

The Mod Squad

The sixties are cool again. If you don't believe it, just ask the Houston Mod, an organization dedicated to saving mid-century houses.

By Wendy Grossman
Photography by Julie Soefer

Jason and Vanessa Smith wanted a home with lots of windows. First they looked at 1970s townhouses near Vanessa's office in the Galleria. Then they started thinking that it would be nice to have a place with a yard. The Smiths were lucky. The very first day of house hunting they found the perfect place. It's a custom-built three-bedroom designed in 1955 by architect William Jenkins (who later became dean of the College of Architecture at the University of Houston). Every room has floor-to-ceiling windows and sliding glass doors that open to the yard. The house is replete with built-in desks, cabinets, and even a fishpond.

The Smiths had actually seen the house once before, when they took a driving tour of Houston's historic homes two years ago. At the time, though, this house, 10 miles from downtown, was a dump. "It was in pretty bad shape. The house had serious deferred-maintenance issues," Jason says. There was a four-by-four foot beehive wedged between the sheetrock and the brick walls. "The lady just lived with it. There were roaches eating all the honey," says Jason.

The Smiths spent four months meticulously renovating their new home—adding new pipes and appliances, reframing walls, and repairing water damage. "Anytime there was something we could save, we did," Jason says. Now Jason is trying to get his home designated as a historic landmark, and he has joined the board of Houston Mod, a nonprofit organization striving to save mid-century modern homes like his.

Five years ago Houston architectural historian Stephen Fox persuaded four people (a couple of former students and a couple of people who had read his book *The Houston Architectural Guide* and contacted him) to start the preservation group.

"It seemed like an increasing number of significant modern buildings in Houston were being demolished," Fox says. "These are great works of architecture, and like any great work of art, they deserve to be preserved."

Houses built during this period are plentiful in Houston. The city grew rapidly after World War II, and many of the most important buildings—from HPD headquarters downtown to the Astrodome—are examples of modern architecture. "The golden age of architecture for Houston was the atomic age, the space race stage," says Robert Searcy, a Houston real estate agent who specializes in modern architecture.

Houston Mod focuses on education and awareness, with the object being to help people understand why modern architecture is important and needs to be saved rather than simply bulldozed to make way for new structures. The board members, who call themselves the Mod Squad, host architecture exhibitions and throw cocktail parties in cool houses, too. The Houston Mod website lists modern homes for sale and features a mod-of-the-month. The ultimate goal is get people—like the Smiths—to buy modern houses, renovate them, and work to have them designated as historic landmarks.

FACING PAGE When Jason Smith and his wife Vanessa came across their 1950s modern home on the first day of house hunting, it had been on the market for awhile. "Everyone had different reasons for not jumping. For the typical flipper, they wouldn't make enough of a profit," Jason says. "For average people, it borders a major street in the back. We saw right through all that and saw the house for the amazing house that it is. Being naive and young, we said 'Let's go for it.'"



But there is a problem of perception: most people just don't think a house built in the 1960s is that old. Some of the properties are definitely showing their age, however, and, at close to 50 years old, some are falling apart. In Houston, these residences are prime candidates for extinction; instead of renovating, many builders simply tear down old houses, quickly replacing them with cookie-cutter townhomes or McMansions. (Just look, for example, at all the shiny new townhomes in the Fourth Ward where shotgun houses once stood.)

"It's really a waste," laments Searcy. "We are filling our landfills with works of art—and replacing them with houses of half the quality." It's a losing proposition, too. "If we don't start working on saving these houses now," Searcy warns, "they're not going to be around. We're already losing them like crazy."

Michael Brichford, one of Houston Mod's four founders, owns a 1959 house in Memorial Bend and describes how that neighborhood was reclaimed. "Some of the houses in the neighborhood were falling apart," he says. Brichford started cataloging the houses in the area and posting them on Web sites when they went on the market. His efforts gained the attention of preservation-

mindful professionals. "Architects and design enthusiasts came in, put in a lot of hard work, and fixed them up," says Brichford. "Now this area is full of these little modernist jewels."

The effort to save houses such as these is difficult enough in any city. Most major cities—San Francisco and Charleston come to mind—have distinctive architecture that defines them. But Houston's situation is more precarious than most for a single reason: the architectural landscape is constantly changing.

Houston Mod president Ben Koush likes to remind people that Houston and Chicago were built within three years of each other. The Windy City, of course, is noted for its fine old buildings and residences. "But you wouldn't know Houston was built in the same era," says Koush. The basic reason for the contrast, Koush says, is that "people in Chicago haven't knocked all their buildings down."

It's all about educating the public about facts such as the rapid tear-down rate and the effects of it on the way a city looks. Houston Mod views education as a main component in the campaign to save historic architecture. "We're trying to teach people that modern buildings



are just as important as the Queen Anne and Victorian buildings,” Koush notes. “Midtown, for example, was once mansion after mansion. Now there’s only one left, and it’s hemmed in by a car dealership and an apartment complex.”

Koush is an architect who wrote his master’s thesis on postwar moderns. He also practices what he preaches: he bought a cinder-block house with a concrete slab roof in east Houston near the University of Houston. He purchased it from the original owner’s daughters, who gave him the original architect’s drawings and photographs—and he restored his “new” house to look just like it did when it was first built, in 1950. “It was mostly just painting and patching,” Koush says modestly. *But his efforts were rewarded: he was able to get it designated as a historic landmark at the state, local, and national levels.*

The mid-century moderns are some of Houston’s best buildings, Stephen Fox believes. “In the 50s and 60s Houston architects were involved with the modernist movement nationally, and they were conversing with greats like Frank Lloyd Wright,” he says. The resulting architecture was their way of making the city beautiful.

“What you see from the freeway or the mall parking lot often looks pretty bleak,” Fox says. “In these mid-century buildings, you realize that there’s a creative energy that’s been here for a long time. People have thought about ways to live in Houston that take positive advantage of some of the more trying aspects—whether it be climate or flat terrain. You can create very exciting spaces by working with what you have, rather than denying everything around you and creating stylistic fantasies that try to make you think you’re somewhere else.” ■

FACING PAGE In turning their house into a home, Jason and Vanessa Smith tried to stay as original to the house as they could. “Anytime there was something that we could save, we did,” Jason says. “A house like this one was commissioned by someone, and it’s a custom, one of a kind. So many of them are getting knocked down. It’s really hard because the 50-year mark is about where the houses are not quite appreciated yet—like an old craftsman. They’re sold because they’re ready to get knocked down.” **THIS PAGE** In the last two years, Houston has created the designated tag “protective landmark” which protects historic landmarks, like Ben Koush’s house (above), from demolition. Achieving landmark status isn’t an easy road. “The city has this culture that restriction is bad. Not being able to knock down a building is perceived as having a negative effect on the value of the property”, Koush explains.