HIDDEN HISTORY

Uncovering forgotten artifacts and delving into dusty archives to explore the little-known stories of our state.

The Wright Stuff

A landmark lecture given by Frank Lloyd Wright in Raleigh in 1950 heralded the recently formed School of Design at North Carolina State College as a driving force in modernist architecture.

written by BRAD CAMPBELL

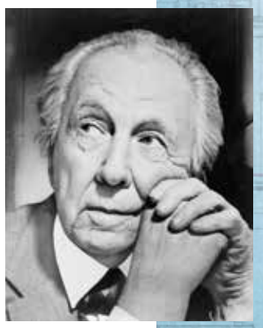
TRUMAN L. NEWBERRY JR. WASN'T sure what an architect was, but he knew he wanted to be one. As a boy in Raleigh, he grew up shadowing his favorite uncle, Bill Newberry, a "jack of all trades" who could do whatever the occasion required — from plumbing to wiring to complete renovations — despite the desperate shortage of materials caused by the Great Depression.

"We'd go to the garbage dump," Newberry says, "and there'd be old lumber and old wire and pieces of metal, and we'd go see what we could find. I could straighten out a bent nail like you couldn't believe."

Newberry learned to love the smell of sawdust, and when he took a shop and drawing class in high school, the puzzle pieces began to fall into place. He realized, "Hey, there are plans that someone draws to do a lot of this stuff." His industrial arts instructor encouraged his interest and suggested he attend an upcoming lecture by Frank Lloyd Wright.

Wright was in the twilight of a seven-decade career that would earn him the title of "greatest American architect of all time" from the American Institute of Architects. His design philosophy had evolved to emphasize organic structures that harmonized with their natural surroundings — most famously in Fallingwater, a private residence that was partly built over a waterfall.

When he spoke at Reynolds Coliseum in Raleigh on May 16, 1950, "it was the largest architecture lecture ever at that time," says George Smart, executive director of NCModernist.org and USModernist.org, websites dedicated to preserving and promoting modernist architecture. Some 5,000 people turned out to hear Wright's speech, including a 16-year-old Truman Newberry.



FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

As dean of the School of Design, Henry Kamphoefner brought luminaries like Frank Lloyd Wright (opposite) and Buckminster Fuller (below, far left) to NC State College. His 1950 home (left) incorporated Wrightian features and is considered the first modernist house in Raleigh.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT PORTRAIT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, LC-USZ62-116657; OPPOSITE, ABOVE: JERRY BLOW PHOTOGRAPHY, © RALEIGH HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION; BELOW: BUCKMINSTER FULLER AND ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS, ITEM 0000101; BLUEPRINT: HENRY L. AND MABEL KAMPHOEFNER RESIDENCE - ELEVATIONS, WINDOW AND DOOR DETAILS, ITEM MC00198-008-FF0059-000-0001, 0014, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS RESEARCH CENTER, NC STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES; GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: DEAN HENRY KAMPHOEFNER LOOKING AT MODEL OF A CITY, ITEM 0229235, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS RESEARCH CENTER, NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES, RALEIGH, NC; BELOW: CHARLES HARRIS

Kamphoefner (above, pictured in 1963) is responsible for training a generation of architects, including Truman Newberry (below), who graduated from NC State in 1956 and designed his eponymous home (pictured) in 1963.

That night, Wright described organic architecture as "a thing of the spirit." According to the Raleigh *News and Observer*, he called the nation's population centers "vampires" dependent on rural areas for their survival. His hope for the South — which he said had fewer "vampires" than the North — was to develop an organic architecture suited to its own needs and to "humanize their buildings, making them richly human, warmly human."

Likely no one in the audience took those words to heart more than the man who'd brought Wright to Raleigh: Henry Kamphoefner, the recently appointed dean of the School of Design at North Carolina State College. Kamphoefner, already a distinguished architect in his own right, saw his new position as an opportunity to achieve what Wright had proposed: the development of "a great creative architecture" by schools in the South that could forget their "reverence of the past."

Wright proposed the development of "a great creative architecture" by schools in the South.

While Kamphoefner may have heard Wright's remarks as an endorsement of his plans for the School of Design, Newberry was just happy to be in the audience for such a historic event. "I was still in the very early stages of learning what architecture was all about, so the level of his lecture was way beyond my ability to fully understand what he was talking about," he says. "But I came away knowing it had been a very special evening."

THE TIMING OF NEWBERRY'S ENTRY TO THE SCHOOL of Design the following year could not have been more fortuitous, as Kamphoefner continued to revamp the school for which he'd been hired.

"There wasn't a formal modernist movement in North Carolina until North Carolina State restructured their engineering program and brought in Kamphoefner," says Smart, who marvels at how quickly he made the school successful.

Guided by Wrightian principles they learned in the architecture program at NC State, father and son Al and Parker Platt designed House on the Edge (right) to blend seamlessly with its natural surroundings on Lake Toxaway.

"He did things they don't let deans do anymore. He fired most of the faculty and began to recruit students from all over the country."

The curriculum developed by "The Dean," as Kamphoefner came to be known on campus, was rigorous and unforgiving. Famously, he left one faculty position open and used the funds to host visiting artists, a rare practice at the time that is now common.

North Carolina boasts more modernist homes than most other states in the country.

In Roger H. Clark's book *School of Design: The Kamphoefner Years 1948-1973*, alumnus Frederick Taylor recounted, "Kamphoefner was somehow able to get these luminaries to accept invitations that more well-established schools like Harvard and MIT had apparently never attempted to do. And I think, as much as anything else, this program put the School of Design on the map."

At NC State, Newberry rubbed shoulders with Charles Eames, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Buckminster Fuller. "A young kid being exposed to that caliber of famous people? I was blessed," Newberry says. "It was the experience of a lifetime."

The faculty, equally august, included George Matsumoto and Eduardo Catalano, whose "Raleigh House" earned praise from Wright and was North Carolina's most famous modernist residence until it was demolished in 2001.

By 1968, the School of Design had graduated almost 500 students. Faculty and students had won

ONE WITH NATURE

Among the architects carrying the modernist banner forward is Parker Platt, who, like his father, Al, was a graduate of the North Carolina State architecture program and benefited from the traditions and philosophies that Kamphoefner and his faculty established. "The spirit of all those people was really present," Parker says. "The professors leading at that point were direct descendants of that crowd."

Parker joined his dad's firm in 1994, and the father/son team has gone on to create a portfolio of distinctive homes, including many in the modernist tradition and most of them in western North Carolina. When it comes to modernism, "I've always been interested in the freedom that it gives you," Parker says. "It frees you up to minimize the building and maximize the connection to its place."

House on the Edge, an Al and Parker Platt collaboration, exemplifies that philosophy. Built in 2011 on Lake Toxaway, the home embodies Wright's view that "no house should ever be on a hill or on anything. It should be of the hill. Belonging to it. Hill and house should live together each the happier for the other."

With its low profile, living roof, and ample windows reflecting the surrounding woods, the home blends seamlessly with the environment that surrounds it. "People think of modernism as cold and hard-edged, and I think of it totally opposite," Parker says. "By minimizing the boundary between in and out, you can really warm up a space. That's how Wright worked." — *B.C.*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JERRY MARKATOS (INTERIOR) AND TODD CRAWFORD (EXTERIOR), COURTESY OF PLATT

more than $250,000 in scholarships and prizes. And while Kamphoefner may have planted the seed, *where* he planted it made all the difference.

Describing the students the School of Design attracted, Catalano said, "The majority were from North Carolina, a state of farms, of healthy life, of purity of soul. No one had the intellectual pretense of people from large cities, only ears to listen and willing hearts and hands to do hard work."

Kamphoefner's protégés went forth putting the modernist philosophy into practice. Today, North Carolina boasts more modernist homes than most other states in the country. The NCModernist.org team has identified and documented more than 5,000 of them. "We estimate we've got 95 percent of what's in North Carolina," Smart says. "We've been very effective at making people aware of what they have."

In addition to cataloging modernist homes, the NCModernist.org site features profiles of the architects who built — and are still building — these masterpieces. As a result, many of these "works of sculpture you can live in" have been preserved for future generations.

AFTER GRADUATION, NEWBERRY SERVED three years in the Army in a combat engineer training regiment. ("We taught the troops how to build bridges and then we taught them how to blow them up," he says.) He'd only been practicing architecture for six years when he was named project architect under Carter Williams for Minges Coliseum at East Carolina University. The building was massive — over 108,000 square feet and over three million cubic feet. Newberry's experience at the School of Design prepared him for the challenge. Sixty years later, the coliseum still serves its original purpose, a testament to the modernist "form follows function" philosophy taught at the school.

"The idea of modernism is 'Keep it simple,'" Newberry says before adding with a laugh, "I'm simpleminded. I ought to be able to do that."

SEE THIS STORY

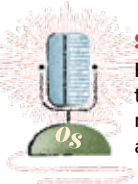
Tune in to *Our State*'s exclusive video to see how modernist architects have left their mark on our landscape. Watch at **ourstate.com/modernist-architecture**.

Of course, the self-deprecating architect is anything but. Like Wright, Newberry's practice has spanned seven decades — at 91, he's still working — and he's designed hundreds of buildings, mostly in North Carolina: private residences, apartments, town houses, high-rises, churches, and more.

Over the years, Newberry's family has surrounded him with reminders of the man who laid the foundation for his architectural philosophy. "Books, pillows, keychains, you name it," he says. "It's a constant flow of Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired gifts. I really treasure those." And with good reason. During the countless times he began a project by smoothing out a blank sheet of paper on a drafting table, Newberry has never been alone: "His presence was there anytime I needed it."

Thanks to Wright, Kamphoefner, and the School of Design, thousands of families know what it means to live inside a work of art, earning the state an unlikely distinction. "Who knew," Newberry says, "that little ol' Mayberry would be a center for great residential architecture?"

Brad Campbell is an award-winning creative director, a feature writer, and the winner of multiple Moth StorySLAM competitions.



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