

Louisiana Architecture 1945 - 1965

Modernism Triumphant – Commercial and Institutional Buildings

**Jonathan and Donna Fricker
Fricker Historic Preservation Services, LLC
September 2009**

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

America in the years following World War II saw the triumph of European Modernism in commercial and institutional buildings. Modernism was a style that claimed not to be a style, but rather an erudite and compelling movement towards rationality and purposefulness in architecture. It grew out of art, architectural and handicraft reform efforts in Europe in the years after World War I. These came together in the Bauhaus school of design in Weimar, Germany, which sought to teach all artists, artisans and architects to work together, in common service, towards “the building of the future.”

Originally founded in 1906 by the Grand-Duke of Saxe-Weimar as a school for the arts and crafts, the Bauhaus emerged in the 1920s as the focus of a radical new approach to industrial design and architecture. Inherent in the Bauhaus was a commitment to marshalling the greater art world in the service of humanity. And there were strong associations with political reform, socialism, and a mandate for art to respond to the machine age.

The new architecture the Bauhaus school epitomized, the International Style as it came to be known, had a “stark cubic simplicity” (Nikolas Pevsner) – completely and profoundly devoid of ornament. Its buildings are characterized by: 1) a machined metal and glass framework, with flat neutral (generally white) surfaces pierced by thin bands of windows (ribbon windows) sometimes turning the corner; 2) an overall horizontal feel; 3) functional and decidedly flat roofs; 4) frequent use of the cantilever principal for balconies and upper stories; and 5) the use of “pilotis”—or slender poles – to raise the building mass, making it appear to float above the landscape. Importantly, modern buildings were supposed to take their cue from their practical function -- the oft-repeated maxim of the day being “form follows function.” This was European modern, circa 1925.

Of particular note were two of the Bauhaus school’s directors, Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Both fled Germany for America after the Nazis took power, and both would emerge as seminal figures in American modern architecture in the 1930s, and even more so after World War II. Gropius became director and dean of Harvard’s graduate school of architecture, and Mies van der Rohe, director of the architecture program at the Armour Institute in Chicago (later the Illinois Institute of Technology). The two men oversaw the two most

influential architectural teaching programs in post-war America. Their numerous graduates fanned out across America -- disciples of abstract modernism – what we call the “International Style.”

Two Americans, Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock, of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, coined the term International Style for their groundbreaking 1932 exhibition on modern architecture. And while abstract modernism appeared on and off in 1930s America, generally at the behest of clients of advanced taste, it was not until the post-WWII period that it became the standard for American commercial and institutional buildings. Its ascendancy was much aided by the teachings of Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, whose graduates read like a *Who’s Who* of American architecture of the post-war decades. Gropius’ Harvard was particularly important. Indeed, as chronicler of twentieth century architecture Carter Wiseman has written, “no school of architecture except the Beaux-Arts itself could claim to have produced so many architects who would have such a pervasive impact upon their society. So powerful was the educational experience in that place and time that even those graduates. . . who did not go on to fame contributed with zeal to the propagation of the faith they absorbed under their Harvard mentors.” (Louisiana’s own Arthur Q. Davis was a Gropius student. See Louisiana section.)

In addition to training virtually a whole generation of architecture students, both Gropius and Mies Van der Rohe enjoyed a huge circle of professional influence which served powerfully to disseminate the style still further. Also, “modern” was much featured and heralded in professional publications of the day. Then there were the propagandizing efforts of the *Union Internationale des Architects*, dubbed “one of the most influential propagators of modern architecture after the Second World War.” The notion that one was designing with integrity in a mode of architecture that was an honest and true reflection of the “modern era” became a potent, quasi-religious philosophy that appealed to intellectuals.

By the later 1940s the revolution was complete. As Philip Johnson, a Harvard architecture graduate and leading light of modernism, wrote in 1952, “The battle for modern architecture has long been won.” Modernism, he continued, “has ripened, spread and been absorbed by the wide stream of historical progress.” And when asked, more than half a century later, why he took up the practice of modernism, Louisiana architect Sol Mintz noted frankly, “that was all there was.”

But it was not exactly the same modernism that sprang fresh from the Bauhaus in 1925. In the same 1952 passage, Johnson noted, “few buildings today recall . . . the cubic boxes with asymmetrical window arrangements so characteristic of the twenties.” “With the mid-century,” he enthused triumphantly, “modern architecture has come of age.”

It must be underlined that high-end modern architecture circa 1955 does look different from modern architecture circa 1925. The old neutral white walls tended to become less and less prominent. Abstract building elevations were given an element of regularity through the use of

modular grids with inset panels. Finally, there was a significant overall increase in the amount of glass in the curtain walls. Indeed, all-glass buildings, especially the skyscrapers, may be seen as the mid-century's highest expression of abstract modernism.

The steel and glass office tower became something of an emblem of mid-century America and its corporate power. Yet the glass skyscraper was a vision of modernity that had been much on the minds, and sketch pads, of European modernist architects in the 1920s, most notably Mies Van der Rohe. The modular grid itself is thought to have originated as a means of balancing the essential horizontality of the International Style with the vertical thrust of tall buildings. In 1950s America, it was Mies (as he is often called) who emerged as the undisputed master of the glass office tower (Photo 1). His skeletal delights, with their glass and panel infills, transformed the look of American cities. Earlier skyscrapers of brick and stone gave way to his pure perfectionist abstractions. Mies' buildings have something of a poise to them, a composure, a kind of quiet class akin to black tie chic. Given the machined functionalist ideology of the day, one hesitates to use the term "elegant," yet in our post-ideological world it seems apt.

The skyscraper modular grid became more-or-less standard for any modernist glass building, be it high-rise or no. Indeed, Mies' own 1951 Farnsworth House (Photo 2) is an adaptation of the skyscraper modular grid, as are countless large and small commercial and office buildings across the country. (One scholar has termed the Farnsworth House "skyscraper abstraction at domestic scale.")

"Skyscraper abstraction," with its delicate regularizing modular grid and surfaces of glass and more glass, has been seen by many as a new generation of "modern." While it is ideologically an heir of the International style, and shares many features with it – notably the rectilinear abstractionism, bands of windows, neutral surfaces, freedom from ornament, flat roofs and an overall machined look, many argue that it is sufficiently different from the old high-art International Style to merit a separate designation. "Miesian" is the term generally in use, in honor of its most influential (and probably talented) practitioner. (The authors of this document, in the Louisiana section, are using "modular grid modern.")

Modernism's mid-century triumph was hailed even in the popular press. One passage may stand for many. In 1958, *Look* magazine's architectural editor John Peter extolled, "There is now a general body of theory and practice that constitutes a Modern style which is rapidly becoming as clearly defined as the Greek style or the Gothic style . . . in almost every type of building – office, factory, bridge, dam, school, hospital – modern architecture works. Only in the private family dwelling, where human needs are scaled to modest and even obsolete handicraft building methods, does modern architecture lag behind." "Architecture has now scraped itself clean of the encrustations of the past. It has advanced new purposes and new forms." France's leading modernist architect, Le Corbusier, called it "an Homeric cleansing" of architecture.

The triumph of modernism in America coincided with America's emergence as the richest and most powerful nation the world had ever seen. In the post-war years American corporations had enormous potency and reach. Some, such as General Motors and RCA, had larger annual budgets than whole nation-states such as Denmark or Portugal. Modern architecture in America came to proclaim and celebrate that wealth and importance. The clusters of steel, smooth panel and glass towers that came to form the heart of many a large American city were mainly the result of corporate patronage.

Modernism also became more-or-less mandatory for government. To quote architectural historian Alan Gowans, "strict Modernism was a natural: government is power." The style served to "create visual metaphors . . . to confirm the power of those that held it." As an official style, it was no less effective than Imperial Roman had been in its day. All in all, Gowans concludes, Modern coincided with, and came in great part to express, the nation's rise to imperial superpower.

Ironically, this mode of design, that had its inception in left-leaning, socialist Europe, came to house numerous great American corporations and ultimately to emerge as a potent symbol of American corporate and governmental power and hegemony. Moreover, shorn of its associations with relief of poverty and social uplift, European Modernism became a more generic symbol of modernity and a form of art. To be sure, it was high art -- a profound minimalism with a powerful philosophy. But ultimately in America it became what it was not supposed to be -- at bottom, just a style.

Styles, of course, can become outmoded. By the mid-1960s, criticism of, and dissatisfaction with, standard (modular grid) modernism was mounting. Many complained about the "rectilinear sterility" of modern buildings. New architectural genres were coming to the fore. One was New Brutalism, a chunky, boxy, rough concrete style whose massiveness was a departure from the smooth surfaces of modular grid modernism. The other has been called "New Formalism," a glossy almost neo-classical take on modernism's architectural vocabulary, unashamed of ornament – with columns, arches, frills and decorative screens. Neither was very important in Louisiana during the period 1945 – 1965. Most examples date from the late 1960s or the 1970s. Notable exceptions include the New Orleans Public Library (1958) and the Automotive Life Building (1963) in New Orleans, both New Formalism landmarks by Curtis and Davis of New Orleans.

THE LOUISIANA STORY

Introduction:

If one were taking a college course in modern architecture during the 1945-65 period it would have focused primarily upon national and international “name” architects: Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, Richard Neutra, Alvar Alto and Eero Saarinen. The national architectural scene would, most likely, have been presented as a succession of successful visionary designs, each moving the cause of modernism (for cause it was) triumphantly forward. But if one turns to the state and local scene, a different picture emerges.

The following general observations can be made when attempting to evaluate Louisiana’s modern commercial and institutional buildings from the period 1945-65:

Firstly, the national “name” architects of the period hardly ever practiced in Louisiana. (One presumes this is true of many other states.) The sole known commercial/institutional exceptions are Skidmore, Owings and Merrill’s 1951 Pan American Life Building and 1962 John Hancock Building (both in New Orleans) and Edward Durrell Stone’s 1964 World Trade Mart (New Orleans).

Secondly, it was not all “brave new world” totally up-to-date modernism in Louisiana’s commercial and institutional buildings in the period 1945-1965. Traditional International Style buildings (i.e., of the same type built in the 1930s) continued to be built right alongside state-of-the-art steel and glass (modular grid) skyscrapers. There was even some pre-WWII hangover Art Moderne work. One suspects that Louisiana is far from alone in these “holdovers.” After all, seldom does a style abruptly end.

Consider Baton Rouge Savings and Loan (Photo 3, Bodman and Murrell and Smith, architects). With its smooth, light-colored limestone two-story volume hovering over a dark base, its ribbon windows with rectilinear canopies, and its large but simple graphic clockface, it looks for all the world like a shop of advanced taste built in, say, Helsinki, Finland in about 1930. Yet this classic, textbook International Style building was actually built in downtown Baton Rouge in 1955. And to look even further backwards (perhaps to Art Deco), the design also includes a bas relief panel depicting a woman and child watching workers build their new home - a graphic testament to the building’s intended function.

At the very same moment, halfway across the state, Shreveport’s state-of-the-art Beck Building was being conceived and built (Photos 4-5, Neild-Somdal Associates, architects). It celebrated modernism of the moment, not of the 1930s. Hailed at the time as “a monument of steel and glass,” and “the world’s first colored aluminum skyscraper,” the twenty-story Henry C. Beck Building is a *tour-de-force* in disciplined abstraction, with windows and panels set in a grid and separated into regular bays by sleek steel vertical shafts. Because of the sharply recessed first story, the building’s main volume appears to float above its urban setting, an attribute that was noted in the local press as, “an unusual treatment of the ground floor.”

Clearly modern architecture in this period was far from monolithic. There were all kinds of modern commercial and institutional buildings being constructed in Louisiana. In short, one cannot prepare a single list of character-defining features of modern commercial and institutional buildings in the state – the interpretations of modern vary too much.

Because the standard breakdowns used in style guides are not always adequate for what one actually sees in the field, the authors of this document have devised their own labels to help understand Louisiana's modern commercial and governmental buildings. (Schools and places of worship will be addressed separately.) Within each category, character-defining features are provided.

Within the overall modern style, we have identified the following subtypes: holdover International Style, holdover Art Moderne, Modular Grid Modern, and a category we have chosen to call "Everyday Modern." (Also, occasionally one sees buildings that combine the International Style and Art Moderne.) And, of course, there are modern commercial and governmental buildings in Louisiana that do not fit into any of the foregoing categories. Modernism tends to lend itself by definition to one-of-a-kind statements. (For example, there are a handful of arched roof buildings in the state from the 1945-65 period. See appendix to photo gallery.)

Holdover International Style (photos 3, 6-12)

Some buildings remained true to the classic white (or almost white) box with ribbon windows and a minimally articulated flat roof. In some cases blond or light colored bricks were substituted for the neutral white stucco or plaster enveloping walls. But there were others, less pure, that still reaffirmed the basic abstract International Style geometry.

The elements that carried forward into mid-century from the International Style include:

- an essentially horizontal feel (even in taller buildings)
- bands of windows, sometimes emphasized with a modest ledge (and sometimes the window sequence is punctuated with periodic blank, neutral or opaque panels);
- flat roofs, sometimes emphasized with a ledge;
- strongly rectilinear compositions;
- substantive exterior walls (as opposed to curtain walls);
- a profound absence of ornament.

Some examples permit themselves a modest amount of texture and variation with brick surfaces contrasting with stucco surfaces. Some also convey some warmth through the use of bricks of a warm hue (red, orange or occasionally pink). Finally, some examples order their

elevations by imposing periodic vertical strips – almost as if dividing the façade into bays. Indeed, some might wonder where this kind of regularizing articulation ends and where the modular grid begins. In such cases, however, the horizontal ribbon window geometry remains dominant.

Holdover Art Moderne (or Streamlined Moderne):

The Art Moderne, or Streamlined Moderne, style has as its vocabulary:

- building corners that end in dynamic curves;
- walls that come together curving inward to mark an entrance;
- rounded forms;
- ribbon windows (that may also curve);
- glass blocks in bands and sometimes whole walls;
- bold jutting geometric forms that may mark an entrance;
- flat roofs with parapets; and multi-color effects (especially contrasting colors in bands that reinforce building massing).

Most post-war Art Moderne buildings in Louisiana are small with modest styling -- a curving wall accented in contrasting colored brick bands, a strong upright architectural mass with a sign in streamlined lettering, or a buff brick tavern with a more or less continuous band of glass block windows providing interior illumination.

A notable exception is Amite's Hotel Ponder, which is thoroughly Art Moderne and quite a local landmark (Photo 13). It has the signature curving corners and subtle horizontal streamlines in its brick skin. Moderne is also seen in its distinctive and striking band of checkerboard brickwork capping the building.

As noted above, there are some post-war buildings that combine the International Style and Art Moderne. Perhaps Louisiana's most striking example is the Esso/Standard Oil Company Building in Baton Rouge (Photo 14, Lathrop Douglas with Carson & Lundin, architects). The building on the whole is in the International Style, but the curving rooftop elements (housing mechanical equipment) make a strong Art Moderne statement.

Modular Grid Modern (Photos 4-5, 15-17):

In the mid-twentieth century, all-glass (or mostly glass) modernist buildings and modular grids went, more-or-less, hand in hand. They were both dependent upon post and beam construction which permitted the exterior wall to hang as if a curtain (hence the name curtain

wall). And despite the apparent limitations of this genre, the modular grid webwork could produce a great variety of designs and visual effects.

Modular Grid Variations:

- The heavier exposed skeleton look versus a smooth taught building skin.
- A horizontal versus a more vertical feeling conveyed by the gridwork. Those associated with Mies van der Rohe, or his many protégés, could achieve an elegant and harmonious balance.
- Clear versus tinted glass (light green or light blue were popular tints).
- All glass curtain walls versus glass used in combination with panels.
- Neutral panels versus metallic panels with a baked-on color (here again, light blue or light green were popular).
- Panels of a single color versus panels of different colors (sometimes contrasting).
- Smooth panels versus panels with a rougher surface (textured stucco or masonry).
- Panels in a relatively inexpensive material, as described above, versus a high-end material (marble or polished granite).

In sum, modular grid buildings could run the gamut from a crystalline tower to something that comes close to a mosaic. Curtis and Davis' Maryland Casualty Life Building (Photo 15) in the New Orleans CBD (now a Quality Inn) is a good example of the latter with its clear glass and contrasting panels of gray and turquoise.

Modular grid design was used in all sizes of buildings – from skyscrapers to small professional offices (for latter, see Photo 16). Louisiana possesses a respectable collection of modular grid modern buildings exemplifying all the stages in this spectrum.

“Everyday Modern” (Photos 18-20):

In an effort to make sense of Louisiana's commercial buildings from the period 1945 to 1965, the authors have proposed the “Everyday Modern” category. This grouping recognizes a broad swath of smaller commercial and professional office buildings that would have been considered “up-to-date” in their day, but which do not fit comfortably into any well-defined modernist genre. Many, probably most, of these buildings did not involve the services of a professional architect. Instead, the builder and client between them came up with the design, often choosing elements from other buildings they knew, illustrations they had seen, and/or from stock parts easily ordered from a building supply manufacturer. Some of the resulting buildings have a striking visual character, others are very basic.

Builder/owner designed commercial buildings tended to focus more on code and permit compliance rather than on any concern for visual character. Features could also be chosen without regard to one particular modernist genre or another – for example, a severe ‘50s glass

box paired with a stylish brick Art Moderne chimney-like element marking the entrance and bearing a sign with stylized lettering.

Some “Everyday Modern” buildings reach beyond established commercial modernism with an occasional nod to Frank Lloyd Wright. For instance, one might find a Wrightian Prairie Style planter accenting the entrance of a ribbon-windowed professional office building. Or one may find a geometrically abstract and smoothly designed commercial building with a prominent front-facing wall faced in rough fieldstone, laid up in narrow horizontal slabs.

One clue to the builder nature of an “Everyday Modern” design may be its “façadism”-- all the stylistic elements limited to the façade with the side walls left blank. Had an architect designed the same building, he would have been concerned with the entire building as a consistent work of design and articulation, not just the public front. Such an architect designed building would “read” from the three-quarter view. Another clue to “builder jobs” is that one sees a jumble of applied stylistic elements, lacking any consistent disposition or treatment.

Finally, there are the minimalist retail buildings found on the outskirts of cities, and in smaller towns, across the state. These typically feature a flat roof, blank masonry side walls and an all-glass (or mostly glass) commercial display front. Sometimes the end walls of the glass façade are marked with corbelled brick, and the area between the end of the glass shopfront and the ground is filled with brick or panels of metal. In their day, many such buildings also featured eye-catching illuminated signs powered by noble gases: argon, krypton or neon.

Schools:

Louisiana retains countless schools from the 1945-65 period. (What with the baby boom, it was a period of much school construction.) The majority (perhaps the vast majority) might best be termed “no style.” Typically they are brick veneer, flat roofed buildings defined by ranges of classrooms with big groupings of metal windows. Auditoriums are articulated as larger squared-off spaces. Elementary schools are universally one story. (Photos 21-22)

For the most part, there is little attempt to give the schools any personality or visual interest. (Perhaps the local school board budget would not permit this.) And if one applies the modernist maxim that “form follows function,” these buildings may be cases in which form is merely a by-product of function.

The authors know of notable exceptions to the foregoing in New Orleans and Shreveport. In New Orleans, in particular, several strikingly modern, avant-garde schools were built. Of special note is the Phyllis Wheatley Elementary School, 1955, Claude R. Colbert, architect (Photo 23). Perhaps the most extraordinary mid-century modern school ever built in Louisiana, the glass box school is perched delicately on piers recessed into the body of the building. It truly seems to float above the ground. Sadly, the glass has been covered in another material, and the school is presently scheduled for demolition.

Wheatley is one of several mid-century modern schools in Orleans Parish either scheduled for demolition or threatened with demolition. (In 2008 the Louisiana Landmarks Society included the city's mid-century modern schools on its endangered list.) Two other outstanding modern schools in the city, Thomy Lafon Elementary and George Washington Carver High, both by Curtis and Davis (see below), are also threatened. (Lafon has actually been scheduled for demolition.)

In Shreveport, the more individualistic modern school designs (the most striking) were often the work of Samuel and/or William Wiener (see architects section below). A good example is Caddo Heights Elementary (1954, Photos 24-26), which exemplifies the idea that good modern architecture is all about geometry. Samuel Wiener took the standard school design of the period (described above), but made it far more dynamic via a boldly formed, strongly vertical entrance pavilion skewed to one end of the otherwise low-slung horizontal building, deep roof overhangs (at two levels) over the long classroom wing, and an end wall (at the end of wing) which juts beyond the main wall plane. The building is a well-executed essay in geometry.

There are also a few schools in Louisiana from the 1945-1965 period that are in the International Style or Art Moderne, often a combination of the two. They generally date from fairly early in the period.

Houses of Worship (Photos 27-40):

The post-war era was a period of considerable church (and synagogue) building (new churches springing up in new subdivisions, older congregations building a new edifice, etc.). While it was well outside the scope of this project to survey every house of worship from 1945 to 1965, enough of a sampling was done to permit some analysis. The majority of churches or synagogues built in this period were modern rather than traditional in design (perhaps a 70/30 split).

It is quite challenging to make general comments about modern Louisiana churches, for they represent an extremely diverse body of artistic creation. One assumes that all are architect-designed. They range from buildings with dramatic, sweeping roofs; to A-frames; to modern takes on the Gothic; to faceted buildings with worship in the round. Almost all examples have a decided and pronounced visual character. Many can be seen as individual, one-of-a-kind, visionary compositions. Some are utterly fantastic, all of which is in stark contrast to the reticent minimalist sobriety of the contemporaneous Miesian modular grid glass office block.

The foregoing said, one can attempt a few general observations:

- 1) Most, though not all, follow the basic basilican plan (as opposed to being in the round).

- 2) Most have a generally vertical feel (the inspirational lofty height of the nave).
- 3) Most make use of colored art glass, typically with an abstract modernist design.
- 4) Most feature fine materials and a good level of workmanship and execution.
- 5) Almost all display powerful and striking geometry in their designs.
- 6) Touches of Frank Lloyd Wright's influence appear in a number of examples, though none can truly be called "Wrightian."
- 7) A small, but distinct, minority display some take on the Gothic pointed arch – though sometimes used in a rather non-traditional way.
- 8) Some incorporate the Christian cross as the centerpiece of an abstract geometric design.

Where possible, the authors included church or synagogue interiors in their survey and photography work. In almost all cases, they found impressive and intact worship spaces, some quite dramatic. Occasionally, the interior was a more consummate piece of design than the exterior.

The Architects:

The state's most notable, most prolific modernist architects were Samuel and William Wiener, of Shreveport, practicing separately or together, and Curtis and Davis of New Orleans (Nathaniel Curtis and Arthur Q. Davis, Principals).

Samuel and William Wiener:

Shreveport brothers Sam and Bill Wiener essentially had two modernist careers in Louisiana – first as pioneering International Style architects in the 1930s and then in the post-WWII years as designers of several exceptional "soft modern" residences, numerous institutional buildings, and a few commercial buildings. Over their decades-long careers the brothers practiced both separately and together.

Sam Wiener was almost 50 at the end of World War II, his brother William, 38. Both were educated in Shreveport public schools and received their architecture degrees from the University of Michigan (Sam in 1920, Bill in 1929). Sam Wiener also had studied under Finnish modernist Eliel Saarinen and at the *Ecole-des-Beaux-Arts* in Paris.

The Wieners were among the first in America to design in the International Style. Sam Wiener and fellow Shreveport architect Theodore Flaxman went to Europe in 1931 with the specific purpose of seeing the new style and meeting its creators. In the next few years Sam and William Wiener produced a number of notable works in the International Style.

The Wiener brothers were, if anything, more prolific in the post-war years. They designed a number of notable, strikingly modern institutional buildings, particularly public schools. Sam Wiener became a leader in school design and theory, publishing articles on the subject in educational journals.

The Wieners did limited commercial work in the post-war years. Notable surviving exceptions include the Fairfield Building (Photos 11 & 12) and the Lakeshore Big Chain Store (Photo 41).

Curtis and Davis:

Formed in New Orleans in 1947, Curtis and Davis was Louisiana's pre-eminent modernist architectural firm. Its principals were Nathaniel Curtis, Jr., who died in 1997, and Arthur Q. Davis, born in 1920 and still practicing in New Orleans. Both men were graduates of Tulane University's School of Architecture, but in the 1930s, when they attended, the school was still rooted in the Beaux-Arts tradition. (It was too early for European modernism to have taken hold.) Davis entered Harvard's prestigious Graduate School of Design, headed by Walter Gropius, in the fall of 1945. He was one of twelve students taught (in that class year) by the famed European modernist. Upon receiving his masters, Davis worked for Finnish modernist Eero Saarinen in Michigan for a few months, before returning to Louisiana in 1947 at the invitation of Nathaniel Curtis. Curtis asked Davis to join him in opening a practice devoted to bringing contemporary architecture to tradition-bound New Orleans.

Over the next thirty-one years (the firm dissolved in 1978), Curtis and Davis gave Louisiana an extraordinary legacy of countless supremely modern buildings. Their work encompassed all types of buildings -- from a zebra house at Audubon Zoo (1960) to the Louisiana Superdome (1970s). Like the Wieners, Curtis and Davis received considerable national and international attention and honors.

Curtis and Davis were modernist players on a much larger stage than Louisiana. At the firm's height, there were offices in New Orleans, New York, Los Angeles, London and Berlin. Among their major commissions were the United States Embassy in Saigon and the James V. Forrestal Federal Office Building in Washington.

Other architects that merit investigation include:

August Perez and Associates (New Orleans)
John Desmond (Hammond and Baton Rouge)
Bodman and Murrell (Baton Rouge)
Murrell and Short (Baton Rouge)
Claude R. Colbert (New Orleans)
Albert C. Ledner (New Orleans)
Burk, LeBreton & Lamantia (New Orleans)
Neild-Somdal Associates (Shreveport)

Note: The above list is far from exhaustive.

Date Range: 1945-1965

Geographical Range:

Modern commercial and institutional buildings are located all over Louisiana.

Property Types:

As noted above, property types include commercial buildings (ranging from skyscrapers in big cities to small professional office buildings), governmental buildings, schools, and places of worship.

National Register Guidance (Criterion C):

Louisiana does not possess any districts of modern commercial or institutional buildings (a la Brasilia, Brazil). Thus Criterion C registration considerations must focus upon individual examples.

Generally speaking, it would not be valid to judge the different types of modern architecture, as identified in this document, against each other because each makes a strong, and somewhat different, stylistic statement in its own right.

Most buildings in the “Everyday Modern” category are vernacular “builder jobs” and generally do not make a sufficiently convincing stylistic statement to be individually eligible under Criterion C.

As for the three other genres of modernism identified in this document for commercial and governmental buildings (Holdover International Style, Holdover Art Moderne and Modular Grid Modern), each example must be evaluated according to the genre’s aesthetic intent (see earlier description of each genre). Below are some suggested overall concepts that can assist in the evaluation process:

- 1) Any historic steel and glass modular grid skyscraper that survives with integrity in Louisiana is eligible for the Register, most likely at the state level of significance. Such buildings may be seen as the highest achievement in post-war modernism and a distinctively American archetype and cultural symbol. In addition, in Louisiana only a limited number were ever built.
- 2) In many ways, modern architecture of this period is all about geometry. Buildings feature strongly articulated, and sometimes quite distinctive, geometrical forms. So one can contrast examples that amount to little more than “façadism” to those which convey a convincing three-dimensional visual effect.

- 3) One can evaluate the extent to which examples are composed with appropriate features that come together to form a cohesive whole -- as opposed to poorly orchestrated or unorchestrated jumbles of elements.
- 4) Finally, one can contrast and evaluate the special qualities of the building's interiors. Is there an interesting or dynamic relationship between interior elements, or is the room layout merely a by-product of the building's functional requirements?

The majority of schools from this period would not be individually eligible under Criterion C in the authors' professional opinion. As noted above, most have little in the way of distinctive design. (One looks much like the next.) That said, a small minority are quite good. These generally rise easily above the rest because they are striking essays in geometry. Per #2 above, they feature strongly articulated distinctive geometrical forms, sometimes playing one off the other. (See Caddo Heights Elementary School, Shreveport, Photos 23-25.)

Per National Park Service guidance, integrity must be decided on a case-by-case basis. Generally speaking, modern buildings can absorb fewer alterations than many earlier styles of architecture. Because the buildings are generally crisply articulated, sometimes as a work of art, and have minimal details, an alteration can easily overwhelm the composition. As with other styles, one must identify those features that make the building a good example, and ask themselves if those features are missing or have been obscured or visually overwhelmed by alterations.

National Register Guidance for Places of Worship (Criterion C):

Religious properties (whether from this period or earlier) are a special category for National Register listing. Because of the constitutional issue of separation of church and state, religious properties generally must be nominated to the National Register for secular reasons. Criterion Consideration A reads: "A religious property is eligible if it derives its primary significance from architectural or artistic distinction or historical importance." The comments below will be confined to "architectural or artistic" distinction. (Providing examples of cases for historical importance for Louisiana churches would require knowledge of the history of various denominations during this period. This is beyond the scope of this project.)

It is challenging to provide National Register evaluation advice on houses of worship from this period under Criterion C. Surviving examples are so distinctive and individualistic that they do not lend themselves easily to the compare and contrast thought process generally envisioned under Criterion C. For example, Shreveport must have some 20 major examples. They are all rather striking and modern, but in different ways. Are they all individually eligible for the National Register under Criterion C (and Criteria Consideration A)? Integrity probably won't be the deciding factor because almost all appear to be unaltered on the exterior. And the few inspected on the interior are well preserved there too.

Evaluating modern houses of worship in smaller towns and cities, where there are not many examples, may be easier. The church or synagogue may be one of the most important pieces of modern architecture in the town (as a particularly consummate composition).

A final word: There may be cases where the statement of significance for Criterion C rests on the interior.

Bibliography:

Davis, Arthur Q., FAIA. *It Happened by Design: The Life and Work of Arthur Q. Davis*. University Press of Mississippi in association with the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, University of New Orleans, 2009.

Eckardt, Wolf Von, editor. *Mid-Century Architecture in America: Honor Awards of the American Institute of Architects, 1949-1961*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1961.

Gowans, Alan. *Styles and Types of North American Architecture: Social Function and Cultural Expression*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

Kahn, Hasan-Uddin. *International Style: Modernist Architecture from 1915 to 1965*. Koln, Germany: Taschen Books, 1998.

Shreveport Chamber of Commerce. *Shreveport Magazine*. 1945-1965. This monthly publication was invaluable because a particular focus was construction activity in the city. It immersed the authors in Shreveport's built environment for the study period.

Whiffen, Marcus and Koeper, Frederick. *American Architecture: Volume 2: 1860-1976*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1983.

Wiener, Samuel Collection. Louisiana State University-Shreveport Archives.

Wiener, William Collection. Louisiana State University-Shreveport Archives.

Wiseman, Carter. *Twentieth-Century American Architecture: The Buildings and Their Makers*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2000.

PHOTO GALLERY



Photo 1. Mies van der Rohe's Lakeshore Apartments, Chicago, 1951.



Photo 2. Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House, 1951, Plano, Illinois, a residential adaptation of the skyscraper modular grid.



Photo 3. Baton Rouge Savings and Loan (1955), a classic, albeit late, International Style building (Bodman, Murrell and Smith, Architects, Baton Rouge).



Photos 4 & 5. The Beck Building (1955) in downtown Shreveport, Louisiana's tallest modular grid modern skyscraper (Neild-Somdal Associates, architects).



Photo 6. The Commerce Building (1955) in Baton Rouge, a “holdover” International Style building. (The present paint scheme is not original.)



Photo 7. The late International Style Shreveport City Hall (now Police Headquarters), 1957-1958, Walker & Walker, Architects, Shreveport.



Photo 8. The former Shreveport City Hall rests on pilotis, making it appear to float above the ground. Note the strong geometry in the entrance, which is skewed to one side.



Photo 9. The city hall's rear wing continues the dynamic geometry of the building.



Photo 10. The late International Style Shell Building in downtown New Orleans, 1952, August Perez and Associates, New Orleans.



Photos 11 & 12. The late International Style Fairfield Building, Shreveport, 1949, Samuel Wiener, Architect, Shreveport.



Photo 13. Amite's Art Moderne Ponder Hotel (1947), architect unknown.



Photo 14. A postcard view of the International Style/Art Moderne Esso-Standard Oil Co. Building, Baton Rouge (1949, Lathrop Douglas with Carson & Lundin, architects). Courtesy Carolyn Bennett, Foundation for Historical Louisiana



Photo 15. This classic modular grid tall building was constructed in downtown New Orleans in 1956 for Maryland Casualty Life Insurance Co., Curtis and Davis, Architects, New Orleans. Some of the gray and aqua glass was damaged during Hurricane Katrina, but all is now well with this masterpiece of modernism.



Photo 16. The modular grid method of being modern was not confined to glass towers. This petite office building on the courthouse square in Opelousas is a good example.



Photo 17. Modular grid modern at the Shreveport City Hall Annex, constructed in 1957 as a State of Louisiana office building (Neild-Somdal Associates, Architects, Shreveport).



Photo 18. This “everyday modern” professional office building in Winnsboro has great modern lines. Note also the Wrightian stone wall.



Photo 19. Jackson Street in Alexandria retains several small “everyday modern” commercial and professional office buildings from the 1945-65 period.



Photo 20. An “everyday modern” bank in Opelousas.



Photo 21. A typical period school in Shreveport (Youree Drive Jr. High, 1959, Peyton, Fisher & McKelvy, architects, Shreveport).



Photo 22. Another typical period school. This one is Broadmoor Elementary School, in a period subdivision in Baton Rouge of the same name.



Photo 23. Phyllis Wheatley Elementary School, 1955, Claude R. Colbert, architect. The building does not look like this today. The glass has been covered in another material.



Photos 24-26. Caddo Heights Elementary School, 1954, Shreveport, Samuel Wiener, Architect.



Photos 27-28. Grace Episcopal Church, New Orleans, 1956, August Perez and Associates, New Orleans



Photo 29. Places of worship for the 1945-1965 appear in a huge variety of shapes. Some have dramatic sweeping roofs, as seen in the Forsythe Ave. Church of Christ in Monroe.



Photo 30. Broadmoor Baptist Church, 1957, Baton Rouge



Photo 31. The truly one-of-a-kind former Queensborough Baptist Church in Shreveport, plans announced in 1961, Frey, Huddleston & Associates, Architects.



Photo 32-33. The authors came across two A-frame churches. One expects there are more. Shown here is Broadmoor Christian Church in Shreveport, in place by 1960, Frey, Huddleston & Associates, Architects.



Photo 34. Worship in the round at New Orleans' Lake Vista United Methodist Church, August Perez and Associates (New Orleans), 1961.



Photos 35 & 36. Lake Vista United Methodist Church worship space.



Photos 37-40. University United Methodist Church, Lake Charles, Gabriel & Reaves, Architects (Lake Charles), 1957. (The tower was originally taller and had an openwork top.)

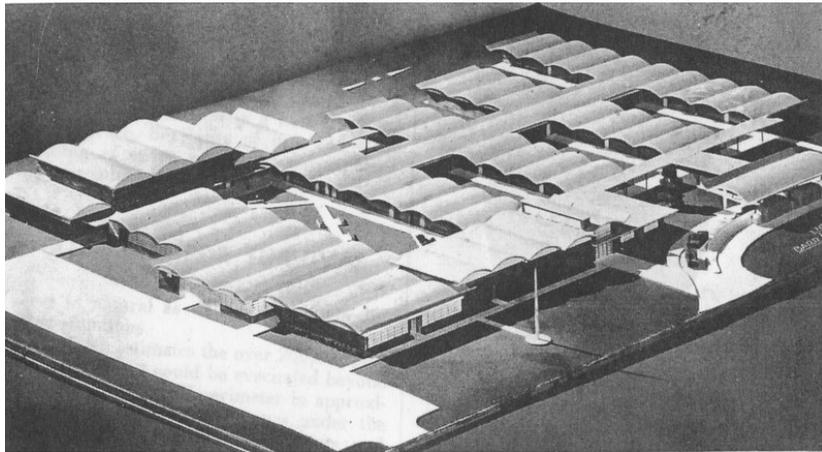


Photo 41. Lakeshore Big Chain Store, 1949, Samuel Wiener, architect, Shreveport.

APPENDIX

Arched Roof Buildings

Note: As noted in the text, modernism lends itself to unusual, one-of-a-kind expressions. The authors encountered a handful of buildings around the state designed with arch roofs of one type or another. While tiny in number, they make quite strong architectural statements. They are depicted below.

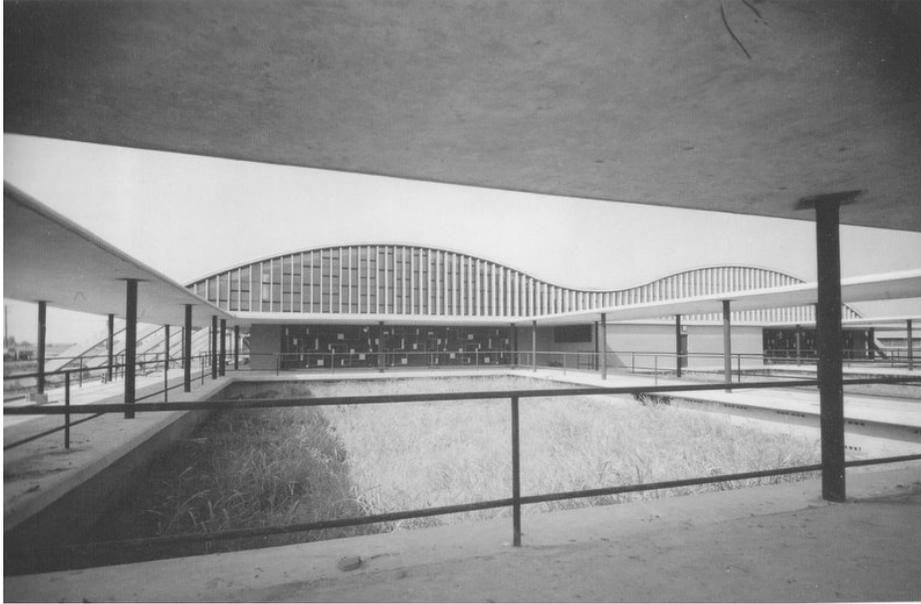


Shreveport Magazine labeled the Quillen Road Jr. High School the “school of 49 arches.” Every building on the campus has the same arched roof design. The concrete shells are a minimum of 3 ½ inches thick and vary in span from 28 to 68 feet. 1959, Barr and Smith, Architects, Shreveport.





Monroe Civic Center, dedicated in 1967,
Johns and Neel, Architects (Monroe).



Curtis and Davis (New Orleans) designed various buildings at Angola Penitentiary in the mid-1950s. Shown above are two dining halls under a graceful double arch.
Frank Lotz Miller, Photographer
Courtesy Southeastern Architectural Archives, Tulane University