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MIDCENTURY HOUSES TODAY

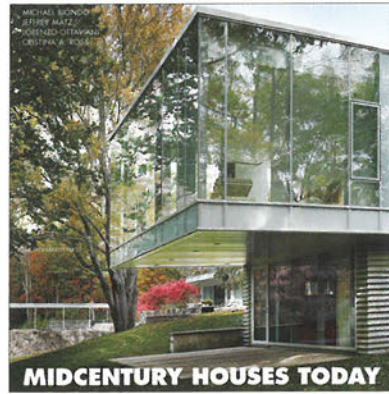
By Lorenzo Ottaviani, Jeffrey Matz, Cristina A. Ross; Photographs by Michael Biondo

Monacelli Press, 2014
240 pages; 200 color illustrations

As Modern architecture passed from newness into history, the term “midcentury Modern” came to describe the variant that accompanied America’s postwar economic boom. Authors Jeffrey Matz and Cristina A. Ross, presumably recognizing the label’s ubiquity, felt confident enough to drop the word “modern” altogether from their title. Whatever else was going on in American building culture at the time, *Midcentury Houses* is understood to mean *Modern* houses, in this case a special cache of them in New Canaan, CT. With photographer Michael Biondo and graphic designer Lorenzo Ottaviani the authors formed a collaborative, *Moderns on Modern*, to explore the challenges of adapting historically significant Modern buildings to current circumstances and carry forth the notion of Modern as a mindset, not a style.

In his introduction John Morris Dixon, former editor-in-chief at *Progressive Architecture*, lays out the unique confluence of geography, changing social patterns and professional migrations that helped establish New Canaan as an East Coast hotbed for the new architecture. The town eventually came to include over 100 Modern houses—many of them by internationally known practitioners such as Philip Johnson, Marcel Breuer, and Edward Durell Stone—of which about 90 still exist. *Midcentury Houses Today* presents 16 of these, chosen as “exemplary survivors,” with special attention placed on the challenges surrounding their preservation.

A small number of New Canaan’s Modern houses are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, though this provides little in the way of protection. Nor does special zoning the town enacted in 2004 to encourage alternatives to demolition. Most often their fates are bound to their owners’ willingness to act as guardians and cultural stewards. In the case of these 16, the enthusiasm of their owners for the design ethos, if not the stylistic specifics, of the original houses informed their



decisions when it came time to wield hammers and saws. Some of the houses underwent significant modifications, such as Breuer House 2, first built in 1951 and essentially rebuilt from the ground up and added onto by architect Toshiko Mori in 2007. Others remain almost unaltered, such as the Noyes House 2, of 1954, which today is essentially a time capsule, with even the interiors as they were when Eliot and Molly Noyes lived there with their family.

In each chapter one house is introduced through a timeline, brief description and small period photograph of the house in its original state. The timelines chart changes in ownership and successive alterations, listing the various architects involved. The project descriptions often include testimony from owners and architects past and present, recounting various challenges faced and decisions made. Original and current floor plans are included for each house, redrawn in a clear, consistent graphic style that makes it easy to spot the changes between the two. (The helpful inclusion of north arrows marks the authors as architects.) The primary content, however, is Michael Biondo’s new photography showing the houses in their current form. Most of the ten to 20 pages allotted to each house are given over to Biondo’s large, carefully composed images, many of them double-page spreads. Immaculately furnished and appointed with prominently displayed artwork, the houses are shown at various times of day, with New England’s diverse seasons ever-present in interior as well as exterior views thanks to that signature feature of midcentury Modernism, the very generous use of glass.

— TIM BUTLER