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“Moving Modern”: Modern Architecture as “Moveable” Heritage

MARY KAY JUDY

Modern buildings—which may be too young to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places, or unappreciated by those who think they are too close to the recent past to be significant or not suitable for today’s living standards—frequently lack protections that older neighboring structures enjoy. Too often these buildings, many designed by influential architects, are demolished to make way for larger homes. Moving these buildings to a new site, however, offers a way to save them. And since many of these buildings are made of prefabricated parts, dismantling and moving them presents a feasible preservation option.

But in addition to moving buildings to preserve them, there can be another motivation at work. An emerging trend—treating Modern architecture as works

of art that can be acquired by collectors—is another reason why these buildings are being

packed up, transported, and reassembled on a new site. (Of course, while it is possible to move many types of buildings, older structures are not currently being sought out as collectibles to the same extent.)

These actions raise many nuanced questions. What are the implications if Modern architecture becomes a collectible commodity like artwork or is treated as “moveable” heritage? Can a Modern

building’s significance be maintained if it is taken from its original site? Does a Modern building’s design significance stand independent from its original site, as does a work of art or sculpture? If a building were to be sold to a private collector to be moved, could a condition of sale include provisions to maintain it appropriately and to allow scholarly and public access?

The following article explores the concept, the recent trend, the future implications, and the possible preservation opportunities of treating Modern architecture as “moveable” heritage.

ART VERSUS BUILDINGS

In the United States, unlike most other countries, there are few heritage protection laws that govern and define “moveable” cultural objects, such as fine art, sculpture, and historic relics, with

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the exception of certain limitations on archeological finds and Native American artifacts. Shaker furniture, for example, is widely considered significant and collectible; however, there is no legal restriction that it be kept in the country as American cultural property. Further, there is no American equivalent to an antiquities registry that would govern American moveable heritage.¹



In 2009 the Lieb House, constructed in 1969 on the Jersey Shore and designed by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, was moved by barge to Long Island after the new owner planned to demolish and replace it with a larger house on the site. The preservation effort was led by the architects' son, James Venturi, who documented the full moving process in his film *Saving Lieb House*.

PHOTO BY EKATERINA CHOUTOVA

In contrast, “immoveable” objects include architecture, built heritage, and landscapes. The most comparable immovable heritage protection laws in the United States are local historic preservation regulations governing individual landmarks and historic districts. It has been taken for granted that these laws would protect built heritage, since it is considered “immoveable.”

The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation also speak to this. They highlight the importance of a site’s integrity and call for making minimal changes to both the building and setting. The Standards cite both the importance of the relationship of the buildings to the landscape and the danger that a moved building can create a false historic appearance. The Standards also do not recommend moving buildings to an existing historic site or

ensemble since their introduction may diminish the historic character of the existing site or complex.

However, both the criteria for determining eligibility for National Historic Landmark (NHL Exception 20) and National Register listing (Criteria Consideration B) identify exceptions for evaluating moved properties.² This option for future listing after a move is important because 20th-century buildings less than 50 years old are not yet eligible for NHL or NR listing unless they meet the criteria of having exceptional significance.

MOVING BUILDINGS FOR PRESERVATION

In the overwhelming majority of cases, buildings have been moved—or proposed to be moved—because that was the only

possible way to save them. Here lies the crux of the compromise: Moving a building from its intended site can seriously harm its integrity and context—but the building is saved. Moving Modern buildings is especially problematic since the surrounding landscape was often specifically designed by the architect in conjunction with the building (such as Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Conn.), or the house was designed in response to the specific setting (such as Richard Neutra's Kaufmann House in Palm Springs, Calif.). Separating a building from its landscape significantly alters the design intent, the experience of the building itself, and its overall integrity. As such, it is understood that Modern buildings should be preserved in situ whenever possible, and moving should only be considered when all other options have been exhausted.

There are many successful cases of moving Modern homes in order to preserve them. A number of houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, in particular, have been moved for that reason, often with the assistance of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, which has raised awareness of the endangered buildings and sought solutions through networking and advocacy.

Wright's Pope-Leighey House, for example, was constructed in Falls Church, Va., in 1940 and was moved in 1964 to Woodlawn Plantation in Alexandria, approximately 20 miles away, after it was slated for demolition to allow a road widening project. In 1985 advocates

dismantled and moved Wright's 1957 Arnold Jackson House approximately 50 miles from Madison, Wis., to Beaver Dam after it was threatened with demolition to make way for an office park. The Gordon House, completed in 1963 on the Willamette River in Wilsonville, Ore., was threatened in 2002 when the owner proposed demolition for the construction of a larger house on the site. In a last-minute negotiation, it was agreed that the house would be moved 25 miles to the Oregon Garden Foundation's property in Silverton. Wright's Duncan House, built in 1957 in Illinois, was moved more than 500 miles to Acme, Pa., in 2004 where it now serves as a guest house near Kentuck Knob and Fallingwater.

Wright's Bachman Wilson House in Millstone, N.J., which has suffered repeated flood damage from the adjacent river, is now up for sale—a moving sale. In this unusual situation, the house, the move, and reconstruction at a new site on Long Island with upgraded energy-efficient mechanical systems are being offered under one single purchase price. Preservation New Jersey included the house on its "10 Most Endangered" list in May 2011 urging that all possible options should be fully explored prior to moving,

Wright's Pope-Leighey House, which is owned and operated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, was moved in 1964 to Woodlawn Plantation in nearby Alexandria to avoid demolition for a road widening project.

PHOTO BY RON BLUNT, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION



but conceding that “If relocation is the only viable course of action, this distinctive building, the work of one of the twentieth century’s greatest architects, should remain on a site as comparable as possible to the original in setting, orientation, and geography.” (www.preservationnj.org/site/ExpEng/index.php?/ten_most_11/index_detail/Bachman_Wilson_House)

There are several other examples of mid-20th-century houses being moved for preservation. The stainless-steel prefab-

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ricated Aluminarie House, designed by Kochner & Frey, was constructed in 1931 for an architectural exhibition in New York City. After the close of the exhibition, it was purchased by a private owner and moved to Long Island by boat. Several decades later, a new owner proposed demolishing the structure to make way for a small subdivision on the estate. In 1988 the house was saved when the owner agreed to donate it to the New York Institute of Technology’s Islip Long Island Campus. The New York State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation provided a grant to underwrite moving costs. The campus where the Aluminarie House is located was recently sold, putting the house back in jeopardy. At the time of writing, there is a proposal to move it to a new site in Queens.

Committed individuals, not necessarily from typical preservation advocacy organizations or backgrounds, led many of these successful moves to save threatened buildings. In two cases the efforts were led by second- and third-generation family members of the original architect.

Unfortunately, saving a building by moving it will not work if the building cannot be matched with a new owner and site. Often finding a new owner and location is complicated by the pressures of a strict time limitation and the lack of technical expertise in evaluating the viability of conservation and moving for preservation.

For example, the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress Exposition featured architect Howard Fisher’s International Style, steel, prefabricated house commissioned by General Homes, Inc., and designed for middle- and upper-class living. Two years later, one of Fisher’s prefab homes was built in Cambridge, Mass. The house remained on its original site until the owner proposed demolition for construction of a new house on the lot. The Cambridge Historical Commission mounted a campaign in 2004 to save the building by having it moved to a new site, but unfortunately a match was not found and the building was demolished in 2006.

Another recent loss is the John Lautner Shusett-designed house in Los Angeles, built in 1951. Local preservation groups including the John Lautner Foundation proposed moving the building to a new site when the owners planned to demolish it for a larger house on the same site in 2010. The owners were not open to negotiation and proceeded ahead quickly with demolition.

MOVING BUILDINGS FOR PRIVATE COLLECTION

Modern buildings are also being moved from their original sites because they are sought out by collectors of 20th-century design who are knowledgeable about



Andrew Geller's 1959 Pearlroth House, built on a beach in Long Island, N.Y., is being moved approximately 40 feet to allow room for new construction. The architect's grandson is spearheading the move that will save the building.

PHOTO BY JERRY BIRNBAUM, COURTESY OF THE ANDREW GELLER ARCHITECTURE ARCHIVE

their importance in both design and architectural history. Collectors have collaborated with major auction houses, such as Sotheby's and Christie's, which have set the appraisal value and publicized sales, while turning the buildings themselves into an investment commodity. Neither auction house maintains an architecture department; rather the recent sales of Modern buildings were conducted by the "20th-Century Decorative Art and Design" departments. Thus, they were handled as art objects—as opposed to architecture or even as real estate.

An early example of architecture treated as movable art is the house designed in 1949 by Marcel Breuer for an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, called "A House in the Garden." The building was designed to be a model for post-war family living. When the exhibition was over, the Rockefeller family arranged for the house to be moved to the grounds of the family estate, Kykuit, in Westchester, N.Y. It was reassembled and has been used over time as a guest house and for an artist-in-residency program. The house recently underwent a full exterior and interior restoration. It is



Maison Tropicale, which is shown here reassembled in Queens before it was sold at auction, was designed by Jean Prouvé in 1951.

PHOTO BY MARY KAY JUDY

operated and maintained by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

More recently, the Farnsworth House by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, which was completed in 1951 in Plano, Ill., was put up for auction by Sotheby's in 2003. At its sale, the house could either stay at its present site or be moved to another location of the purchaser's choice. This auction changed the way the public, the art community, and investors looked at architecture. The sale created the concept of "trophy" architecture and presented buildings as moveable and collectible. The National Trust for Historic Preservation purchased the house in cooperation with Landmarks Illinois which, unlike the majority of bidders, planned to preserve it in situ. Sotheby's still considers the Farnsworth House sale as one of its most significant auctions, and features it prominently on the company's website.

Several years later, in 2007, Christie's auctioned the Jean Prouvé-designed Maison Tropicale house in New York. The steel prefabricated house, one of

three prototypes, was originally shipped from France and erected in Brazzaville, Congo, in 1951, then a French colony. Before the auction, the *International Herald Tribune* stated: "The Maison Tropicale is the biggest trophy in modern and contemporary design." The auction catalogue contained a lengthy disclaimer and conditions of sale stating that the house would be delivered, dismantled, and stored for several weeks for the new owner, but the new owner would be fully responsible for claiming and moving it thereafter. The house sold for nearly \$5 million to a private owner who has loaned it to the Tate Modern in London where it was displayed on the banks of the Thames River. The owner plans to ultimately move it to the Caribbean. A second Prouvé prototype house that was brought out of the Congo was purchased and restored by an American collector who donated the house to the Pompidou Center in Paris after exhibiting it at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

Shortly after the sale of the Maison Tropicale, the owners of the Kaufmann House in Palm Springs, which was designed by Richard Neutra and completed in 1946, put the house up for auction by Christie's in May 2008. The owners and the auction house hoped to capitalize on the momentum of the Farnsworth and Maison Tropicale sales. A large part of that momentum, as they saw it, was to continue "promoting architecture as a collectible art worthy of the same consideration as painting and sculpture." (Edward Wyatt, "A

Marcel Breuer's "House in a Garden"—designed for a 1949 exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and moved to Kykuit, the Rockefeller family estate in Westchester, N.Y., shortly after—is an early example of architecture treated as moveable art.

PHOTO BY MARY KAY JUDY

Landmark Modernist House Heads to Auction,” *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2007.) However, in contrast to the previous auctions, it was not being offered to be moved in the terms of sale. Christie’s created a brief film to promote the sale which highlighted the importance of the desert setting and intimate relationship between the house and landscape; the narrator enthuses that the experience of the house is “a complete immersion in a work of art” (www.christies.com/features/special-sites/kaufmann_house). The house was auctioned in May 2008 for \$16 million, which was on the low end of the anticipated sale, perhaps indicative of the onset of the economic recession. Soon after the auction however, the sale fell through.

During this period, before the recession slowed the pursuit of these houses, an innovative approach for architectural collection was proposed in the spring of 2007 by Michael Govan, the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Citing architecture as inseparable from art and noting the high degree of significance of local mid-century architecture, he proposed acquiring local landmark houses by notable architects such as Rudolf Schindler for the museum’s collection. The houses would be preserved and maintained as museum pieces and also serve as housing for curators. To date, apart from the purchase of a John Lautner office interior, the museum has yet to acquire any properties.

In August 2010 an article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* about two of Frank



Lloyd Wright's textile-block houses in that city, La Miniatura and the Ennis Brown House, both of which were for sale. Neither house had found a buyer despite steep price reductions. According to the article, the Realtor for La Miniatura was report-

act of taking the Elgin Marbles (or, more appropriately, the Parthenon Marbles) out of Greece? Or if you were to purchase and move the Farnsworth House, would you be denying Illinois its heritage? These issues are also reminiscent of the claims over the past

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decade made against North American museums for repatriation of national treasures to their country of origin. Such

edly in discussions with Japanese art collectors who had proposed dismantling the house and shipping it to Japan. The Realtor was quoted as saying: "With my position in the preservation community, I will probably be crucified for saying this, but we have to consider all options. We moved the London Bridge to the Colorado River. Why couldn't we move this house to Japan?" (Jori Finkel, "Dramatic, Historic and Prices Slashed, Yet No Buyers Are Biting," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 27, 2010) However, in late July 2011 it was announced that the Ennis House had been purchased by a private owner committed to its restoration in situ. At the time of writing, La Miniatura is still on the market.

questions are not new, of course. Historic buildings, or sections of them, have been collected and moved for centuries—but the fate of endangered Modern buildings is a particularly pressing concern.

For prefabricated houses or those that have been moved more than once, the preservation issues are not clear-cut. Since prefabricated houses weren't designed for a specific site, it may be more acceptable to move them than a house that was created with its setting in mind. In addition, it may be more appropriate to move a house that has already been moved more than once since it has lost any association with its setting. But at what point does its setting become significant to the house and to local history? Borrowing a concept from National Register criteria, should a building be on a site for at least 50 years to be considered significant to its location?

**PRESERVATION ISSUES—
THE ELGIN MARBLE DEBATE**

The uncertain future of these two properties have left many in the local architecture and preservation communities asking what would it would mean for Los Angeles if they were to lose a Wright house to an international collector.

The Los Angeles situation raises a number of questions: Shouldn't a Modern building's heritage belong to the identity and community in which it was originally built? If you take buildings out of Brazzaville, Congo, for auction in New York would that be comparable to the now highly questioned

Certainly when moving the building is the only option to save it, then it should be moved. However in many cases buildings are lost at the 11th hour because there is not enough time to mobilize. To prevent these losses, should moving Modern buildings be a more established, accepted solution for saving them? Should a Modern preservation advocacy organization maintain an online listing of threatened Modern properties eligible for moving?

“MOVING MODERN” ROUNDTABLE

To respond to this growing trend and the issues it raises, the Neighborhood Preservation Center in New York sponsored a roundtable of interdisciplinary preservation professionals to discuss “Moving Modern” in June 2011. It was agreed that each situation must be evaluated individually, but that the guiding philosophy for all cases is that Modern buildings should not be moved unless that is the only option for preservation.

However (barring economic limitations, construction deadlines, and the failure to match a proposed move with a new site), from an engineering standpoint, these buildings *can* be moved. One participant, Nancy Hudson, a structural engineer at Robert Silman Associates, pointed out: “Anything is possible.” Eva Subotnik, professor of law at St. John’s University, was then quick to highlight UNESCO’s massive undertaking of dismantling and moving six temple complexes—nearly 30 buildings, including Abu Simbel—under the Save Nubian Heritage Program from 1959 to 1979.

Additionally, it was agreed that owners, potential buyers, and advocacy organizations, as well as preservation professionals, need to be better prepared to evaluate suitability for moving and offer technical advice. As it is, technical resources on how to move a historic building are rare, since this is considered an option only in extreme circumstance, and none address the special challenges or considerations of Modern buildings. The most comprehensive guide to date is *Moving Historic Buildings* by John Obed Curtis, published in 1975 in cooperation with NPS in the Technical Note series. Curtis uses several case study examples, all of which were masonry or wood-

frame buildings from the late 1800s to the turn of the 20th century. While this is an excellent guide for older buildings, it does not address modern building materials, technology, and systems such as curtain walls and prefabrication. A guide for moving Modern architecture would continue to build on established knowledge in the same way the field of technical building conservation has drawn from previous experience to address new challenges for restoring and preserving Modern architecture.

As such, the recommendation was to create a “toolkit” specifically tailored to Modern heritage resources. It will provide such information as criteria to evaluate a modern building’s suitability for moving and its proposed new site; technical guidelines on means, methods, and estimated costs; a template RFP for moving contractors; and a template legal contract to define the scope of work and responsibility for the owner and buyer of the property to be moved. Additional roundtables and discussions are also needed to keep this topic a focus of attention.

Watch for further developments. **FJ**

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- 1 In countries such as Peru, Mali, Czech Republic, and China, among others, there are restrictions on exporting cultural heritage or antiques over a certain age. Typically items ranging from 50 to 100 years old must be approved by the local antiquities department of the Ministry of Culture or in-country customs office for export.
- 2 The criteria for eligibility as either an NHL or NR property agree that a moved building must be significant primarily for its architectural merits and embodied values while retaining a very high amount of integrity. Further, the moved location must be in keeping with the original site in terms of orientation, setting, and environment.