

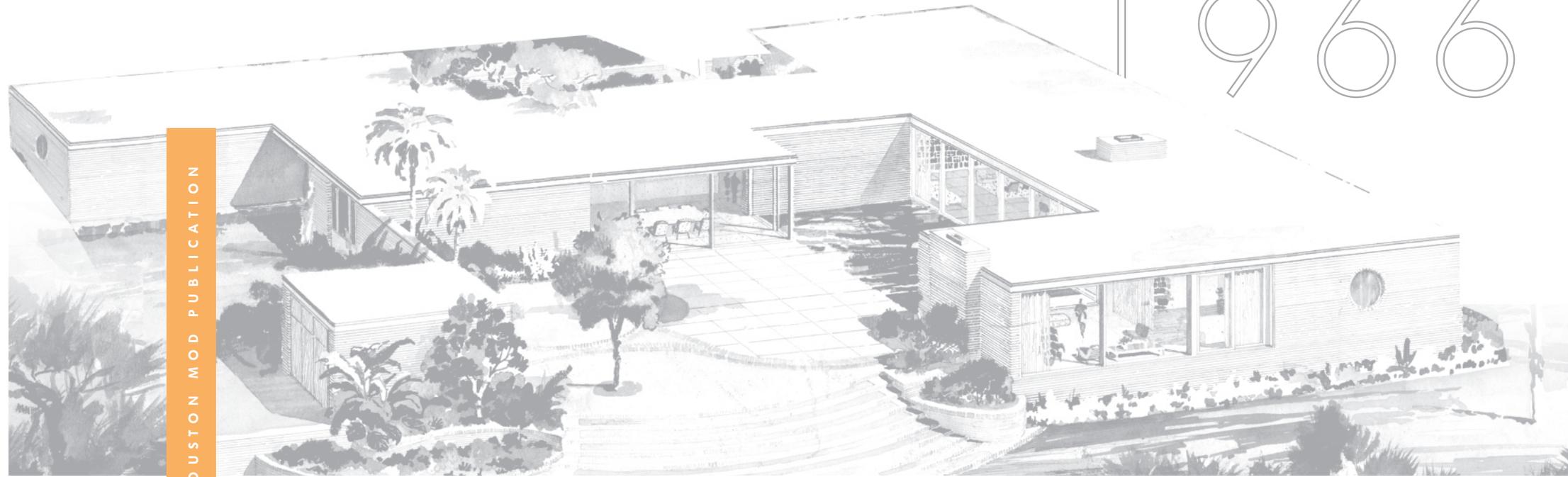
HUGO V. NEUHAUS JR.

RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE //

1948

1966

A HOUSTON MOD PUBLICATION



American modern architecture does not fit into one cohesive mold, which is all to the good. Stylistic labels obscure the fluid processes of design and patronage in creative work. Myths of autonomous genius deny the complexity of cultural life, since individuals are always part of multiple overlapping networks. Even the most ardent modernists remain pragmatists, mindful of circumstances, adapting to different clients, sites, budgets, and programs. Ben Koush's eloquent short book captures these powerful currents by linking the houses of Hugo Neuhaus to national trends and local histories during the post-World War II years when Houston became one of the nation's most dynamic cities.

I spent my youth in Houston during the 1950s and 1960s and remember fondly some houses in River Oaks. The melancholy evocations of pre-Civil War splendor had no appeal. Modern houses suggested alternative possibilities, an appealing world of openness, restrained differences, and collective aspirations. My favorites were located along Buffalo Bayou, gracefully adapting to the contours of the overgrown slopes, so enticing and mysterious in a city that was otherwise so flat. Some of these, I later learned, were the Neuhaus, the Cullinan, and the Stude houses. Those formative memories and associations had a palpable effect.

Post-war Americans embraced new trends in domestic architecture. As *Time* magazine announced in 1949, "modern houses are here to stay [with] practicality and sometimes spectacular good looks." The term "modern" entailed positive shifts: informal living, open plans, indoor-outdoor living, straightforward construction and materials. New York's Museum of Modern Art and its architectural curator, Philip Johnson, wanted to direct that broad cultural shift. They did so in part through individual hagiography. Mies was the hero of a 1952 exhibition and catalogue, *Built in USA*. The curators, Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, hoped to inspire an architecture "more

nationally standardized---in a good sense" and also "more luxurious---and not to balk at a word---beautiful." Other, more nuanced ambitions were expressed in an earlier MoMA exhibition and catalogue of 1944, also called *Built in USA*. That curator, Elizabeth Mock, had stressed the need for a "creative synthesis" to "humanize" modern architecture by engaging issues of environments, emotions, and community life. Johnson clearly wanted to erase Mock's sensibilities by appropriating the title. Yet all these overlapping themes reverberated in the outstanding work of the era and continue to resonate today.

The various interpretations were not necessarily antagonistic. The familiar dichotomies---modern versus traditional design, architect versus building, elite versus popular culture---prevent us from seeing the spectrum of influences and ingenious combinations. Houston architects drew various lessons from Mies, including Lars Bang's 1954 courtyard house for the Bendit family which won a *Good Housekeeping* award that year as one of the country's "10 Outstanding Small Houses." Mies' architecture, even his own work, had multiple meanings rather than one essence. As Stephen Fox notes, the emotional and place-bound qualities have been largely ignored to our collective detriment.

Other sources resounded as well, especially the regional modernism of northern and southern California, Florida, Oklahoma, and the peripatetic Frank Lloyd Wright. The best and most innovative American architects always sought to engage local climates and environments. (A belief in the power of nature also tolerated a disregard for land and ecological balance, as if these were eternal resources.) Writing in the *Texas Monthly* in 1958, Harwell Hamilton Harris, dean of architecture at the University of Texas in Austin, distinguished a parochial, backward-looking "Regionalism of Restriction" from a modern "Regionalism of Liberation" based on locally-based experimentation that investigated "emerging ideas."

The work shown here stands in sharp contrast to what took place after the mid-1960s. Suddenly aware of urban problems and inequalities, many Americans demanded an 'advocacy architecture' of new housing, schools, and other services for those who had been marginalized. Howard Barnstone's wife Gertrude was such an activist in Houston. Others rejected demands for equity and social change. This too had an impact on modern architecture. A new grandeur defined office buildings, public performance centers, and private houses in the early-1970s. Opulent scale and lavish style flourished all over the country, especially in Houston. The 'Anxiety of Influence' would generate a frantic cult of originality for its own sake.

Post-World War II American architecture is making a comeback, celebrated as Mid-Century Modernism. If the norm of that era was uniform, the reality was surprisingly rich and varied, both socially and culturally. Ambitious architects and clients were comfortable drawing from a range of sources and stimuli. They recognized that significant innovations always draw on existing knowledge. This in turn encouraged efforts to influence the larger world of building, including the surge in large-scale housebuilding. Those sensibilities are important today, far more so than any mythic fantasies about historical traditions.

The legacy of Houston's best postwar architecture reveals a network that linked Houston's civic and business leaders with talented modern architects. Collectively they built upon a creed that connected personal wealth with aesthetic restraint, civic responsibility, and conservation of the natural environment. Historic preservation involves such cultural legacies as well as respect for good architecture. On both terms, Hugo Neuhaus's houses remain a valuable resource for Houston and the nation in the twenty-first century.

-Gwendolyn Wright