

BAUHAUS IN THE 'BURBS

Modernism met socialism as forward-thinking architects built neighborhoods based on egalitarian principles



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Written by **BRUCE IRVING**

DEEP IN THE ROCK-RIBBED YANKEE HEART-land of Eastern Massachusetts sit little pockets of — gasp! — socialism (and we’re not talking about Cambridge). Planned communities with a deeper founding mission than, say, Long Island’s Levittown, these are New England neighborhoods with DNA tracing back not to Anglo-Saxon lands, but to Germany. Startling when they were first built, they live on today — and in good health — though much of the region seems to have caught up with many of their once-radical principles.

While modernism yielded some early individual buildings in the region, the full flowering of the style and its social ambitions didn’t occur until architect Walter

Gropius fled Nazi Germany and landed at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design in 1937, bringing with him the socialist ideals of the Bauhaus movement — and the need for a house of his own in his new homeland. The Gropius House in Lincoln, Massachusetts, is now a revered icon visited by thousands each year, but when it was built, it was also part of a unique enclave. Between 1938 and 1939, Gropius and Harvard colleagues Marcel Breuer and Walter Bogner created their own little neighborhood on 20 acres provided by Helen Osborne Storrow. Known today as the Woods End Road Historical District, it is the earliest collection of International Style houses in the country.

At a time when postwar Americans were trying to return to some kind of group “normalcy,” and in a region where the traditional held sway, Gropius was saying things like, “The key for a successful rebuilding of our environ-

THIS HOUSE IN Five Fields was built in 1952, one year after The Architects Collaborative broke ground in the development. An addition was built in the late 1960s, and the current owners renovated the space, making it handicapped accessible. The house is one of 10 on the “Mid-Century Modernism: Lexington’s Second Revolution” house tour. (Details on Page 58)

ment will be the architect's determination to let the human element be the dominant factor." No doubt, there were some receptive ears, but it took the true believers to put Bauhaus egalitarianism into practice.

In 1945, Gropius joined with a group of his former students to create The Architects Collaborative (TAC), a firm devoted to modernist architecture. In 1948, driven certainly by their beliefs but perhaps also by necessity (three couples who worked at TAC shared a triple-decker in Cambridge), firm members purchased 20 acres of rocky hillside in Lexington and set about to replicate Woods End Road for themselves. Six Moon Hill was so named because the seller had left six antique Moon cars in a barn on the property. The young architects drew straws for their lots, designed and built small homes for themselves, and formed a cooperative with shared governance and communal space, such as a pool and recreation area. It was experimental, as was the mass-produced Levittown being built at the same time, but compared with that overtly economic model, it was almost artistic in its civic-mindedness. In "Still Standing," a 2006 documentary about TAC, Norman Fletcher, a firm founder who died in 2007, recalled, "[We] had an idea that somehow we were smart enough to create ideal communities and by doing so create a peaceful world."

Pure economics played a bigger part in the Six Moon Hill gang's next project. Emboldened by the success of their own neighborhood — and eager for more commissions — TAC members purchased an 80-acre Lexington farm, named the community-to-be after its five fields, and in 1951 began selling lots with houses of several affordable (\$19,950 to \$36,000) stock designs. It too had communal land, a pool, a playground — and an atmosphere that attracted people unlike the standard Lexingtonian of the time. As described in a 50-year anniversary publication about Five Fields, the town's population was "rather homogeneous and conservative, almost entirely Republican." Put off by the architecture, some townspeople called the development "Chicken Coop Hill." Most buyers came from out of town, out of state, or overseas. Attracted by its progressive promise, its new residents "practiced a variety of religions or no religion at all, with some mixed marriages and greater than expectable number of adopted children," the anniversary retrospective reports. "They in-



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► MODERN EVOLUTION

The current owners bought this 1949 bungalow in Six Moon Hill in 1989. Working with architect Patrick Hickox of Hickox Williams Architects of Boston, they expanded and updated it. The house will be on “Mid-Century Modernism: Lexington’s Second Revolution,” a house tour to benefit the Lexington Historical Society, Sunday, October 19. Ten houses in Peacock Farm, Five Fields, Turning Mill, and Six Moon Hill will be open to the public. Advance tickets are \$20 for society members, \$25 for nonmembers. Day of the tour, \$25 for members, \$30 for nonmembers, and \$15 for students. For more information, call 781-862-1703 or go to lexingtonhistory.org.

cluded an African-American family. They tended to be politically liberal and predominantly voted Democratic.” Sales were brisk.

Seeing that it was possible to do well by doing good, soon others joined the game. W. Rupert McLaurin, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology economics professor with a vision of affordable housing for young couples, joined with MIT architecture professor (and Gropius student) Carl Koch to build Conantum, a 190-acre, 100-home development near the Sudbury River in Concord, Massachusetts. Prices began at \$10,000, and at a time when such

things were uncommon, the houses came with an anti-discrimination clause in their deeds.

Today, these and other modernist neighborhoods around Boston continue to thrive. Peacock Farm and Turning Mill in Lexington, and Snake Hill in Belmont all retain their minimalist, trapezoidal houses, and while most have been expanded, the additions are in keeping with the original style. Indeed, several of the neighborhoods maintain strict control over exterior changes, but that didn’t bother Jennifer Goldfinger, who earlier this year moved her family into a 1958 Peacock Farm house designed by architect Walter Pierce.

“The natural light pouring through the windows is just wonderful,” she says. “We feel like we’re in a tree house, with a powerful connection with nature, the birds, and the weather.” She attended her first neighborhood association meeting soon after moving in. “You have to ask permission to do just about anything to your house, including changing its color, but that doesn’t bother me. The people at the meeting — and it was packed — were great. I’ve only been here a short time, but I can tell I’m surrounded by very interesting, intelligent neighbors.” Somewhere, Walter Gropius is smiling. ■