



Sam's Creek House in Bridgehampton, New York
Ty Cole, courtesy MBB

Bauhaus Influence Runs Deep in Modern Luxury Home Design, 100 Years Later

Original homes designed in this unique style are rare, but high-end houses inspired by the prolific design school are abundant

By Mareesa Nicosia
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Mention “Bauhaus” at a cocktail party and you’re likely to conjure visions of chrome-plated tubular steel chairs, charming teapots or a certain ubiquitous sans serif typeface. For others, the word calls to mind the stacked concrete apartment balconies dotting Tel Aviv’s White City, the Bauhaus-inspired neighborhood that sprang up in the 1930s—and has since transformed into one of Israel’s most upmarket housing, hotel and restaurant scenes.

These and other products came out of the short-lived but prolific German design school founded in 1919 by architect Walter Gropius; it was later led by architects Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe before closing under pressure from the Nazis in 1933. As the centennial of the school’s founding is celebrated around the world this summer, we can add contemporary luxury homes to the long list of things touched by the Bauhaus spell—though Gropius and his cohort might be dismayed if they were alive today to hear “luxury” too closely associated with them, since egalitarianism was central to the Bauhaus movement.

Part of the artists’ early mission was to help solve the

post-World War I housing crisis and produce furniture for the masses; while these plans didn’t succeed at scale, the Bauhaus’s rejection of ornamentation and its ideal that functionality drives form far outlived the physical school. And when it comes to real estate, a building aesthetic that was intended to serve the everyman has ironically ended up in vogue with wealthy homeowners who have refined tastes.

Clean lines made with copious glass and steel are pervasive in today’s residential and commercial architecture, said Hilary Lewis, an architecture scholar, author and chief curator and creative director at The Glass House in New Canaan, Conn., the former residence of architect Philip Johnson that is now a museum.

“There’s no getting away from the influence of the Bauhaus because it is really the center that helped to popularize the idea of ‘modern’ in the 20th century, and we live with that very much today, and that’s whether you’re looking at Tel Aviv, looking at Miami, in Aspen, the south of France, or São Paulo,” Ms. Lewis said. “This is the way most contemporary architects build today.”

Mixing Old and New

When the Bauhaus school closed in 1933, teachers and students left Germany and scattered to Budapest, Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe. Gropius and his family briefly moved to London and finally settled near Boston in 1937, where he designed and built a modest 2,300-square-foot home in Lincoln, Massachusetts, just outside of the city. It became the New England mecca of the Bauhaus diaspora where Gropius and his wife, Ise, welcomed architects, artists and other visiting associates for years, said Peter Gittleman, the visitor experience team leader at Historic New England, a preservation organization that now owns the property and runs it as a historic house museum.

Their home also introduced Americans to the idea of a “modern New England house” but it was received with skepticism from the neighbors because of unusual features like its flat roof, which had a drain pipe in the middle, Mr. Gittleman said. Gropius’s then-12-year-old daughter, Ati, asked for her own private entrance to the house and her father obliged with an outdoor spiral staircase attached to her bedroom window.

The house was a testament to the idea that buildings should stand in tune with their surrounding environment, as is evident in the combination of traditional New England materials like wood, brick and fieldstone. But Gropius combined them with what were then considered innovative touches, like a large opaque glass panel at the front entrance and sound-absorbing acoustic plaster.

“In every case, he took what was available to him and what the local vernacular architecture presented and updated it for the 20th century,” Mr. Gittleman said. A few years later, Gropius and partner Marcel Breuer took this concept and cranked it up several notches, together producing the Alan I W Frank House and all its

furnishings for a steel industry magnate in Pittsburgh. The private residence is arguably the architects’ most significant project, with nine bedrooms, 13 bathrooms, an indoor swimming pool, five terraces and a rooftop dance floor. The main building measures 12,000 square feet, plus 5,000 additional square feet of outdoor space.

These days, newly built modernist homes that draw on Bauhaus sensibilities are widely available through resale or commissions. But opportunities to purchase high-end, single-family Bauhaus-era homes are rare.

One current listing offers a flat-roofed, Bauhaus-style villa with seven bedrooms and four bathrooms overlooking a pristine lake and mountains in the village of Ascona in southern Switzerland. The home was built in 1934 by German architect Carl Weidemeyer; he didn’t attend the Bauhaus school but he familiarized himself with the movement as a young man, according to Ueli Schnorf, co-owner of listing agency Wetag Consulting, a Swiss affiliate of Christie’s International Real Estate.

Mr. Schnorf said the home has been owned by several generations of the same family since it was built and it’s on the market now for the first time ever, asking CHF\$6.23 million (about US\$6.3 million). It is one of the few buildings of the period that are still standing, he said.

“When you buy something like this, you buy a piece of history,” he said.

Quantifying the number of existing Bauhaus and Bauhaus-inspired homes is difficult because the movement has been so pervasive in its 100 years, experts said. In addition to New England, there’s a strong presence in Aspen, Colorado, where Bauhaus student and teacher Herbert Bayer settled after World War II; in Chicago, where Mies was active; and in Budapest, where Breuer lived for a time.



A Bauhaus-era villa, Ascona, Switzerland, by architect Carl Weidemeyer.
Courtesy of Wetag Consulting/Christie's



A Bauhaus house on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts by Andrew Franz Architects
© Albert Vecerka/Esto

Form Follows Function

Many of the concepts that architects take for granted today—such as the idea that design should improve daily life—sound obvious but were considered somewhat radical when the Bauhaus movement was fledgling, said Anne Mason Kemper, an associate at the Andrew Franz Architect firm in New York City.

In her current work, she thinks about inspiration from the Bauhaus “as almost an unconscious or subconscious influence because it has so permeated the way that we think about designing spaces for people.” (That might explain why commission requests frequently tend to be for “modernist” homes rather than explicitly for “Bauhaus style,” architects told Mansion Global.)

Ms. Kemper and her colleagues drew inspiration from both Bauhaus philosophy and various other architects when they undertook a 5,000-square-foot vacation home commission on Martha's Vineyard a few years ago. The owners, who describe themselves as “an introverted Manhattan couple who both work from home” and have two teenage children, asked for a window seat/reading nook for each person in their family of four—cozy spots where they could retreat to while maintaining some connection to the rest of the house. Since form follows function, those types of priorities drove the design plans.

They also chose materials that fused tradition and energy efficiency. The Meadow Beach House, completed in 2016, has a shingled, white cedar exterior and a fieldstone chimney, typical of New England homes. Extra-thick insulation underneath the shingles helps seal it against the elements and abundant glass paneling allows for plentiful natural light exposure.

“We really strove for simplicity as opposed to ornamentation and let craft take the place of ornaments,” Ms. Kemper said, noting the exposed oak ceiling beams throughout the main living area, which were left unpainted.

Bringing Outdoors In

Architect Mary Burnham, a partner at MBB Architects in New York City, said a second-home project her firm did in Bridgehampton, New York, in 2016 tapped into another Bauhaus theme of blurring the line between indoor and outdoor living (the idea is a key part of the broader modernist style).

The five-bedroom Sam's Creek home features an informal kitchen-dining-living area that transitions to a screened porch to a large open-air terrace with grill set—that runs along the length of the main house, all of which overlooks a sweeping lawn and a pool.

“The idea was to build a house that was going to be enough of an incentive to keep my children coming back, to have them want to be here, bring their friends over. We wanted it to be a place where everyone would want to be,” said Elisabeth Turner, who owns the home with her husband. The couple has twin 18-year-old sons who are heading to college this year.

Ms. Turner and her husband, a senior partner at a private equity firm, live in New York City most of the year but spend summer weekends at the US\$12.5 million Hamptons house, often with relatives. Her favorite feature is the open floor plan and sliding glass doors that allow her to prep meals in the kitchen and seamlessly coordinate with her husband while he grills on the porch. They eat most meals outside, she said.

Thinking about the inhabitants' desired relationship with the house and with the outside world while they are at home is important while designing it, Ms. Burnham said.

“I think way back when Gropius and Mies were designing houses, these were very much similar themes that they were exploring, (and) I don't think those themes have been exhausted yet,” she said.