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"Mid-century homes are a labour of love" say conservation experts



Amy Peacock | 23 October 2024 | 17 comments

The challenges of [preserving](#) and [upkeeping](#) [mid-century modern](#) homes mean many are at risk of [demolition](#), conservation experts tell Dezeen as part of our [mid-century modern series](#).

Open-plan layouts, large windows and aesthetically on-trend fitted furniture are among the attributes found in many mid-century modern houses built from the mid-1940s to the early 1970s that make them sought-after today.

However, experts say that difficulties in maintaining the original building fabric and the challenges of fittings that aren't compatible with modern technology mean mid-century modern homes are especially vulnerable to demolition.



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Many mid-century modern homes are at risk of demolition. Above and top: photos of High Sunderland by Dapple Photography courtesy of Loader Monteith

"Mid-century homes are a labour of love," said Liz Waytkus, director of conservation group [Docomomo US](#). "Most people who own them put most of their time into them."

"Mid-century modernism was when we came up with the idea of open concept between the kitchen, the living room and dining room, so they're absolutely what people still want," she told Dezeen.

"Maybe the bathrooms and closets were smaller, but maybe we can learn something about our consumerism and our spending habits."

Mid-century modern houses "underbuilt for the land"

Although many mid-century modern homes have qualities that people today consider desirable, in some cases, they are torn down to make way for larger developments.

A number of notable mid-century modern homes have been razed recently. These include [Marcel Breuer's Geller I house in Long Island](#), demolished to make way for a tennis court, and [Craig Ellwood's Zimmerman House in Los Angeles](#), which was torn down by actor Chris Pratt to build a mansion.

"There are realtors in all 50 US states who specialise in mid-century because there is such a demand," said Waytkus. "It gets trickier when you have a house in a desirable area – the mid-century homes are then considered underbuilt for the land."



Experts say mid-century homes and interiors are desirable today. Photo of Farnsworth House by William Zbaren

Waytkus aims to offer guidance to homeowners navigating the challenges of maintaining mid-century modern homes in the hopes that more of the homes will be well preserved. One of the ways she does this is by connecting them with contractors who have experience working with mid-century materials.

"The earlier examples of modern homes were often made of wood, and wood will last you longer than any of the plastic garbage that you get on the market now," she said. "With a little bit of TLC, that wood could be restored."

"Later, in the 60s and 70s, the materials were more experimental and it takes more time to find the right contractor who understands mid-century homes. Having a knowledgeable community is really important to point people in the right direction."



Read:
Chris Pratt's destruction of Ellwood house in LA symptom of "systemic problems"

Jon Wright, who is the 20th-century heritage lead at architecture studio [Purcell](#), agreed with Waytkus that mid-century modern interiors are popular and highly sought after today.

"Mid-century modern is really quite desirable now, and it fits very well into modern lifestyles," he said. "The key thing for that is the open-plan nature of it."

"If we were having this conversation 20 years ago, nobody would have been interested in G plan furniture, fitted teak sideboards, open plan living, or anything from the 50s or 60s," he continued.

Lack of mid-century modern conservation reference material

However, he argued that fixtures and fittings from the period are a challenging aspect of home preservation and that there are not enough previous examples for people to reference.

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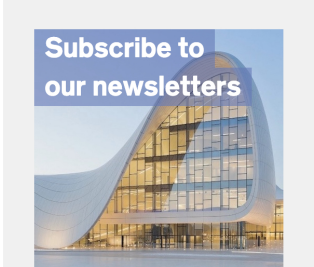
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"The fixtures and fittings are not compatible with new technology and new ways of living, particularly in the kitchen," Wright said. "That includes completely new pieces of utility that would not been there before, like dishwashers."

"There's also an issue of knowing how to look after it," he continued. "If one were dealing with the fixtures and fittings of a Victorian or Georgian house, there is a long track record of textbook cases that you could go to – you know what to do because it's been done in another 100 places."

"But there isn't that track record for post-war building conservation. Very often, you're doing things for the first time."



Purcell worked on the conservation of the 1961 Ahm House in Hertfordshire. Photo by James O Davies

Wright emphasised the importance of distinguishing between original features and later alterations when conserving a building.

For mid-century homes, he argues that the most significant features are the building materials, the arrangement of internal spaces and how the project relates to the surrounding landscape.

"Making changes is what conservation is really about – what can I do to this building without messing up what's truly important about it?" he said.

Balance between preservation and future suitability is necessary

UK conservation group [Twentieth Century Society](#) director Catherine Croft believes that some alterations are necessary to make mid-century modern homes liveable and long-lasting.

She explained that in some cases, homeowners are told by authorities to preserve impractical home fittings that are sometimes later additions to the house.

"With housing more than anything else, we're sometimes asked to intervene on behalf of owners who feel that they're being given too hard a time by local authority planners and conservation officers – particularly about retention of kitchen fittings that aren't necessarily original," she said.

"It's the sort of cases where we end up saying, maybe back off a little bit. Let's get a balance between preserving the historic fabric and making sure these buildings have a future."



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Hassrick House is a mid-century home maintained by Thomas Jefferson University.
Photo by Hussain Aljoher

Suzanne Singletary – director of [The Center for the Preservation of Modernism](#) and architecture professor at [Thomas Jefferson University](#) – hopes to spread awareness of the significant design aspects of mid-century modern homes by using Hassrick House as an example.

Designed by modernist architect Richard Neutra in 1958, the Philadelphia home was sold to Thomas Jefferson University to be used for educational purposes.

Singletary has analysed Hassrick House with her students, documenting how the building's condition declines without proper maintenance.

"The reason why many buildings from this period are being demolished is because it's easier to get rid of it and start all over with newer materials, even though the notion that the greenest building is one already built is true," said Singletary.

"Within the five years since we've purchased Hassrick House, we can see already how quickly the building deteriorates," she continued. "They used novel materials that are often hard to replace and hard to get to a state of equilibrium where they're not decaying any further."



Read:
"Mid-century modern is classic, it's never going away" says Cara Greenberg

Croft argued that allowing buildings to be listed before they are at risk of being torn down would help protect more mid-century modern houses and would mean they are purchased by people with a desire to maintain them.

"Buildings are only being added to the list if they are threatened with demolition, but it would be infinitely better if a broader upgrading of the listing system was happening on a regular basis," she said.

"It's not really fair that people might buy a property and then subsequently have restrictions placed on it that they weren't anticipating."

There is more of an interest in preserving these types of homes now than ever before, according to experts.

"There's more of an outcry when something from this period is threatened than there ever has been before," added Wright. "That's entirely due to listing and organisations like the 20th Century Society putting their head above the parapet, saying, actually, this stuff is really great."



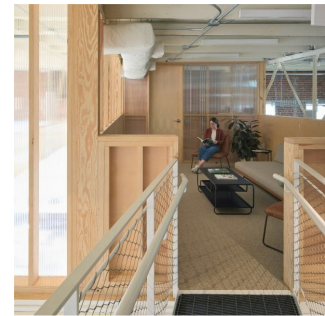
Illustration by Jack Bedford

Mid-century modern

This article is part of Dezeen's [mid-century modern design series](#), which looks at the enduring presence of mid-century modern design, profiles its most iconic architects and designers, and explores how the style is developing in the 21st century.



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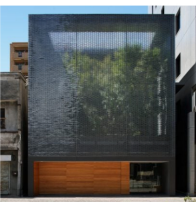
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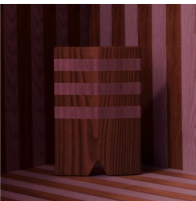
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Best Newest Oldest**jb**

10 months ago

Modernists are pro-demolition except when it's a modernist building.

👍 1 🗨️ 3 Reply Share ›

**JZ**

10 months ago edited

Dezeen, I wish you had reached out to George Smart, the CEO of NC Modernist and [US Modernist Homes](#). He has created a robust online archive (he believes its the world's largest) along with a community of enthusiasts who support travel and home tours in the US and abroad. He is a tireless advocate, approaching two decades of documenting and educating the public on the value of Modern domestic architecture. He would have been able to discuss at lengths the challenges and needs for midcentury preservation.

👍 2 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›

**Eric Hansen**

10 months ago edited

We are the fourth owners of a home designed by Eugene Kinn Choy. The third owner destroyed the living room. We are trying to take it back to its original glory but some materials are not easily attained such as clear redwood tongue and groove. We love our home and will take it back to its original glory.

It is a labor of love.

👍 4 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›

**B C5**

10 months ago edited

As an engineer who specializes on high design residential I would help you for free.

👍 1 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›

**Milton Welch**

10 months ago edited

Greatest danger for those homes is the new owner who starts "remodeling" for the sake of remodeling. Many Eichler homes in California can attest to that.

👍 2 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›

**jb**

10 months ago

There's only a need to keep one or two M-CM homes per continent as curios and then demolish the rest as required.

👍 0 🗨️ 8 Reply Share ›

**Alfred Hitchcock**

10 months ago

You're advocating demolishing perfectly usable buildings, many of which are people's well-loved homes. All because you have an irrational fear of modern architecture. That's a really sensible comment.

👍 6 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›

**jb**

10 months ago

Property owners should be allowed to demolish their unlisted non-contributory and insignificant out-of-date money pit without interference from modernist zealots. Opposition to the prevailing design obsession is always met with empty accusations of irrationality. You should look to your history of modernism for examples of true psychopathy in architecture, a subtopic which is currently being expertly sidestepped again in yet another lengthy presentation on modernism.

👍 0 🗨️ 4 Reply Share ›

**Heywood Floyd**

10 months ago

"Zealots...obsession...psychopathy...". The relentless irony with which you inadvertently describe yourself while attempting to demonize your rhetorical opponents would be hilarious if it weren't also Trumpian.

👍 4 🗨️ 0 Reply Share ›

**jb**

10 months ago

At least you have a sense of humour about it, unlike some.

👍 0 🗨️ 1 Reply Share ›

**Jim Angrabright**

10 months ago

"Zealots...obsession...psychopathy...". Yeah, I believe the term is called projecting.

'jb' obviously lacks the ability to actually articulate a cogent argument against his bete noire else, one would think, he would have presented it by now. But like many people who have nothing to say, he insists on saying it anyway. Next up: he tells us his least favorite color.

3 0 Reply Share ›



JZ 10 months ago

Advocating for indiscriminate, widespread demolition when there are reasonable alternatives is irrational, psychopathic prejudice, a subtopic which currently is running through the US political system as a form of unhealthy nostalgia, also known as right-wing fascism.

2 0 Reply Share ›



Keith Powers 10 months ago edited

Well stated in the article is, "Croft argued that allowing buildings to be listed before they are at risk of being torn down would help protect more mid-century modern houses and would mean they are purchased by people with a desire to maintain them." Give the market exposure before deciding to raze mid-century buildings. It may be a win-win.

2 0 Reply Share ›



Milton Welch 10 months ago

Beauty of Palm Springs in California.

0 0 Reply Share ›



Laura 10 months ago edited

It may be worth considering that the more modest mid-century homes are also worth conserving and celebrating. I live in the American West, where ranch homes are abundant- and frequently despised. Yet, my own home, blissfully untouched since 1959 has built-in wardrobes, ample bleached oak woodwork, expansive windows that face the back of the property rather than the street, and many other nods to mid-century living.

The 91-year-old owner sold it to me because I loved the house as it was, and "wasn't going to tear up a good house". The other interested purchasers all had house flipping on their minds, ripping out tiled bathrooms, small kitchens, pocket doors, bleached oak, etc. I do my best to preserve and highlight the original features while adding features and finishes that enhance and blend. If only more people did. I regularly see original cabinets, built-ins, and woodwork stacked at the curb, ready to go to the dump or with a sad little sign stating "free" as my neighbors remodel their way to magazine-inspired blandness.

is my house an important mid-century bit of architecture? No, especially from the exterior, where it appears to be a western ranch-style house in a post-war suburb like many others. But, inside, the details are there. My neighbors, especially my young neighbors, are puzzled I don't want to "update". I just smile. It's already far more modern than they know.

8 0 Reply Share ›



Milton Welch 10 months ago edited

Our starter home was in one modest post-and-beam 50's development. Now, three decades later if I happen to be driving through the neighborhood, every house's original feel is destroyed by the "new-and-improved" vinyl windows or unsightly addition/remodel.

3 0 Reply Share ›



David Marquette 10 months ago edited

I can relate. We live in central California in '54 that was original when we bought it 6 years ago, we're the 3rd owner. Same vintage neighbouring homes mostly very modified, carport enclosed to garages, siding and garages added. It's impossible to update the existing house to comply with building codes like Title 14 energy efficiency. Doing so would destroy for example the shed roofs (we did add some R factor on top when re-roofing; doesn't change the look aside from a thicker fascia).

We have just added on in the rear, taking the laundry out of the kitchen, permitted to current codes. That brought us new water & sewer lines , heat pumps, tankless water heating, replaced main electrical panel. We mimicked the original house; flat roof, tinted concrete floors, T&G ceilings with beams (original house is post & beam), transom-topped window walls flush to the room corners, but only since its in back it still looks different with the requirements on insulation, structural, limited glazing.

Now as we turn to updating the kitchen and 2 bathrooms, we're doing work to code with licensed contractors but not permitting it as an interior renovation. We're trying to stick to the minimalism, and repeating any removed finished, like the current kitchen is mostly stainless steel, replacing with Walnut veneers and SS appliances and counters).

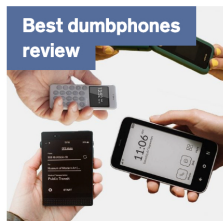
It will still look 50's original, as it was published in the local paper in '56.

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