THAT IS HISTORIC???
The History of Mid-Century Modern Architecture in SC

Dr. Lydia Mattice Brandt (UofSC)
and Staci Richey
(Access Preservation)
WHAT WE’LL COVER TODAY

History of Mid-Century Modern Architecture in SC

Identifying patterns, styles and materials

Strategies for identifying, documenting and preserving
HISTORY OF MID-CENTURY MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN SC

- The Times
- The Profession
- The Architects
HISTORY: CHANGE

• Wartime/post-war economy and baby boom
• Urbanization and suburbanization
• Role of Jim Crow segregation, white flight
• Technology and dependence on the automobile
• Commitment to long-term planning and investment in infrastructure
• Institutional expansion
HISTORY:

ARCHITECTURE

- Impact of modern styles of architecture…. after a little Moderne

- New ideas for comprehensive city planning

- Federal funding for
  - new building types
  - growing institutions
  - city planning, including urban renewal
  - highway/infrastructure development
  - influence of the GSA (General Services Administration)
HISTORY: THE PROFESSION

• Clemson’s architecture program shifts to modern curriculum (1955)

• Clemson Architectural Foundation (founded 1956)

• South Carolina AIA
HISTORY: THE FIRMS

- Continuity of smaller firms/partner swapping and associating
- Expansion of Beaux Arts eclecticism (Lafaye, Lafaye & Fair)
- Formation of new full-service corporate firms specializing in different kinds of modernism and training new generations (LBC&W)
- Specialized firms (Wilbur Smith and Associates)
- Savvy politics…….
IDENTIFYING PATTERNS, STYLES AND MATERIALS

What makes it modern?
PATTERNS:

ERA

- Defining the Modern era is an important component for any effort towards documentation, identification and preservation

- Generally, the era is around the mid-1940s through the mid-1970s

- In South Carolina, there are later examples of Modern architecture, into the 1980s

- Total Design = these buildings were part of a new philosophy/ideology that included all elements of the built
PATTERNS: SHAPES

• Mid-Century Modern architecture often has an emphasis on the overall shape, which can be short and squat, whimsical with swooping roofline, or tall and narrow
• Openings like windows and doors may be the only other “decoration” on the building and can be used as geometric shapes that contrast with the wall material
• Wall materials can be used to generate the appearance of a monolith, to create a contrast with a repeated window pattern on a single floor
• Due to some of these shapes, the building may have used unusual materials
PATTERNS: CARS

- Unlike early 20\textsuperscript{th}-century buildings, Mid-Century Modern architecture is accommodating to the automobile
- In urban settings this resulted in some interesting solutions to small lots, like raising the building up, or creating a drive-thru to a rear parking lot
  - Banks were first introducing drive-thru service
- Parking garages became a new architectural form in this era, and they sometimes reference the main building if they are an attachment
- Parking lots may have incorporated a fence or low wall that ties into the building material
- Cities were trying to figure out how to carve out parking in dense urban areas, older buildings were often demolished
  - Older buildings nearby were sometimes
PATTERNS: THE SETTING

- The setting around the building was given attention, since some of the Modern buildings were constructed on formerly residential lots.
- In dense urban areas the setting could include the sidewalk and street lighting, which matched the materials used in and on the building.
- Landscaping and hardscaping became an integrated part of the design.
- The setting beyond the building was not as important as the building’s own lot; these buildings did not necessarily sympathize with established lot setbacks, building heights, scale or massing.
- If part of a planned development, the building’s setting may have been a carefully designed element that tied multiple buildings together.
- Plazas were a design feature that encircled parts of a building and often repeated its materials, creating an extension of the structure.
IDENTIFYING STYLES: International Style

- First articulated in Europe and the United States in the 1910s-20s
- First seen in SC in the late 1940s
- Inspired by the machine: sleek, efficient, industrial materials
- Open plan made possible by new structural technologies
- Form follows function
- Could be built at any scale
- Other characteristics:
  - flat roofs
  - ribbon windows (windows in bands)
  - honest use of materials
  - lack of applied decoration
IDENTIFYING STYLES: New Formalism

- Develops in the US in 1950s
- First seen in SC in the late 1950s
- More Classicizing approach to the International Style
- Sometimes called “Ballet Style” or “Neo Palladianism”
- Other characteristics:
  - symmetry
  - temple-like
  - strong axes/platforms
  - play with surfaces and ideas of transparency
  - lacy, delicate details
IDENTIFYING STYLES: Brutalism

- Develops worldwide post-1945
- First examples in SC by mid-1960s
- Heavier, more muscular and expressive approach to modernism
- From beton brut = “raw concrete”
- Also called “monumental” or “heroic” modernism
- Clear expression of function (“served” vs. “servant”)
- Importance of public space
- Usually institutional; often very large scale
- Other characteristics:
  - exposed concrete
  - deep-set/few windows
MATERIALS: WHAT?

- the materials ARE the decoration
- can be difficult to identify without original drawings/specifications
- many are experimental or proprietary (and are therefore no longer available)
- modern materials can age differently than historic materials
Crimped metal screen over old building on Main St., Columbia, SC (c.1970)

Concrete veil block on motel in Myrtle Beach (c.1965) Horry County Historic Resource Survey
STRATEGIES FOR IDENTIFICATION, DOCUMENTATION AND PRESERVATION

It's not that easy (but hopefully getting easier!)
IDENTIFYING Mid-Century Modern Resources

- Educate yourself about the variety of styles
- Research the local history and the patterns that contributed to the growth of modern buildings
  - Find residential resources by maps/driving
  - Generally, higher-style commercial and institutional resources are in urban areas
  - Vernacular examples, particularly for small office and retail, appear in both urban and rural areas
  - Note concentrations of resources that may indicate a planned effort
- Learn about locally important architects and the examples of their work
  - Research published architect portfolios
  - Research architecture publications – AIA magazine, for award-winning examples (see also US Modernist Architecture Magazine Library)
DOCUMENTING Mid-Century Modern Resources

- Surveys are now capturing buildings up through 1972 and later (50-year mark)

- Resources can be documented through National Register of Historic Places nominations

- As buildings are threatened, communities can document them as part of a preservation effort or as an archival record if they are lost

- Recent City of Columbia Downtown Resource Survey (2020) captured 430 resources built between 1945-1981, many of them representative of Modern architecture
DOCUMENTING Mid-Century Modern Resources: Tips

- Take into account the surrounding context since some mid-century resources were part of a planned effort that included several buildings, hardscape features, landscaping, street lighting and parking = total design!

- Look at resources beyond buildings, including artwork, bridges, pedestrian bridges, monuments, landscapes (like gardens), amphitheaters, plazas, signage

- Consider interior features as part of the thoughtful design for the building

- Research city and privately published planning documents from the era – things that are planned but never built can still help explain what was!
RESEARCHING Mid-Century Modern Resources: Tips

City Directory, found at local public libraries

1967 Zoning permit, State Library, City of Columbia, Planning Department

Postcards (color, landscaping)

Permits! (architects, drawings)

Photographer Collections (Maxey at Richland Library, more than what is online)

Architectural drawings, archived (Clemson, UofSC)

Highway Maps (digitized)

Church and school cornerstones

Plan books on www.archive.org

Newspapers

City directories
Preserving a historic resource generally always includes the following:

- Research of the resource’s history, architect (if known), original purpose and appearance, and date of construction
- An assessment of the integrity of the resource and identification of any changes
- An honest assessment as to the significance of the resources, based on the research and integrity
- Owner’s desire to preserve the site (and interest in incentives)
- A listing of the site on a local historic register, which might have the authority to prevent demolition or govern alteration
- A listing on the National Register of Historic Places, which does not prevent demolition, but can provide incentives for preservation through tax credits and recognizes and documents the building at the national level
CHALLENGES TO PRESERVATION

Perception of youth (I am older than that building!)
Taste (that’s ugly!)
Layout inside and out (set back on lot)
Materials used are deteriorating
Vernacular and high styles
Lots of Ranches and Colonial Revival
Lack of understanding from professionals on styles, architects
Painful history (urban renewal, relocation)
Alterations
Unsympathetic zoning
Lots of others
CHALLENGES to Preservation:
No documentation, demolition permit request does not trigger any review at City level, no information to provide to owner about the significance of a site.
CHALLENGES to Preservation: Alterations

Preservation is largely reactionary, and there are other fires to put out.
“I guess it’s not old enough to be saved by the preservationists,” he said. “It’s in the middle ground.”

– architect Maynard Pearlstine quoted in *The State* newspaper when referencing his works from the 1950s and 1960s in Columbia, SC (6/24/12)
CHALLENGES to Preservation: Alterations

Masonic Lodge, 1401 Senate St (built 1962), Russell Maxey photograph (1979), Richland County Public Library
CHALLENGES to Preservation:
Alterations

2717 Devine Street, Columbia
Google Streetview today

2717 Devine Street, Columbia
1970, Russell Maxey photo, Richland County Public Library
CHALLENGES to Preservation: Aging Materials and Limited Knowledge on Proper Restoration

1003 Richland St., Columbia (1958)

Columbia Post Office, Assembly Street (1965)
CHALLENGES to Preservation: Loss of “Character-Defining Features”?  
1979, Russell Maxey photograph, Richland County Public Library 
1339 Main St., 2020 photo
ADVOCACY for Mid-Century Modern Architecture

Moving modern forward.

https://docomomo-us.org/

Docomomo is an international organization with state and local chapters, dedicated to the documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighborhoods of the modern movement.

MidModSC is a new state-wide non-profit (filing) dedicated to the documentation and preservation of South Carolina's Mid-Century Modern resources.

Email Caroline Wilson: cwilson@mac-ha.com

https://midmodsc.wordpress.com/
Mid Mod SC Tour

Please join us for a tour in downtown Columbia, featuring some of our Mid-Century Modern architecture. You will see buildings ranging from the 1940s through the 1970s and learn about the city’s efforts to modernize Main Street and use futuristic city planning to draw people back downtown.

May 29, 2022
2 pm
Corner of Main and Blanding Street
Street and nearby lot parking available (metered spaces, but free on Sunday)

https://fb.me/e/1roQYbXYM
Link to facebook page for the tour to let us know you are coming!
THANK YOU!
QUESTIONS?
Read our survey of downtown Columbia!