

# Prince George's Modern

MIDCENTURY ARCHITECTURE 1941-1978



Above: Palmer Ford Showroom, Jamestown Road, John S. Samperton & Associates, 1960. (Demolished 1990) Courtesy Hyattsville: Our Hometown

## INTRODUCTION

The recent past is now a driving force in historic preservation. Organizations such as [Docomomo US](#) have been established to recognize buildings of the period, and historic communities across the country have made it part of their mission to study mid-twentieth-century modern architecture.

Yet Midcentury Modern buildings are among the most underappreciated and vulnerable aspects of Prince George's County's architectural heritage. Fine examples of Midcentury Modern buildings have aesthetic value and community importance and can have a role in sustainable planning. As with any type of historic building that possesses integrity, Midcentury Modern properties “embody a transcendent and enduring memory that accurately conveys a sense of what life used to be like.”<sup>1</sup> Ongoing demolition and alteration is diminishing the tangible presence of the County's recent history. Identifying individual properties and documenting their architectural and cultural value can play an important part in helping to understand our shared past.

The Historic Preservation Section of the Prince George's County Planning Department has developed an initial [table of properties](#) that will be expanded and enhanced as discovery and documentation continue. The immediate goal of the list is to generate awareness—for those who are already intrigued by the County's Midcentury Modern architecture it provides a place to explore that interest. This narrative accompanying the table positions the County's midcentury resources in the context of history to gain understanding of their overall significance.

*...[W]e live in the past. That is, the world that surrounds us is not new. The things in it, our houses, the places we work, even our clothes and our cars aren't created anew every day. So any particular period is an amalgam of many earlier times.*

—Thom Anderson  
*Los Angeles Plays Itself*; 2003



M-NCPPC's 1958 General Plan with midcentury boomerang.

**M**odern architecture developed in the late nineteenth century as a reaction to the revivals of historical forms,<sup>2</sup> and sought to be an authentic style for its time. Simply stated, modern architecture is the expression of structure and the elimination of ornament; such ornament as there is seeks to be a pure expression of that structure and/or of function. In America, Post-World War II modern architecture was an extrapolation of turn-of-the-century conventions already established, but not widely put into practice, by **Le Corbusier** and the **Bauhaus**. (The exceptions are work by **Eero Saarinen** and **Frank Lloyd Wright**.)

After 1945, when materials once again became available and a demand for new construction exploded, the vast majority of new commercial buildings were modern: “the new technology was ready for the new architecture, and vice-versa.”<sup>3</sup> Modern architecture’s popularity was supported by a widespread aspiration to break from older building traditions as a new world order was forming. Its stature in America was enhanced by the presence of Bauhaus luminaries such as **Walter Gropius** and **Mies Van der Rohe**, who, having fled the Nazi regime, settled in the United States and lent their authority to the movement.

There is not one, but “many modern architectures,”<sup>4</sup> or styles that fit under the umbrella of modernism. Most prevalent in Prince George’s County, and throughout the world, was what came to be known as the **International Style**. As defined by Alfred H. Barr, first director of the **Museum of Modern Art**, “The distinguishing aesthetic principles of the International Style...are three: emphasis upon volume—space enclosed by thin planes or surfaces as opposed to the suggestion of mass and solidity; regularity as opposed to symmetry or other kinds of obvious balance; and, lastly, dependence upon the intrinsic elegance of materials, technical perfection, and fine proportions as opposed to applied ornament.”<sup>5</sup> These qualities are present in the best County

*There always exists a real need to re-examine the work of the past. There is, presumably, almost always a generic interest in architectural history among architects; but the aspects, or periods, of history that seem at any given time to merit the closest attention certainly vary with changing sensibilities.*

—Henry-Russell Hitchcock  
quoted in Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1966



1962 Opening of the Hyattsville Municipal Building  
(Hyattsville: Our Hometown)

examples of the style: the **Celtic Building** (1957), **WSSC Headquarters additions** (1953; 1963), the **A. R. Keir Building** (1963), the **Hyattsville Branch Library** (1964), the **Mech-Con Building** (1965), the **Mid-Atlantic Trucking Association Building** (1965), and **M-NCPPC's Regional Headquarters** (1967).

**A**merican art, advertising, architecture, design, and fashion at midcentury were hugely influential and cast a long shadow over the following decades. Many of the era's cultural artifacts have long been recognized as possessing enduring value for their high-quality design and historical associations. The best of the work has been accepted into the canon of the timeless. Since Prince George's County grew rapidly during this period, it is rich with many excellent examples of modern architecture.

In the 1960s, Prince George's County was the fastest-growing county in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Growth had begun in the 1930s due to the County's proximity to the nation's capital and its burgeoning federal government. New roads (the Beltway opened in 1964) and buildings were constructed to meet the demand for housing, shopping, offices, and worship space. Churches, always an important county building type, were ideally suited for the soaring roofs and light permitted by modern construction technologies and design trends. An example is the 1962 **First United Methodist Church of Hyattsville**—prominently featured in **On Wedges and Corridors**, M-NCPPC's 1964 General Plan. M-NCPPC steered the way for modern-movement government offices with its glass and marble Regional Headquarters on Kenilworth Avenue, designed by Edwin Ball in 1967. The ambitious New Town Center of Prince George's Plaza was enhanced by three towers designed by internationally renowned modern master **Edward Durell Stone**. The furious suburbanization finally subsided in 1970, due in part to the end of the postwar baby boom and a slowdown in the rate of government growth (it would resume in the 1990s). Many

*In its overpowering presence and thrilling beauty, the world of the machine not only engulfed people's lives—it swept over their imagination...Architecture was under the imperative to “adapt” to the machine age and was inspired to do so in the near-worship of the machine.*

—Marvin Trachtenberg and Isabella Hyman  
*Architecture: From Prehistory to Post-Modernism*, 1986

*The premier notion was that a new aesthetic standard rooted in technology—known to some today as mid-century modernism—was also the epitome of functionality: faster, larger, sturdier.”*

—Steven Heller,  
*Mid-Century Ads*, 2012

1950s Moyaone Reserve  
brochure, Accokeek



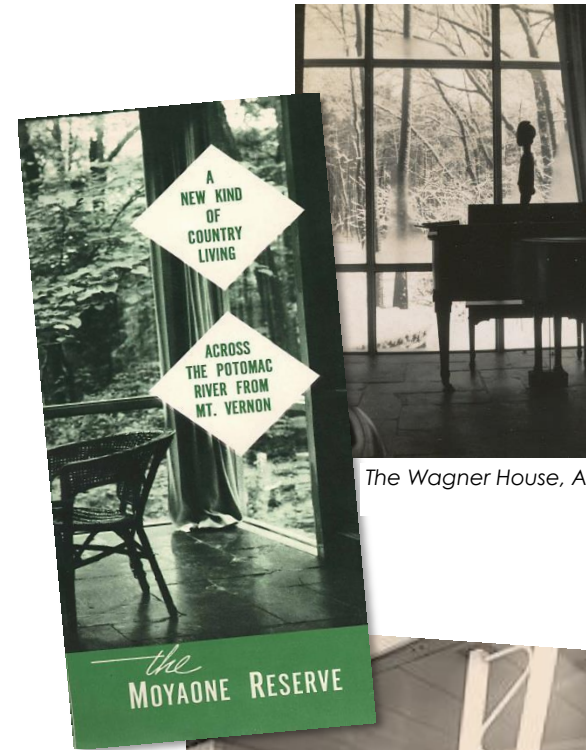
A midcentury collage from M-NCPPC's *On Wedges and Corridors*

subdivisions and thousands of single-family houses were constructed during this period. When compared with multifamily and commercial buildings of modern aesthetic, single-family residential architecture continued—and continues—to accommodate the taste of most Americans by relying on premodern architectural traditions. Midcentury Modern dwellings, such as the Marenka House in College Park, the 6 Lustron Houses there and in Temple Hills, and the 14 works of Charles Wagner in Accokeek, are relatively rare.

By the mid-to-late 1970s, lock-step adherence to modernist dogma and endless, slapdash versions of International Style and other motifs looked dreary and uninspired to a new generation. What was considered to be stylish and appropriate in architecture began to change; the then-new Postmodern architecture, for example, incorporated revival motifs such as split pediments. Despite modern architecture's aspirations of being a durable movement suitable for the modern age, like all styles, it became outmoded. Yet as the mid-twentieth century recedes, there is renewed appreciation for Midcentury Modern buildings and their purity of design and the principles they embodied. As Americans continue to mine our yesterdays for inspiration,\* Midcentury Modern themes are appearing in new building designs, such as the initial rendering of the County's proposed **regional medical center**. But there have been losses, mainly in the northwest region of the County where many of the resources are located. In a reversal representing evolving transportation modes, the elegant 1960 **Palmer Ford Showroom** was demolished for a Washington Metro station in 1990. Paul Kea's 1962

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\* As Thomas Hine noted in *Populuxe* as early as 1986, "We have become a ruminative society, gaining our nourishment from spitting up and chewing over pieces of the past" (page 178). Such rumination or nostalgia should not be confused with historic preservation, which seeks to preserve the physical fabric of the past for its intrinsic, cultural and educational value.



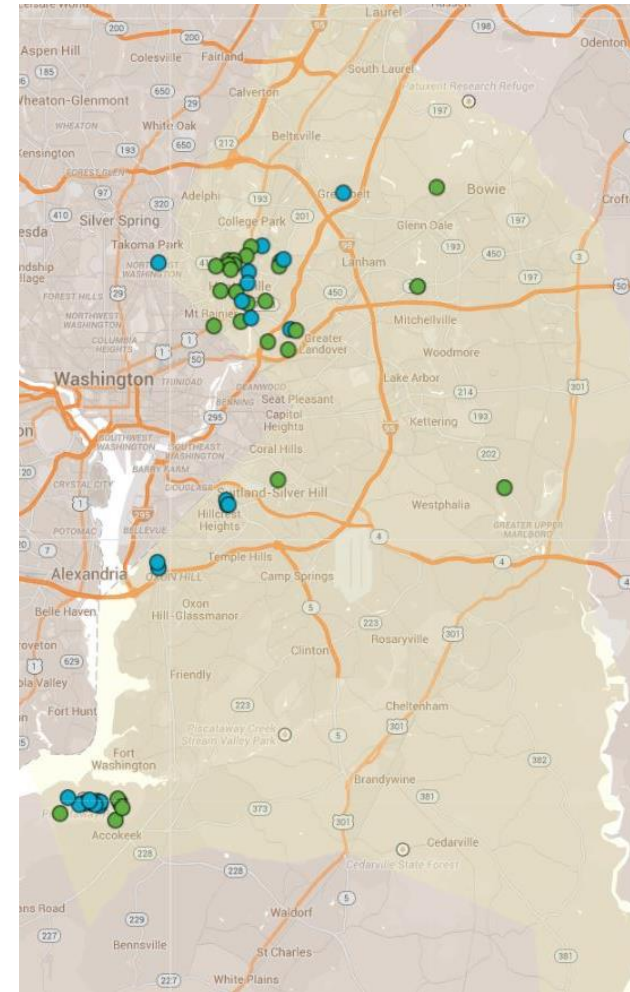
The Wagner House, Accokeek



Entrance detail, 1949 Crumly-Murray( Lustron )House, Temple Hills

**Hyattsville Municipal Building**, a collage of panels and windows raised on pilotis, was razed in 2006. The once state-of-the-art **Hyattsville Branch Library**, with its unique flying saucer entrance, is soon to be demolished.

Identified County buildings are concentrated in three areas: on the Annapolis Road/MD 1 corridor, with 1950s resources built along those roads and 1960s resources further out; aligned to the southwest of Southern Avenue; and in the Moyaone Reserve in Accokeek. There is an impressive and appealing diversity of designs, types, and functions. Inventive explorations of space-age themes can be found in the **Hyattsville Branch Library** and **La Reine High School** in Suitland. **Greenbelt Community Church**, from 1951, is a midcentury evolution of Greenbelt's earlier **Moderne** motifs. The **Lustron Corporation's** prefabricated houses brought the modern aesthetic to the middle class. Midcentury complexes such as **Kiplinger Editors Park**, **Volkswagen Offices** and the **Pepsi-Cola Plant** combined administrative and industry on a single site, and represented vital, large-scale investments in the County, as well as important architecture. These buildings make valuable contributions to Prince George's County history and architectural history. The architects and firms that practiced and built here have local, regional, and national significance. Consider: those evanescent qualities we seek when creating or revitalizing our neighborhoods and communities—style, sophistication, authenticity, a true sense of place—can be found not only in the new and the antique, but at midcentury.



Map shows identified Midcentury Modern buildings. Blue indicates 1940s-1950s resources; green indicates 1960s-1970 resources.



Board Members meeting at the new Hyattsville Library, 1964

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<sup>1</sup> John Chase, *Glitter Stucco & Dumpster Diving*; Verso, 2000, page 201.

<sup>2</sup> William J.R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*; 1987, Phaidon Press, page 8.

<sup>3</sup> Marvin Tractenberg and Isabella Hyman, *Architecture: From Prehistory to Post-Modernism*; Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1986, p. 487.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 488.

<sup>5</sup> Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style*; 1932, 1966, W. W. Norton & Company, page 8.

<sup>6</sup> The Washington Center for Metropolitan Studies released a report on April 28, 1975 that stated, "In that decade [the 1960s], Prince George's was the most rapidly growing major suburb of the most rapidly growing major metropolitan area in the nation. Its population increased by over 300,000 or 85 percent." The 300,000 number/85% growth rate is substantiated by census data. See also *Prince George's County: A Pictorial History* by Alan Virta, page 212.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**What is modern architecture?** Modern architecture, of which the earliest physical manifestations date from the late nineteenth century, was part of the Western philosophical movement “modernism,” which rejected [Enlightenment](#) thinking and was shaped by the development of industrial societies. Modern architects believed new technology made traditional styles and building modes obsolete. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, modern architecture was supplanted in popularity by postmodern architecture, which had its own architectural sub-movement in which historic styles of ornament were referenced and often used ironically or as abbreviated motifs.

**What is the difference between modern and contemporary architecture?** Although often used interchangeably with “modern,” contemporary architecture refers to the architecture of today—or the very recent past—that is not a revival of earlier styles. Recent buildings executed in revival motifs might be termed “New Traditional,” for example, rather than contemporary.

**What is the difference between modern architecture and Midcentury Modern architecture?** Ultimately, it is the period (at its broadest, 1940-1970) that defines Midcentury Modern architecture: a continuation of the modern architectural movement (once the early twentieth-century “heroic epoch of discovery was over” as John Jacobus wrote) influenced by the socio-economic conditions, philosophy, materials, and technology of the time.

**What date range defines Midcentury Modern?** The range as defined for this study is approximately 1950-1970. Our survey reaches to 1947 to include Charles Wagner’s first house, and extends to 1971 to capture the third Edward Durell Stone Prince George’s Plaza building (Metro 3), which was designed in the early 1960s.

**What is the “Fifty-Year Rule”?** In the field of historic preservation, a building or site is considered eligible to be *evaluated* for historic significance after fifty years have passed. This period of time was established for use with the National Register of Historic Places. Buildings or sites of exceptional importance at the national, state, or local levels may be evaluated earlier. An example is the 1966 [Spacecraft Magnetic Test Facility](#) in Greenbelt, which was listed as a National Historic Landmark in 1985.

**Midcentury doesn’t seem historic!** There are several reasons we might feel this way, including the fact that people are living longer. The rate of change to our surroundings (and even to stylistic tastes) has also slowed in most of the developed world. This can make it challenging to understand why the preservation of something that seems just “dated” might be worthwhile. [Novelist and essayist Kurt Anderson wrote about this phenomenon in 2012.](#)



**Does everything “become historic” after 50 years?** No. Resources still have to be evaluated for integrity and significance. This is especially true of post-World War II buildings for three reasons: after World War II, methods of construction and designs became standardized, making many buildings alike; the massive building campaign means there can be thousands of examples of a single type; and, finally, many buildings were constructed without consideration for aesthetics and, lacking connections with a significant event or person, have no aspects worthy of preservation. Local significance plays an important part in evaluating a given building's historic value.

**Why are there properties in the table that aren't 50 years old?** Eight properties in the [table](#) date from 1966-1971. Two are Moyaone Reserve residences designed by Charles Wagner that continue his work in the same genre and region; two are Edward Durrell Stone towers designed in the early 1960s and executed later; and one is Edwin Ball's 1967 M-NCPPC Regional Headquarters, which was documented and evaluated by third parties in 2005, 2011, and 2012. The remaining three consist of two Ball residences from 1967-1969 and a 1969 insurance building that are midcentury designs and could be documented in the near future and evaluated after they reach the 50-year mark.



*Kiplinger Editors Park opening, 1960. (Courtesy The Kiplinger Washington Editors, Inc.)*

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FURTHER READING

### ***Architecture: From Prehistory to Post-Modernism***

Marvin Trachtenberg and Isabelle Hyman's 1986 work is eloquent on the transition from historical styles to modernism and the midcentury forces that formed the architecture of the period.

### ***The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago***

Hans M. Wingler's comprehensive book on the subject.

### ***Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture***

Robert Venturi's 1966 work "expresses...the postmodern rebellion against the purism of modernism." Hitchcock's quote at the beginning of this essay is taken out of context to turn our attention to aspects of Midcentury Modern architecture worthy of study.

### ***From Bauhaus to Our House***

Published in 1981 at the end of the International Style's reign, Tom Wolfe's work is a spirited analysis of how American architecture achieved its current state. Notable for its sympathetic analysis of the later work of Edward Durrell Stone.

### ***Glitter Stucco & Dumpster Diving***

Although its focus is on consumerist architecture, John Chase's essay "Duty and the Beast" crystallizes important issues about historic preservation and the recent past.

### ***Hyattsville: Our Hometown 1886-1986***

Many photographs from the mid-twentieth century.

### ***Images of America: Hyattsville***

A wealth of period regional photographs.

### ***The International Style***

Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson's seminal, influential document was written for the first architectural exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932 and elucidates the concepts of Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus.

### ***The Language of Clothes***

Alison Lurie's study of apparel and its meanings.

### ***Los Angeles Plays Itself***

Thom Anderson's film documentary about how Los Angeles is depicted in film touches on both planning and historic preservation.

### **Mid-Century Ads**

Jim Heimann and Steven Heller's compilation of the best American print advertising of the 1950s and 1960s shows how Midcentury Modern architecture was a vital backdrop.

### **Modern Architecture Since 1900**

The standard work on the subject by William J. R. Curtis.

### **National Register Bulletin 22: Evaluating and Nominating Properties that Have Achieved Significance within the Past Fifty Years**

"Generally, our understanding of history does not advance a year at a time, but rather in periods of time which can logically be examined together." (p.6)

### **The Pan Am Building and the Shattering of the Modernist Dream**

Meredith Clausen's analysis of how the notorious New York City tower became a symbol of modernism's fall from grace; notable also for its discussion on how Pan Am's construction spurred historic preservation efforts.

### **Populuxe**

A richly illustrated analysis of American material culture in the period 1950-1965 by Thomas Hine including architecture, domestic articles, advertising, and automobiles.

### **Prince George's County: A Pictorial History**

Alan Virta traces the earliest origins of the County to 1991, the date of publication.

### **Twentieth-Century Architecture: The Middle Years 1940-1965,**

John Jacobus' global look at some of the leaders of post war architecture and their buildings shows us how the iconic forms of the period were adapted for use in varying types of county buildings, including structures such as a dry cleaners or automobile dealerships. For example, Hyattsville's **House of Kleen** and the **Palmer Ford Showroom** share their compound barrel vault concrete roofs with Wallace K. Harrison's 1966 **Metropolitan Opera House** at Lincoln Center.

### **World War II and the American Dream**

Different perspectives on the massive building program instigated by the war.