

## Editorial: Bauhaus to your house

. as Tom Wolfe put it. . .

Some wags might say that even ugly architecture is architecture, and so worthy of preservation. We'll hear a lot more about this soon — indeed, at next Saturday's annual conference of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission — because many Modernist homes now are 50 years old or more, making them eligible for historic designation and protection under local, state and federal laws. The trick will be to determine which design elements and materials brand them as truly high-quality and significant Modernist works.

The great rage for Modernist houses crested in the '50s. Centers included Fairfield County, Conn., California, Chicago's suburbs and Long Island's East End. The houses vary of course, but their boxiness, sharp angles, heavy use of glass and general austerity (in appearance if not price) set them apart. Perhaps the most famous one is Philip Johnson's Glass House, in New Canaan, Conn., which we consider lovely if impractical —unless one is an utterly uninhibited exhibitionist.

Some of them have what would seem now to be environmentally conscious elements, such as exterior overhangs and tinted windows to reduce the effect of the sun, though some of these houses are also energy-wasteful, in having too much window space in the wrong places, no insulation, electric heat (to avoid clunky furnaces) and so on. They do tend to have nice landscaping (recalling Japan). But then they'd better, since you see a lot of the yard through their window-walls. Some of these clean-line dwellings seem made more to be looked out from than into.

They're far too Spartan for many people, but this same minimalism is very beautiful to others.

In any event, the best built ones should be saved from knock-down: They represent, after all, an important wave in Western art. And it bears remembering that popular tastes change. Big old Victorian houses (and furniture, which used to be left at the curb for the trash collectors) were once considered hideous. Now they are beloved again.

Still, it's difficult to see Modernist houses gaining or regaining the sort of affection that people now have for ornate old Victorians. Cozy they aren't. Their beauty is a chilly one.