



Preservation Hotline #13

South Carolina Department of
Archives & History
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**State Historic
Preservation Office**
<http://shpo.sc.gov/>

Researching a Mid-Century/Modern Property

Mid-century construction, now fifty years of age and eligible to be considered for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, is prominent across South Carolina. While our state may not have been the center for big-name designers of the time, South Carolina had several prominent firms designing buildings in the mid-century and a wealth of vernacular buildings. Mid-century structures range from houses to schools to banks to government buildings and beyond and we encourage citizens interested in the history of our state to recognize and preserve these historic structures.

Until now, little scholarly attention has been paid to the mid-century and post-World War II building era in the South and in South Carolina. New research into the history of mid-century buildings is likely to break new ground and require a broader context to understand the historic significance of a building or development. A building's significance should relate to the historic events and trends of the era—military growth in the face of the Cold War; desegregation of public facilities and white flight to the suburbs; or the development of the interstate highway system and the growth in tourism that it brought to towns across the state. Urban renewal policies, which often called for the demolition of historic buildings and neighborhoods, can now be analyzed in a historic context. The new housing developments and other large-scale community projects may be significant for their context in the urban renewal policies of the late 1950s and early 1960s. By understanding the context in which a building was constructed, we will be able to define the significance and identify the key features that reflect its history.

One of the most comprehensive bibliographies of writing and works on mid-century buildings and materials is Richard Longstreth's *Historical Bibliography of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urbanism in the United States Since World War II*. Longstreth updates his bibliography each calendar year, and it is available for download from the Recent Past Preservation Network's website, www.recentpast.org.

This list of potential sources is not comprehensive and may not apply based on the location or type of the building. Remember to check some of the main staples of South Carolina history, such as the local history rooms in the county library systems, the South Carolina Encyclopedia, and Walter Edgar's *South Carolina: A History* when doing research!

Places to Start:

University collections: South Carolina's main universities, such as the University of South Carolina, Clemson University, South Carolina State University, and College of Charleston all have extensive libraries and collections that deal with the architecture of the state. University collections may house historic maps, such as Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, topographic maps, and other highway maps.

Local library and local history rooms: Housed in county libraries and/or in local historical societies, local collections can provide historic context, photographs, maps, or other information about a municipality or a county. City directories may have building names, advertisements, and indices that trace the history of a building or neighborhood.

Specific Resources:

Aerial photographs: These photographs can show the development of a town or area and may show new residential, commercial, or industrial development. Dating as far back as 1938, aerial photographs can be found in local planning or zoning departments or through the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, the University of South Carolina Map Library, or the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

AIA publications: The *Review of Architecture and Architecture South Carolina*, published by the South Carolina American Institute of Architects, focus on local buildings. Researchers can find historic photographs, building plans, and architect histories. These publications are available for researching by contacting the SC AIA.

Architect collections: Firms, family members, or other repositories may hold papers of architects/architectural firms that practiced in mid-century South Carolina. Documents can include building plans, specifications, photographs, correspondence, and newspaper clippings.

Catalogues: Useful for researching building materials, fixtures, or standardized building plans for sale. Lustrons, a type of pre-fabricated house, were ordered from catalogues.

Chamber of Commerce publications: Chambers of Commerce began to develop marketing campaigns to bring businesses and residents to their towns. These publications highlighted new buildings, new developments, new shopping centers, and other changes in the towns. Chambers of Commerce may also have tourism brochures and historic maps in their archives.

Department of Defense: The military presence in South Carolina expanded during World War II and in the Cold War era. Each military base in South Carolina maintains its own archives and has a cultural resource manager. Information may include the acquisition of land to expand the base, architectural and site plans for new housing projects, photographs, and other planning documents. The University of South Carolina Public History department produced a 4-volume report on Cold War in SC, 1945-1991 that discusses the history of military sites and expansion during this time period.

Department of Transportation: The interstate highway system was funded and built in the mid-twentieth century. Department of Transportation records may include photographs taken for acquired right of way for new interstates and roads, planning documents, maps and information on interchanges and other highway plans. The South Carolina State Archives holds a number of records from the Department of Transportation during this era.

Development plans: Engineering firms, architectural firms, construction firms, or municipalities may have permits, layouts, plats, or other information related to development of a neighborhood, subdivision, shopping mall, or other large-scale developments.

Engineering plans: Collaborations between architects and engineers, especially on large-scale buildings, began to proliferate in the mid-twentieth century. Engineering firms and/or construction firms may have information in their archives on buildings, structural materials, and development plans.

Home owners associations: These groups began to proliferate in the 1960s. HOAs for early residential developments may have documents and records for the neighborhood and individual houses.

Housing Authority: Urban renewal began in the mid-twentieth century as cities and towns chose to fight blight and poverty by demolishing large swaths of land and building new housing developments or commercial developments. Housing authority records could include photographs, building plans, site plans, and other records related to commercial and residential development.

Magazines: Magazines highlighted new architecture and promoted architectural plans and new materials in the mid-twentieth century. Magazines that include architectural information are Better Homes and Gardens, House Beautiful, Popular Mechanics, and South Carolina Magazine. Information available in magazines can include photographs, building plans, and architect histories. Local libraries may have back issues of these magazines for review.

Newspapers/Advertisements: Real estate sections, advertisements, and articles highlight new developments, residences for sale, and new commercial and office space. Some newspapers may have architectural reviews.

Oral histories: Seek out architects, clients, designers, developers, community leaders, business people, and residents for their memories and stories.

Picture/Postcard Books: Many South Carolina communities have these picture/postcard books that can have photographs of mid-century places. The South Carolina Sesquicentennial Commission published South Carolina Architecture, 1670-1970 that is also full of mid-century architecture from across the state.

Planning Department: Local planning departments (city, county, and/or Council of Government) may have building permits on file, planning documents (especially related to urban renewal projects or downtown development), subdivision plats, photographs, and development plans. Historic preservation surveys and plans may also be useful and obtained through the planning department. Older preservation plans from the 1970s are on file at the South Carolina State Archives. Note: Many planning departments began in the mid-twentieth century and may not have older documents organized.

School Districts: In South Carolina, school districts began consolidation of smaller schools and smaller districts in the 1950s. District records may include consolidation plans, building plans for new schools, photographs, board of education meeting minutes, and yearbooks.

South Carolina Development Board: Founded in 1945 as the Department of Research, Planning, and Development, this precursor agency to the Department of Commerce was responsible for bringing industry and economic development to South Carolina. The Development Board promoted

the state and its people, towns, cities, and buildings across the nation. Development Board records may include information on new industries, tourism, and other large-scale economic development projects and are available at the South Carolina State Archives.

Tax records/Plats/Deeds: Online tax databases tend to have correct dates for buildings from the mid-twentieth century. Tax records, plats, and deeds can show sales in residential neighborhoods/subdivisions, creation of parks, and the exchange of ownership. Many tax records and deeds are now available online.

Thesis Research: Many graduate students in South Carolina are producing research on the history, buildings, and development patterns in the state during the mid-century. Look for thesis topics from the University of South Carolina Public History program and the College of Charleston/Clemson University Historic Preservation program to start.

Television: Television stations, such as the South Carolina Educational Television or local news channels, usually have archives of film and stories. ETV began in 1957 and houses an extensive archive in their Columbia offices.

Tourism brochures/travel guides: As tourism increased with the development of the interstate highway system, brochures highlighted new hotels, motels, restaurants, parks, golf courses, and other entertainment. These brochures can be found in local libraries, at Chambers of Commerce, or in newspaper archives.

Zoning Department: Local zoning departments may have building permits, historic maps, or historic aerial photographs.

For More Information:

DOCOMOMO-US—An international group dedicated to the Documentation and Conservation of building, sites, and neighborhoods of the Modern Movement. See www.docomomo-us.org for more information.

National Park Service—Their Recent Past Initiative has links to NPS publications, articles, presentations, and other sources that are applicable to the preservation of the recent past.

See <http://www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/recentpast/> for more information.

National Trust for Historic Preservation—Their Modernism + Recent Past division has resources for mid-century building owners, case studies, and links to a wealth of information and documents. See www.preservationnation.org/issues/modernism-recent-past/ for more information. The Trust has also published “Preserving Resources from the Recent Past” by Jeanne Lambin available for purchase online at www.preservationbooks.org.

Recent Past Preservation Network—become a member and receive a quarterly newsletter, access to the website, and more!

See www.recentpast.org for more information.

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