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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.

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Customer Reviews

"Cape Cod Modern reveals one of the East Coast's best-kept architectural secrets: an enclave of disarmingly unpretentious houses In this rich cultural setting, left-leaning figures . . . dined on plywood tables, bathed nude in brisk waters on principle and exercised elastic morals among the unpainted two-by-fours. It was a summer camp for consenting, distinctly un-Puritanical intellectuals. And the party needn't be over." [— Joseph Giovannini, New York Times](#) "An eye-opening history of an overlooked moment in modern architecture." [— Dana Jennings, New York Times](#) "Aficionados as well as those curious about these architectural gems will be interested in Cape Cod Modern, a name-dropping beauty that covers not only the designers of the odd-shaped, rustic 'summer camps in the air,' as the coauthors call them, but their parties and intellectual ferment." [— Jan Gardner, Boston Globe](#) For nearly four decades, Cape Cod was a haven where two different sets of designers--European modernists and local nonconformists--found common ground, working hard during the daytime, then repairing to each other's houses for cocktails and bonfires at night...Cape Cod Modern, by McMahon and the architectural journalist Christine Cipriani, [will] be published by Metropolis Books in June. Full of fascinating primary research, archival photographs and lavish color pictures of the houses today--well--preserved and not--it opens a window onto a part of Cape life that has been secreted away in the woods for years, partly because that's what its creators intended. -- Carol Kino, WSJ Magazine, Wall Street Journal "Walter Gropius was tired.' That is the fabulous first sentence [—](#) to this engaging book. . . . A sweeping celebration of modernism anchored by a strong sense of place, [—](#) Cape Cod Modern [—](#) is a must-read for anyone interested in architecture, maritime history, artistic communities, the Cape itself, Yankee do-it-yourself determination and Thoreauvian love of the land. Without McMahon and Cipriani's efforts this mostly unknown chapter in the history of modern architecture would've been forever lost." [— Design Within Reach, Design Notes](#) "More than just a paean to an architectural style, Cape Cod Modern illuminates a rich, under-examined moment [—](#) from 1938 to 1977 [—](#) when the towns of the Outer Cape drew a hyper-creative crowd of design-besotted artists and intellectuals. . . . The book traces the flowering of a distinctly regional modernism marked not by flashy commissions but instead by deeply personal spaces meant for repose." [— Elle Decor](#) "A vibrant cultural history that considers how time, place, and intersecting lives coalesced to generate the built environment. . . . The pages of Cape

Cod Modern brim with captivating images, original scholarship, unexpected legacies, and humorous anecdotes. . . . [these] cultural memories have been preserved with great dedication and joy." — Susan Morgan, *Modern magazine* "The story of these structures, including a terrific natural and cultural history of the Cape, is lovingly detailed in the book *Cape Cod Modern*." — — — — — • Anthony Flint, *Metropolis* "Intriguing and meticulously researched survey of modernism by the sea." — — — — — • Mayer Rus, *Architectural Digest*

"A beautifully written book with a tremendous sense of time and place." -- John Pawson, John Pawson Architects Ltd, London "Rigorously researched and meticulously documented, *Cape Cod Modern* narrates an extraordinary era of architectural experiments in spatial organization and materials on the Outer Cape. These houses are not only examples of an alternate legacy of the 'masters' of modern architecture. They are diagrams of a very particular worldview and recommendations for a specific way of living -- progressive and enlightened, with art at its center." -- K. Michael Hays, Eliot Noyes Professor of Architectural Theory, Harvard Graduate School of Design "One of the missing links in East Coast modernism has been beautifully uncovered and brought to light by Peter McMahon and Christine Cipriani. Beyond a mere documentation of forgotten architecture, *Cape Cod Modern* is a first-rate chronicle of a special place and period in American cultural history." -- Alastair Gordon, co-publisher, *Fire Island Modernist: Horace Gifford and the Architecture of Seduction*, and author, *Weekend Utopia: Modern Living in the Hamptons* "Fascinating -- an elegantly written, well researched, highly readable account of the creation and flowering of a world of social and intellectual exchange, its characters, influences, and traditions, and the refined, austere, and delightful houses that are its legacy." -- George McNeely, *World Monuments Fund*

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 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.

I love Cape Cod and anything that sheds light on its history. I've noticed some of these houses for years, and they are unobtrusive and a little mysterious. It's nice to get the backstory on how and why they were built, and by whom.

Inspiring!!! I enjoy the work of McMahon, especially, as it relates to both the preservation and restoration of a significant aspect of modernism in Cape Cod. Great reference material....

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.

Great book

Very accessible and very thoughtfully written (most unusual for an architecture book!), discussing a handful of wonderfully modest, delightful buildings, and the people who created and loved them. An inspiration.

Gorgeous and very well-written history of the wonderful mid-century architecture on the Cape. An excellent companion on the coffee table to another great book - Fire Island Modernist.

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