

# The Hijacking of “Modern”

Midway in the 20th century, the term “modern” became attached to the International School of architecture. Even though time and taste have relegated this style to the history books, the Miesians still cling tenaciously to their “modern” adjective. It’s time we took it away!

By Clem Labine

I recently heard a highly successful neo-traditional architect use the term “modern architecture” when referring to a building rendered some years ago in the International Style. It was at that moment that the irony struck me: The traditionalist architect with whom I was conversing is the one actually creating *modern architecture* because he is designing in the predominant style of today. Neo-traditionalism is the style that characterizes our age — and thus is truly deserving of the adjective “modern.” Yet my architect friend, along with just about all of his colleagues and architectural commentators, continues to allow the Miesians to retain possession of “modern,” even though they lost the right to the term at least a decade ago.

The adjective “modern” is totally style-neutral; it merely refers to traits that characterize our present time. Applying the term “modern architecture” to highly geometrical, machine-oriented constructions in the manner of Mies or Gropius is an insult both to logic and the English language. The International Style has become an historical style fully as much as the Colonial

ers were far more entitled to call their architecture “modern” than retardaire Miesians are in 2002 when they continue to call their style “modern architecture.”

## More Than Mere Nostalgia

The growing success of neo-traditionalism is not based merely on romantic yearnings for a long-ago golden age. Proponents of the International School threw out 2,500 years of accumulated experience of the classical, humanist tradition and declared that they would build a better world by worshipping at the altar of technology. But the mistake of regarding architecture as merely “machines for living” is becoming clearer each day.

People want architecture and the built environment to convey more than technical content. People want symbols and emotional connections; we want buildings that tell us who we are as a people and as human beings. We want buildings that are visually interesting and entertaining. And, most important of all, when it gets down to where we live, we want a residence that says something very personal about us and our values.

It wasn’t an intellectual revolution at the schools of architecture that revealed the Miesians were peddling defective theories; it was the phenomenal success of the historic-preservation movement. Historic preservation

took off in this country when it became clear to everyone who hadn’t been brainwashed by Miesian polemics that great old buildings were being destroyed to make room for structures that were far less satisfying. When paying clients began to demand that good old buildings be restored — and that new buildings have some of the same visually pleasing characteristics that pre-1940 buildings had — it was then that the design profession began to realize that the International School had become a dead end.

Teaching institutions like the schools of architecture at the University of Notre Dame and the

University of Miami have been among the leaders in recognizing that a rediscovery of traditional principles is required for preparing “Modern architects” for the realities of the 21st century. And organizations like the Institute of Classical Architecture have been teaching a whole new generation of designers how the principles of classicism can be used as a modern design tool. (See the Spring 2002 issue of *Period Homes* for a profile of the teaching programs of the Institute.)

## They Can Have “Modernist”

Because the term “modern architecture” has been applied for so long to the works of the International School, we are left with the dilemma of what to call this body of work, now that it is clear that the term “modern” should be transferred to the neo-traditionalists. This writer has settled on the compromise term “modernist.”

But from now on, I shall reserve the term “modern architect” for those designers like our Palladio Award winners. Architects such as Gil Schafer (see photo below) are the ones who are really doing the trend-setting work that is “characteristic of the present.” They are the modern architects of our time. ♦

**“MODERN (adj.): Of, relating to, or characteristic of the present.”**

Revival or the Arts & Crafts movement. Yet the Miesians and most architectural critics hold on to the “modern” adjective, perhaps hoping that it can still confer some legitimacy on their theories and rationalizations that have been largely discredited over the course of the last two decades.

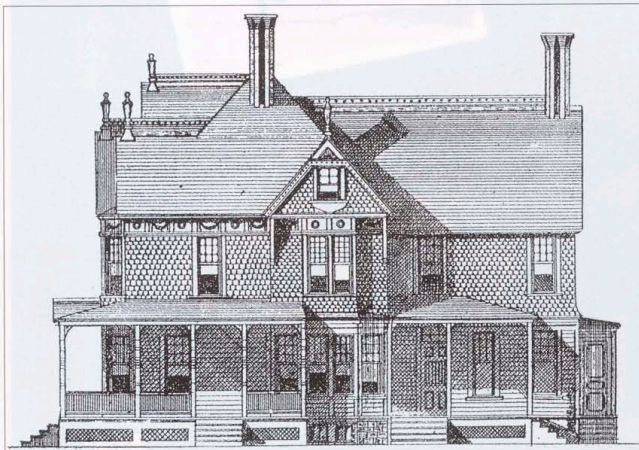
In the field of architecture, there are two predominant themes that can be said to be characteristic of our time. On one hand, especially in the realm of institutional architecture, is Frank Gehry and his deconstructivist, sculptural approach to design. His work is modern (contemporary), but certainly not Miesian.

Opposed to the deconstructivist school, and far more widespread — especially in residential architecture — is neo-traditional design. Because it truly reflects the predominant taste and trend of our times, neo-traditionalism is surely our *Modern Architecture*.

When George and Charles Palliser called their designs “modern” in 1887 (see illustration), they were being quite correct and accurate in their use of the word in the context of the late-Victorian era. And the Pallis-



**MODERN ARCHITECTURE:** Built two years ago by architect Gilbert P. Schafer III, this residence perfectly expresses the prevalent traditionalist taste of our time. Schafer originally was looking for an old Greek Revival house to restore. When he couldn’t find one that suited his requirements, he decided to design and build one from scratch. The jurors in the Palladio Awards competition chose this house as the winner in the New Design & Construction category, citing Schafer’s sense of proportion and exquisite attention to detail. (See p. 12 for more on this project.) Photo courtesy of G.P. Schafer Architect PLLC



**“MODERN” IS TIME-DEPENDENT:** “... New & Original Designs in all the Modern Popular Styles” was the description for this house — and 250 others like it — in a residential pattern book published in 1887. The authors, brothers George and Charles Palliser, architects practicing in Bridgeport, Conn., were quite accurate in describing their architecture as “modern”; their designs were characteristic of the late-Victorian era in which they lived.



**HISTORICAL ARCHITECTURE:** The April 2002 issue of *DWELL* Magazine published this newly constructed residence in Louisville, KY, calling it “a modern house” (and seeming to be surprised that the neighbors were quite upset about it). In fact, this residence is quite retro, being a nostalgic reference to the technocentric International Style of the mid-20th century. Photo by Michael Wilson.