

MOD SQUAD HITS HOUSTON



While the preservation of modern architecture is well established on both coasts of the United States, appreciation of our recent past is also picking up in many cities in between. Docomomo, the international preservation group focused on buildings, sites, and neighborhoods of the modern movement, now has six regional chapters across the United States committed expressly to twentieth-century design. Organizations and local government in a handful of cities have launched programs focusing on their metropolitan areas: Los Angeles, Palm Springs, Denver, and Miami. And with the establishment this summer of Houston Mod, a volunteer organization, the petrochemical capital has its own mod squad.

Citing what it considers "Houston's notorious ambivalence to preservation and modern buildings," the nonprofit group believes that many of the city's modern landmarks are in danger of disappearing. A number of buildings designed by two of the city's most important modernists, Donald Barthelme and Hugo V. Neuhaus,

already have been demolished, says architectural historian and volunteer Stephen Fox. And three 1960s Skidmore, Owings & Merrill buildings and Houston's major O'Neil Ford-designed building, the 1957 Texas Instruments Houston Technical Lab, have already been torn down. With few exceptions—the 1951 de Menil House designed by Philip Johnson that now belongs to the privately endowed Menil Foundation, and the Museum of Fine Arts, with its two wings designed by Mies van der Rohe, both of which have recently undergone extensive restoration—the rest of Houston is at risk, according to Fox.

Today, says Fox, some significant modern buildings in Houston are in danger of being lost forever: M.D. Anderson Hospital plans to demolish the Prudential Building designed by Kenneth Franzheim in the early 1950s (right) to make way for new office space; the Alley Theater is exploring extensively altering its 1969 Ulrich Franzen-designed landmark building; and Rice University may demolish three mid-century buildings on its campus.



Spearheaded by local architects and other sympathizers, Houston Mod is hopeful that through the documentation of cultural resources and preservation advocacy—and by providing public programs including lectures, publications, exhibitions, and tours—awareness may prompt preservation of the buildings at risk. **Bay Brown**