcel Breuer, Herbert Bayer, László Moholy-Nagy, Xanti Schawinsky and others. Together they feasted, swam and planned their futures on a new continent, all sensing they were on the cusp of a momentous new phase in their lives. Yet even as they moved on, the group never lost its connection to the Cape Cod coast. Several members returned, when they had the means, to travel farther up the peninsula, rent cabins, buy land and design their ideal summer homes. Thus began a chapter in the history of modern architecture that has never been told--until now. The flow of talent onto the Outer Cape continued and, within a few years, the area was a hotbed of intellectual currents from New York, Boston, Cambridge and the country's top schools of architecture and design. Avant-garde homes began to appear in the woods and on the dunes; by the 1970s, there were about 100 modern houses of interest here. In this story, we meet, among others, the Boston Brahmins Jack Phillips and Nathaniel Saltonstall; the self-taught architect, carpenter and painter Jack Hall; the Finn Olav Hammarström, who had worked for Alvar Aalto; and the prolific Charlie Zehnder, who brought the lessons of both Frank Lloyd Wright and Brutalism to the Cape. Initially, these designers had no clients; they built for themselves and their families, or for friends sympathetic to their ideals. Their homes were laboratories, places to work through ideas without spending much money. The result of this ferment is a body of work unlike any other, a regional modernism fusing the building traditions of Cape Cod fishing towns with Bauhaus concepts and postwar experimentation.

Book Information

Hardcover: 272 pages

Publisher: Metropolis Books (June 30, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1935202162

ISBN-13: 978-1935202165

Product Dimensions: 1.2 x 8.8 x 11 inches

Shipping Weight: 3.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars See all reviews (34 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Cape Cod Modern tells the little-known story of how some of the best mid-century architects and designers (Breuer, Chermayeff, others) came to build simple, exceptional summer homes out at the end of Cape Cod. The book's research is extraordinary, full of information with intriguing details large and small. The writing is first rate. Such texts often omit the human tales or get tied up in analytic minutia. This text flows compellingly and brings the singular undertaking alive. Finally, the pictures are splendid, fully delivering on the claimed excellence of these designs.

This is a book about "the day before yesterday," an elegant look at recent history on Cape Cod that transcends the kitsch obsession with the architecture of earlier years and brings home design and construction into the 20th century. It took a handful of highly-educated and talented European refugees in the years right after WWII, colluding with open-minded Americans from Boston, New York and Cape Cod, to begin re-thinking the Cape Cod house. More than 100 innovative, sometimes frankly-experimental homes were built along the lines of simplicity, economy, liveability and respect for the land itself; privacy was wrested from public areas, light and space became prime considerations, ornament and "trim" were re-considered as generally unnecessary. It was a new way of thinking about life on the beach or in the woods that had traditionally characterized Cape Cod residential construction, and it had long-lasting effect on American architectural design as well as on the professional reputations of dozens of men and women who went on to illustrative international careers in engineering, furniture and textile design, commercial architecture, teaching, and residential design. The book is well-illustrated, there is a treasure of photographs and anecdotes and site plans, and the format and writing are exceptional. An excellent book that enlarges our understanding of Cape Cod history and the importance of house preservation, even as the daily newspapers indicate the relevance of this period to current events in the outer Cape regarding modern home construction.

I'm from this area, and my dream house is one that blends traditional Cape Cod style with contemporary architecture. When I saw the cover to this book, I thought I would be seeing several contemporary examples of homes like the one on the cover on the inside, too. Instead, the book emphasizes the history and evolution of this particular architectural style on Cape Cod, and uses

photos of mostly older houses to support the narrative. It's not that the book itself isn't interesting or well done; it's both. It's just not what I was expecting based on the cover and what little I could preview inside before purchasing.

I enjoyed this book but - my personal bias - would have enjoyed it still more with fewer words and more pictures of the architecture. The descriptive material on is accurate: as stated the book is mostly about the unique community of architecturally-aware people that gathered on mid-century Cape Cod; details of the resulting architecture are much less emphasized. The style itself appeals to me. I called it in the '70s 'New England Modern', and built two houses in Connecticut in roughly the same vernacular. There are not too many books that collect or isolate this particular style, so it's worth getting.

I have to confess to some bias as we have a home in Truro and discovering the origins of various homes and then actually visiting/driving by..them is a winning combination. The book is beautifully illustrated and wonderfully written. I'd love it even if I did not have the luxury of seeing these one of a kind treasures.

For an architecture book, this was very interesting as it delved into a period of time with great insight into the people who lived in the area. Photos, anecdotes and biographical information brought the homes and their owners to life. A wonderful read.

I love Mid-C Modern, but guess what, who knew about this Cape Cod thing! Guess I spent too much time looking at saltboxes and federals. Mostly b/w pictures, not a 'decorating book'. Buy it for the "and Community on the Outer Cape".. The book is about the people who built these houses. A fascinating read for anyone who loves Mid-C Modern, Cape Cod and Bohemia! (A Saltonstall?) Who knew.

Entirely happy with the book and the promptness with which my order was filled. Love the houses tucked away in the recesses of the still somewhat unspoiled terrain of the outer Cape. Like finding a treasure when you read about these very interesting and novel architectural creations.

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