

# Modern Seashore

The Development of the Modern Summer House on Cape Cod

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'Often our most treasured retreat, the cottage has become a metaphor for relaxation, escapism, and family kinship. Above all, it's the place where we can cast off our city shoes and worries, sink into an old porch rocker and be ourselves.'<sup>1</sup>

'More than anywhere else on the continent, the history of the towns along this coast can be traced by strangers; their direct lines of descent from port to resort...whaling ships, ships in the China trade, ships in trade with the West Indies, ships carrying ice to Brazil, or guano back from Peru. When...the trade eventually failed and the ports languished, little by little in the place of sailors and merchant-captains and a dolorous plenty of black-shawled widows came the first summer people. The sea for them was a place to play upon, not wrest a living from.'<sup>2</sup>

'Unfailingly, summer places have been the agreeable ghosts that accompany me throughout the winter and help me to survive its bitter humors. They are robust and yet tender-hearted ghosts, not shadowy, unfeeling ones, and I hold out my hands to them for warmth.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John de Visser and Judy Ross, *Summer Cottages*, (Toronto, Canada: Boston Mills Press, 1991), pp. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Brendan Gill and Dudley Whitney, *Summer Places*, (New York: Methuen, 1978), pp.115.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pp.17.

### **Convergence of Modernists**

The convergence of Modernists on the Outer Cape in the 1940s and 1950s produced a significant architectural contribution to Cape Cod's built environment. The Modern architectural presence on the Cape was as much a result of architects seeking to build summerhouses in a beautiful setting with their friends as it was about exploring the ideological premises of their design approaches. The Modern architecture on the outer Cape personifies an important period in architectural history in which increased mobility, a social shift toward summer culture, and an artistic desire to experiment in the freedom of nature resulted in a maelstrom of important architects designing and living on the Outer Cape. The convergence of creative, like-minded thinkers fostered Modern architecture in multiple locations throughout the United States including in and around Los Angeles, California, New Canaan, Connecticut and Detroit, Michigan in addition to Cape Cod and eastern Long Island. The proximity to large metropolitan areas suggests that Modernism was also directly correlated to urban centers that were subject to international influence and those that hosted academic and cultural institutions like the Detroit Institute of the Arts and the Museum of Modern Art.

These designs represent an integral moment in the canon of Cape Cod architectural history and exemplify the work of multiple masters of Modernism, which bolsters the argument for their value locally, regionally and nationally. As Serge Chermayeff said, 'if you design a house for yourself, it is likely to become an experiment.'<sup>4</sup> Indeed the houses designed by and for Marcel Breuer, Serge Chermayeff and Olav

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<sup>4</sup> Powers, *Serge Chermayeff*, pp. 221.

Hammarstrom on Cape Cod were experiments in resources, space and ways of inhabiting architecture. These houses demonstrate the parallels between Modernism and the traditional architecture of Cape Cod in both materiality and design. Furthermore, the Modern building stock on Cape Cod was as much derived from the historical built fabric of the Outer Cape as they exemplified cutting edge design during the post-war era. Similar to the early Cape settlers, Modern architects utilized a combination of local materials, such as the pine and cedar used by pilgrims for siding and roof material in the seventeenth century, as well as natural fiber and seaweed insulation, while simultaneously experimenting with the emerging technologies of the twentieth century like scissor-truss construction and Homasote paneling.<sup>5</sup> These architects experimented with their own craftsmanship by employing a hands-on approach to construct modest scale residences in which their families could enjoy the Cape Cod landscape. This methodology was not unlike that of the whalers and farmers who built cottages for their families in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Modern architects maintained a loyalty to the Cape tradition, which has granted their designs long-lasting integrity and value as well as the ability to assimilate into the Cape landscape.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter McMahon, Interview with the author, Wellfleet, Massachusetts: May 18, 2011.

## **I. Geographic Context**

Before examining the architecture of the Modernists, it is imperative to understand the historical fabric in which their contributions lie. Cape Cod, the coastal hook of land that juts east from the Massachusetts mainland into the Atlantic Ocean, is known as one of the great American seaside playgrounds. With a local year-round population of approximately 215,000 that swells to more than half of a million people between Memorial Day and Labor Day, Cape Cod provides a seasonal haven for summer vacation-makers.<sup>6</sup> The Cape is comprised of fifteen towns. From west to east the towns of Eastham, Wellfleet, Truro and Provincetown make up what is known as the Outer or Lower Cape. So called because it is the furthest stretch of the Cape Cod peninsula from the mainland, the Outer Cape has a distinctly rugged, less developed character than its more inland neighboring towns. An area bounded by the Atlantic Ocean and Cape Cod Bay, the Outer Cape is dotted with kettle ponds formed by glaciers during the Pleistocene era, which give the landscape its marshes, ponds and hilly terrain.

## **II. Historic Context: Cape Cod Architecture and the Development of the Summer House**

When envisioning Cape Cod, images of silvery gray cedar-shingled cottages with white-painted trim come to mind. Indeed the architectural

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<sup>6</sup> "Massachusetts – County: Barnstable, Population Estimate Data Table," US Census Bureau, accessed June 14, 2011.  
[http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?\\_lang=en&\\_ts=326128849911&\\_ds\\_name=PEP\\_2009\\_EST&\\_program=](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_lang=en&_ts=326128849911&_ds_name=PEP_2009_EST&_program=)  
"Cape Cod Demographics" accessed June 14, 2011.  
<http://www.capecodtoday.com/blogs/index.php/2011/03/23/cape-cod-population-totals?blog=233>.

footprint of the Cape is so pervasive that the Cape Cod-type house has spread beyond the bounds of the Massachusetts peninsula at multiple stages in the United States' history. First developed in 1678, the Cape typology was defined by its small rectangular plan centered on a chimney, its low-lying one story height and lack of exterior ornamentation.<sup>7</sup> While the image that Cape Cod architecture evokes is one of a low-lying structure with a steeply pitched roof, a central chimney and a central door flanked by one or two windows; Modernist architecture on Cape Cod is defined by similar elements, which reinforces the notion that Modern architecture was influenced by the traditional architecture of the region.

Populated shortly after the pilgrims settled Massachusetts Bay, the first generation of houses on Cape Cod were constructed in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century with materials indigenous to the Cape environment: local woods like oak, pine and cedar for the frame, exterior shingles, shakes and sill plate, rubble or brick (made from soil clay) for the foundation in later versions, thatch made from reeds for the roof, and occasionally seaweed for wall insulation.<sup>8</sup> The use of natural, local materials as construction resources was part of the experimental approach to design that many Modernists adopted. Distributed by Massachusetts-based manufacturer Samuel Cabot Inc., eelgrass was sourced from Cape Cod beaches from as early as 1890 and its popularity in residential use grew during the 1940s; it is likely that the Modern cottages built on Cape Cod

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Schuler, *Saltbox and Cape Cod Houses*, (Westchester, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1988), pp. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Clair Baisly, *Cape Cod Architecture*. (Orleans, Massachusetts: Parnassus Imprints, Inc., 1989), 43-44. William Morgan, *The Cape Cod Cottage*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), pp. 9.

incorporated eelgrass as insulation.<sup>9</sup> A notable example of Modern architecture that employed Cabot's eelgrass insulation is the Gropius House in Lincoln, Massachusetts (1937-38).<sup>10</sup>

The prototypical Cape Cod house remained the house of choice on the Cape throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because of its ease of construction and economy. The occupants that inhabited this architecture were primarily families of modest means whose livelihood consisted of local trades and industry. These were houses built for and by fishermen, whalers and farmers – men guided not by Palladian proportions but by their experience with barn and boat building.<sup>11</sup> This working class demographic defined the early architecture of Cape Cod and established a unique typology in the New England vernacular tradition. Furthermore, this demographic defined the economic and social infrastructure of the Cape itself.

It was not until the late nineteenth century, a period characterized by 'burgeoning wealth, opulent spending and ostentatious social one-up-man-ship', that the character of Cape Cod began to shift in tandem with shifting national ideals.<sup>12</sup> In the late nineteenth century, increased emphasis was placed upon the merits of nature as industrial urban centers came under severe criticism for their deleterious effects on human health, and associated with the sharp increase in typhoid, cholera

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon Bock, "Insulation for Old Houses: What You Might Encounter – Retrofit Recommendations," *Old-House Journal*, January-February, 1992, pp 26.

<sup>10</sup> Historic New England, "Gropius House," Historic New England website accessed June 23, 2011, <http://www.historicnewengland.org/historic-properties/homes/Gropius%20House>. Theodore Prudon, "Structures, Systems and Materials" Lecture March 2011, Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, New York, New York.

<sup>11</sup> Morgan, *Cape Cod Cottage*, pp.12.

<sup>12</sup> Baisly, *Cape Cod Architecture*, pp.169.

and tuberculosis.<sup>13</sup> The initial instatement of a National Park Service began in the nineteenth century and endorsed the need to protect and enjoy the nation's natural resources.<sup>14</sup> Shortly following the increased interest in the outdoors, the automobile industry emerged and provided a means by which people could be transported to seaside locations like Cape Cod.<sup>15</sup>

The influx of mobility that characterized the early twentieth century generated a culture of summering: one in which 'it became fashionable for inlanders, even those of modest means, to go to the seashore for the summer or at least for the choice month of August.'<sup>16</sup> Though this social shift occurred elsewhere in northeastern seaside communities like the southeastern coast of Maine, the New Jersey shoreline, and Newport, Rhode Island - often on a grand scale in the shingle style tradition popularized by McKim, Mead and White - the majority of late nineteenth and early twentieth century architecture on Cape Cod remained relatively modest in scale with a layout derived from its historical predecessors.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century Cape Cod summer residences were not opulent mansions. They were cottages that remained true to the building scheme set forth by the first settlers and accommodated growing families or the need for additional space by

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<sup>13</sup> Jorge Otero-Pailos, "Nationalist Preservation" Lecture September 27, 2010, Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, New York, New York.

<sup>14</sup> Barry Mackintosh, "A Brief History," The National Park Service website accessed August 5, 2011, <http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/hisnps/NPSHistory/npshisto.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> James C. O'Connell *Becoming Cape Cod: Creating a Seaside Resort*, (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2003), pp 8, 27-33.

<sup>16</sup> Baisly, *Cape Cod Architecture*, pp. 169.

simply expanding or adding the extant dimensions. Most houses included a first story with two or three rooms for cooking, dining, socializing and sleeping. Structures that had served as year-round residences became modest summer cottages, suitable as a summer escape for urban families' from Boston, Providence, Montreal and New York.<sup>17</sup> This trend continued into the 1930s and 40s when Modernist architects first began using the Cape as a summer haven. The majority of Modern architects that made the Cape their secondary residence during the twentieth century, did so either by purchasing an already-built Cape Cod cottage, as Serge Chermayeff did, or by purchasing land and designing, and often building, their own design, like Marcel Breuer did.<sup>18</sup>

When Modern architects first came to the Outer Cape, its landscape was far less populated than it has become in the past three decades. Even then, however, overpopulation threatened the unspoiled environment: between 1950 and 1960, Cape Cod underwent a fifty percent population increase, which directly correlated with the 'almost sixfold decline in farms' between 1950 and 1970.<sup>19</sup> What is termed "exurban growth" – growth attributed to retirement migration, second-home construction and tourism-related development- although somewhat diminished by the implementation of the Cape Cod National Seashore in 1961, threatened and infringed upon the land where most of these architects built their homes.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> William Kornblum, "Cape Cod: Challenges of Managed Urbanization" in *National Parks and Rural Development: Practice and Policy in the United States*, ed. Gary E. Machlis and Donald Field, (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000), pp.168.

<sup>18</sup> Peter McMahon, Interview with the author, Wellfleet, Massachusetts: May 18, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Kornblum, *Managed Urbanization*, pp.170.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

The establishment of the Cape Cod National Seashore, spanning from Chatham to Provincetown, contributed to the preservation of the Modern houses and the configuration in which they were first situated on the land. Although many of the houses were designed in the same time period by friends, colleagues and acquaintances, these houses were not clustered in a suburban neighborhood configuration. The Outer Cape's Modern community is reminiscent of the Modern building stock designed by The Architect's Collaborative (1947-1959) in Lexington, Massachusetts. The majority of families that resided in Modern houses on Cape Cod owned a significant amount of land that was frequently adjacent to that owned by a friend-neighbor. However, their houses were sited to afford privacy and take advantage of the landscape and views. Integrating the landscape was a primary design objective— be it a kettle pond, marsh, bay, dunes or the ocean— and windows framed the expansive beauty beyond the confines of each structure's dimensions.

### **III. Creative Context: Presence of Artists, Writers and Architects on the Outer Cape**

The Outer Cape maintained its identity as a creative haven during the 1940s and 50s; a point in time when it provided summer respite for a bohemian set and embodied Jane Jacobs' personification of fringe culture's manifestation: that is, artists and creative types' tendency to live and/or work in marginalized areas.<sup>21</sup> Some Modern architects built on the Cape because of its proximity to their careers and year-round residence, Chermayeff and Breuer were both based in Boston when they designed their summerhouses. Some were drawn to the Cape by

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<sup>21</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York: Random House, 1961), pp. 243.

colleagues, classmates or friends, as structural engineer Paul Weidlinger and architect Olav Hammarstrom were. Others still were attracted to the Cape's affordability in the post-war time period. At that time, the traffic that plagues Route 6 (the east-west artery from which the Cape communities stem from) today, even in the emerging car culture of the 1950s, was less prohibitive than it is today. All of these architects were drawn by the undeniable and untamed beauty of Cape Cod.

#### **a) Artists and Writers**

Modernist architects were not the first creative minds to discover the Cape's virtue; it has long been a haven for artists to explore their craft. Cape Cod drew a wealth of artists to its shores throughout the pre- and post- World War era. From Henry David Thoreau's adventures in 1849 to Charles Hawthorne's founding of the Cape Cod School of Art in 1899, the nineteenth century welcomed the first of many creative minds to Cape Cod. A devotee of the growing plein air painting movement, Hawthorne settled in Provincetown on the Outer Cape because its scenery and light provided ample subject matter for his outdoor painting pursuits. The cost of living in Provincetown in 1899 was also affordable to an aspiring artist. The town's prosperity had declined in tandem with the obsolescence of whaling, the draining effects of the Civil War and the steam engine's replacement of clipper ships.<sup>22</sup> Hawthorne opened the Cape Cod School of Art and attracted fellow artists to the school, including Emile Gruppe, Norman Rockwell, Max Bohm and Richard Miller who were drawn to the Cape because it provided an alternative to Europe, which, despite its cache and renown, had lost some appeal with

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Allison, *A Short History of Cape Cod*, (Beverly, MA: Commonwealth Editions, 2010), pp. 95.

the rise of World War I.<sup>23</sup> Other important artists including Childe Hassam, William Paxton and Edwin Lawson, also visited the Cape during the early twentieth century.

Simultaneously, the literary tradition passed on by Thoreau was fostered by Henry Beston and John dos Passos. Beston is noted for his book *The Outermost House*, in which he recounts his observations of Cape Cod in 1925, recorded while living in a self-built house on the dunes of Eastham. Dos Passos found the Cape environment restorative, alternating exotic global travels with extended periods of writing, painting, sketching and afternoons of sailing and swimming on Bound Brook Island in Wellfleet.<sup>24</sup>

As the twentieth century progressed, an early Modernist that drew upon Cape Cod's alluring scenery was Edward Hopper. Hopper's haunting depictions of cottages and lighthouses perched on rolling dunes have become commonplace in the canon of American art. His scenes of the pastoral, vernacular Outer Cape landscape transferred images of Cape Cod to the Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery in New York and subsequently, the world at large, through his 1933 retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>25</sup> Hopper and his artist-wife, Josephine Nivison, summered in Truro from 1930 through the 1950s and fostered the growing presence of artists.

During this period, Hans Hofmann began painting in Provincetown and garnered a significant circle of influence there. A circle of European

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<sup>23</sup> "History of the School," Cape School of Art, accessed June 9, 2011, <http://www.capeschoolofart.com/history.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Barry Maine, *John Dos Passos*, (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 191.

<sup>25</sup> "Edward Hopper," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed June 8, 2011. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hopp/hd\\_hopp.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hopp/hd_hopp.htm).

émigré artists and their American counterparts explored their creative pursuits on the Cape, including Peggy Guggenheim, Max Ernst, Roberto Matta, Gyorgy Kepes, Franz Kline, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Jack Tworkov, Red Grooms, Raphael Soyer, and Chaim Gross.

## **b) Architects**

Just as these artists and writers were attracted to the Cape, so too were some of the great architects of the mid-twentieth century. The progenitor of Modern architecture on Cape Cod was John “Jack” C. Phillips, Jr. whose inheritance of 800 acres of land adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean along the Wellfleet-Truro border laid host to what became a community of humble houses set within the beautifully rugged landscape of the Outer Cape. This collection of houses embodies the manifestation of ‘good-life Modernism’<sup>26</sup> on the Outer Cape following World War II. Good Life Modernism provided ‘visually cultured individuals who had progressive ideas about home, family, and education’ with an alternative to mainstream, mass-produced design. While this demographic shared some qualities with the mainstream populous, these “prosperous bohemians” did away with traditional living and dining rooms, opting instead for an open plan more conducive to summer past times like cocktails, card games and bridge.<sup>27</sup>

The houses that these Modern architects inhabited were typically small, often self-designed and self-built summer cottages on the Cape. The interiors of the houses were configured with partitions, half-wall kitchen counters, and sliding glass doors to lend fluid circulation among

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Jarzombek “Good Life Modernism” and Beyond, *The American House in the 1950s and 1960s: A Commentary*. (Cornell Journal of Architecture 4, Fall 1990), 76.

<sup>27</sup> Gwendolyn Wright *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 255.

the eating, living and sleeping spaces. This fluidity reflects that the kitchen was no longer a private domain relegated to a far corner of the house and accessed via service corridor by servants. It represents a divergence from the traditional norm, as described by Lawrence Kocher in 1956:

The long familiar oversized and traditional country house...is now seemingly obsolete. [An] outwardly logical expression of our industrial age and of our American manner of living... [t]he contemporary house...consists of a more open grouping of rooms, usually all on one floor.<sup>28</sup>

This departure from the traditional hierarchy of residential spaces is emblematic of a shift in the way of living and dynamics of family life propagated by Joseph Hudnut's argument that Modern architecture enabled a new command and new quality of space.<sup>29</sup> In 1937 Phillips attended Harvard's Graduate School of Design under Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer.<sup>30</sup> Later, with friends and fellow architects, Hayden Walling and Jack Hall, Phillips experimented on his Cape Cod land, building interpretations of Modern architecture using locally-sourced, recycled materials.<sup>31</sup> This building method mirrors that practiced by the Cape's earliest settlers.

Ultimately Phillips parceled plots of land to friends and acquaintances, many of whom visited and departed longing for their own space, thus welcoming more of the architecturally avant-garde of the

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<sup>28</sup> Lawrence Kocher "The New House for Family Living" *Architectural Record*, (May 1956), pp. 25.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Hudnut. "The Post-Modern House," in *Architectural Record*, n 97 (May 1945), pp. 74.

<sup>30</sup> "Jack Phillips," Cape Cod Modern House Trust, accessed May 15, 2011, <http://www.ccmht.org/philips.html>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

period to flock to Cape Cod. Phillips ‘encouraged other Modern artists and designers to build vacation houses on his land’; sign posts marking their residences were ‘hand-painted and nailed to trees on the dirt track approaches [and] read as a lexicon of distinguished names, including Breuer, Saarinen and Kepes.’<sup>32</sup>

### **1.) Marcel Breuer**

Shortly following Marcel Breuer’s move to the United States for an appointment at Harvard University in 1937, he built a ‘delicate wooden summer cottage in Wellfleet’ in 1943.<sup>33</sup> Breuer, one of the forefathers of the Bauhaus, employed an architectural cubism derived from his background in the fine arts that pervaded the modest residences he designed for himself and clients on the Outer Cape. During that time, ‘similar cottages on adjacent land in the pine forest were built by and for his friends Serge Chermayeff, Paul Weidlinger, Gyorgy Kepes, and Edgar Stillman.’<sup>34</sup> Robert Gatje, one of the partners employed by Breuer’s firm, remembers being invited to Breuer’s cottage in Wellfleet for a weekend lunch and arriving to find Breuer ‘decked out in his summer American weekend costume—chambray shirt and chino slacks.’<sup>35</sup> This anecdote provides insight into the kind of lifestyle Breuer maintained on the Cape; a man known for his ‘elegant hand-tailored suits’ found ease and casual respite in his summer cottage; ostensibly he was also emulating the culture of the American summer time and place.<sup>36</sup> Similarly his house was also an expression of this summer lifestyle with its expansive

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<sup>32</sup> Alan Powers, *Serge Chermayeff: Designer, Architect, Teacher*, (London: RIBA, 2001), pp. 233.

<sup>33</sup> Robert F. Gatje, *Marcel Breuer: A Memoir*, (New York: Monacelli Press, 2000), pp. 26.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56.

<sup>36</sup> Gatje, *Marcel Breuer*, pp. 56.

windows, open, rectangular plan, wood panel- siding and cantilevered screen room. The house is characteristic of Breuer's Modern principles: it is a study in economy of space and pared restraint. In 1948, Breuer designed a nearly identical house for friend and founder of MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies, Gyorgy Kepes.<sup>37</sup>

Breuer's sphere of influence was a wide one and he encouraged others, such as structural engineer, Paul Weidlinger, to experiment with design on Cape Cod. Weidlinger designed a summerhouse in Wellfleet, tweaking his drawings with critiques from Le Corbusier, Gropius, Chermayeff and Breuer.<sup>38</sup> John Johansen, one of Breuer and Gropius' "Harvard five" students, and later Gropius' son-in-law, summered in Wellfleet and currently resides there year-round.<sup>39</sup>

## **2.) Serge Chermayeff**

Another European transplant was Serge Chermayeff, who came to Cape Cod by invitation from a mutual friend of his and Jack Phillips; Phillips sold Chermayeff twelve acres with a small cabin, a hand pump and privy for \$2,000.<sup>40</sup> Having immigrated to the US with his family in 1940, Chermayeff was immediately enveloped in the Modern art and architecture scene: staying with Walter and Ise Gropius in Lincoln, Massachusetts while lecturing at universities and organizations where he was introduced to many key figures in the Modern movement in the US. Chermayeff was well-established in the circle of architects that shaped

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<sup>37</sup> Jaci Conroy, "Cape Cod's Modern House Tour," Boston Globe, accessed June 10, 2011, <http://www.boston.com/lifestyle/house/gallery/capetour?pg=7>.

<sup>38</sup> Gatje, *Marcel Breuer*, 56.

<sup>39</sup> "Others," Cape Cod Modern House Trust, accessed April 25, 2011, <http://www.ccmht.org/others.html>.

<sup>40</sup> "Serge Chermayeff," Cape Cod Modern House Trust, accessed June 7, 2011, <http://www.ccmht.org/chermayeff.html>.

Modern architecture's manifestation in the US through posts at MIT, Brooklyn College of Art, Harvard and Yale.

A Renaissance man of sorts, Chermayeff's artistic background as an accomplished ballroom dancer, interior designer, painter, drawer, theater set designer and architect is referenced in the colorful, geometric designs he implemented in the summer cottage that he purchased in 1945, set in the back woods of Truro.<sup>41</sup> Chermayeff's commissions on the Outer Cape, particularly the Sigerson and Wilkinson houses of 1954 and O'Connor House of 1956, reflect his interpretations of traditional, local wood frame construction. These designs employed new structural forms and materials like Homasote – a paneling material made from pressed paper fiber. These houses also demonstrate Chermayeff's tendency for experimentation 'without undue compulsion for aesthetic strictures.'<sup>42</sup> His own house was literally an expanded, renovated version of the historic cottage Chermayeff purchased from Jack Phillips. Chermayeff expanded the house throughout the years that he used it as a summer retreat, year-round residence and studio.<sup>43</sup>

### **3.) Olav Hammarstrom**

Continuing the tradition of European architects designing, summering and living on the Cape was Olav Hammarstrom. Known for leading Alvar Aalto's Finnish firm while Aalto was based in Massachusetts in 1940, Hammarstrom's collaboration with Eero Saarinen on the General Motors Technical Center in Warren, Michigan (1944-1955), employment for Saarinen's firm as well as friendship with Saarinen, ultimately led to Hammarstrom's settling in the United States.

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<sup>41</sup> Plunz, *Design*, 308.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, xxx.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

These connections likely also led to his introduction and marriage to Saarinen family-friend and Cranbrook Academy of Art head of textiles, Marianne Strengell, in 1949.<sup>44</sup> Accounts of the Saarinen family vacationing on Cape Cod suggest that they introduced Hammarstrom and Strengell to Cape Cod in the 1930s and the couple eventually designed their own summer house in Wellfleet in 1952, later taking up year-round residence there.<sup>45</sup> Hammarstrom was commissioned to design other summer residences including one for Lily Saarinen, a sculptor at Cranbrook and first wife of Eero Saarinen, who moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1953 following her divorce from Eero. Hammarstrom's relationship with the family and his proximity to Cambridge led him to design a house in Wellfleet for Lily and her children in 1960.<sup>46</sup> These relationships and the architecture fostered by them personify the way in which Modern architecture organically manifested on the Outer Cape.

The Hammarstrom house, with its barn door, floor-to-ceiling windows and layout oriented for casual, flowing interaction between living spaces, depicts the central, recurring theme of this typology: the house was designed for summer living and comfort. Its low-lying furniture and floor pillows, not unlike those of Charles and Ray Eames' house in Los Angeles, personify the notion of easy living. This was not a living room for hosting tea in wingback chairs, surrounded by folds of chintz drapery framing six-over-six-paned windows. The interior was decorated in textiles designed by Strengell and the furniture designed by her contemporaries oriented to afford not just views through the

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<sup>44</sup> Jayne Merkel, *Eero Saarinen*, (New York: Phaidon, 2005), pp. 75.

<sup>45</sup> "Olav Hammarstrom," Cape Cod Modern House Trust, accessed June 8, 2011, <http://www.ccmht.org/hammar.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Merkel, *Saarinen*, 85. "Olav Hammarstrom," Cape Cod Modern House Trust.

expansive windows but to facilitate the sense of integration with the landscape. Spaces were not divided into small chambers serving specific purposes; rather they were desegregated and unified by the central hearth. This organization of space made the activities carried on in the house communal and shared. Bedrooms and bathrooms were the only spaces delineated as private.

#### **IV. Parallel Comparison: East End of Long Island**

Modernism on the eastern end of Long Island's south fork, commonly referred to as "the Hamptons," depicts a parallel trajectory to that of the Outer Cape in the 1950s: it provided 'a laboratory for New York architects fashioning contemporary weekend houses that nestled into the rugged landscape of sand dunes and pine scrub.'<sup>47</sup> With a similar history of hosting and inspiring some of America's most notable artists including Arthur Quartley, Thomas Moran, William Merritt Chase, and later, Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Constantino Nivola, Willem de Kooning, Le Corbusier and others.<sup>48</sup> Beyond their analogous identities as artist havens, Cape Cod and eastern Long Island present similar instances of the manner in which Modernism manifested in concentrated areas.

This notion of seeking respite from urbanity in the rural and relatively removed was not a new concept. Thoreau, Ruskin, and Morris extolled its virtues long before the likes of 1940s and '50s architects. However this generation's version of escapism was different from that of its predecessors. The leisurely weekend provided an 'antidote to harried

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<sup>47</sup> William Morgan, *Yankee Modern: The Houses of Estes/Twombly*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010), pp. 17.

<sup>48</sup> Alastair Gordon, *Weekend Utopia*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), pp. 9, 43.

day-to-day reality ...and artists and architects alike subscribed to that formula.’ While Boston and Manhattan were synonymous with the Monday through Friday workweek, the Hamptons and Cape Cod provided an escape for Saturday and Sunday. In his autobiography, curator and critic, Peter Blake recounts ‘we were a very small group, and we all knew one another...There were so few of us that we saw one another constantly.’ This “we” he describes includes Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson, John Johansen, Landis Gores, Ulrich Franzen, Edward Larabee Barnes and Paul Rudolph among others.<sup>49</sup> Blake describes their lifestyle as one in which they were ‘hanging out in the same bars and restaurants; going to the same parties; swapping wives, husbands, girlfriends, boyfriends; and sharing some of the same political interests.’<sup>50</sup>

The east end of Long Island and the Outer Cape also shared similar threats from increased mobility in the late 1950s. The subsequent history, however, presents two divergent scenarios: the Cape, with much of its land conserved as a park administered by the National Park Service, has managed to maintain much of its building stock and a significant amount of its ecological character. On Long Island, however, modest houses like Peter Blake’s Pinwheel House and the Pierre Chareau-designed Quonset hut that Robert Motherwell inhabited, have been replaced or overshadowed by mansions. Indeed the east end of Long Island has morphed into “The Hamptons” – an area glittering with celebrity and contemporary interpretations of “shingle style” summer

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Blake, *No Place like Utopia: Modern Architecture and the Company We Kept*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), pp. 145.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 146.

“cottages.”<sup>51</sup> What was once a haven for weekend jaunts from New York City set amidst the rugged, open landscape of potato fields and Atlantic coastline is changed irreparably. While the Cape is not entirely free from such development, the local governance and active community involvement that began with the National Seashore legislation controversy remains today.<sup>52</sup>

## **V. Preservation Future for the Modern building stock on Cape Cod**

The future of the outer Cape’s modern architectural resources remains unclear. However, a contingency of local advocates recognizes the significance of these structures and efforts have been made to ensure that they are preserved for the future. One key player in this discourse is the Cape Cod Modern House Trust. The not-for-profit organization was started when some of the Modern houses sited within the bounds of the Cape Cod National Seashore fell into disrepair and were slated for demolition due to lack of maintenance funding. Recognizing their architectural importance and historical value, a local architect, [Peter McMahon] created the Cape Cod Modern House Trust, and initiated a unique agreement with the owner of the properties, the Cape Cod National Seashore. The Trust applies for leases on individual properties and, if granted, becomes steward, provides the expertise to restore them, and reuses them. The intention of the Trust is to restore all seven of the Modernist houses owned by the National Seashore and reconfigure them as educational and cultural resources.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Gordon, *Weekend Utopia*, pp. 164.

<sup>52</sup> Kornblum, *Managed Urbanization*, pp. 174.

<sup>53</sup> Cape Cod Modern House Trust, “About Us”, Accessed April 24, 2011, <http://www.ccmht.org/about.html>.

The Kugel/Gips House in Wellfleet was the initial house restoration executed under the agreement. Kugel/Gips serves as a home-base of sorts for the Cape Cod Modern House Trust; providing a space for meetings, house tours, Trust-sponsored events, and the artist and scholar residency program. For select weeks, the house is rented to visitors to generate revenue stream to sustain the Trust.

This May, I was afforded the opportunity to stay in the Kugel/Gips House as a scholar-in-residence, researching the local architecture as well as the Cape Modern House Trust's model first-hand. While the house museum is an important tool for historic preservation advocacy, the number of closures due to lack of funding and visitation in recent years, reflects the need for preservationists to think more creatively in terms of viability. The Cape Cod Modern House Trust presents such a model. Certainly, welcoming visitors to live in a preserved house comes along with its own set of criticisms – the main concern being potential for visitors damaging the structure - yet if the visitation volume is kept to a minimum and the caretaker ensures that visitors are mindful of the fragility of the house, the Cape Cod Modern House Trust's model is one that can be replicated as a viable model for preservation. This concept is uniquely innovative and logical and injects new life into resources that are threatened by demolition from neglect.

## **V. Conclusion**

The numerous modern houses set within the Outer Cape hosted friends and colleagues who enjoyed the seaside environment as well as spending time with each other socially. In this way, they reflect the Cape's development as a summer haven. Furthermore, they demonstrate

the regional tradition of literally living with local resources through their use of recycled building materials. This architecture personifies Modernism's tendency to thrive in places of artistic convergence. The Modern architecture extant on Cape Cod was established according to the Outer Cape's historical, architectural and social traditions and, therefore maintains a significant role in the continuum of Cape Cod history. If we are to preserve such history on Cape Cod and elsewhere, preservation needs to adopt more creative approaches.

Many of us are attending this symposium out of curiosity and even concern for the future of New England's resources. If we are to ensure that preservation is a successful pursuit, it is important that we recognize the need for it to engage a broader audience, namely the general public. In many ways preservation is highly specialized. Yet it is no longer the burgeoning grass-roots movement that it was in the 1960s; it is a recognized profession and as such, preservation needs to establish more viability to successfully interface with society. Models like the Cape Cod Modern House Trust represent a step in the right direction.

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