

Sun,  
Sea and  
Geometry



While the Californian Case Study Program of housing is well-documented, we know less about what was happening on the East Coast in the 1950s and '60s. Celebrated author *Andrew Weaving* tells us more about Sarasota Modern and his path to discovering this very distinct architectural style through two properties he bought in Florida.

# Sarasota Modern

### **How did you first discover Sarasota Modern?**

My partner and I went on vacation to Miami and picked up a book about the Sarasota School of Architecture. I hadn't heard of it before; I didn't realise there was an architectural movement going on there at the same time as the Case Study Program was happening on the West Coast. Even photographs of these low-slung post and beam houses took my breath away. I loved the way the structures were designed to capture the cross-breezes for cooling, with their large overhanging roofs for shade, and their use of local materials.

### **How did you come to buy your first property in Florida?**

I had long since wanted to buy a Modernist property in California and I'd looked and looked, but couldn't find anything within my budget. Following our trip to Miami, I read an article about Florida architect Gene Leedy, who had worked with the founder of the Sarasota School, Paul Rudolph. On a whim I searched for his contact details online and found his phone number; I called him and by the end of the conversation, I had agreed to buy one of the houses he designed in Winter Haven, just across the street from his own home. I had only seen photos of the house at this point – a simple post and beam timber construction with walls of glass – but I loved it.

When we first set eyes on it, the house was somewhat neglected, but the original fabric of the building remained intact. While we spent time restoring it and creating a landscaped tropical garden, we got to enjoy the neighbourhood; life on our street was pretty much one continuous cocktail party! We hadn't just bought a house, we'd bought a lifestyle.

### **So, why did you move for a second time?**

When I was researching for a book, I came across a house designed by Mark Hampton, who was the first architect to work with Paul Rudolph in the early '50s. Located in Lakeland, the next big town to Winter Haven, the house, which dated from 1956, was situated in a leafy area amongst traditional Florida homes. It had been on the market for some time and when I enquired, I discovered that someone had bid on it, but that they planned to tear it down and replace it with a more conventional house. It was devastating to think that this house could be lost forever and, although at the time we had no intention of moving from Winter Haven, once we'd seen the house, we knew we had to have it. We decided to sell the Gene Leedy place in order to make this possible.

### **Had the house retained its original features and furnishings?**

It was immaculately preserved; every little detail seemed to be original and intact, from the light fittings to the door handles. The house had been designed to a high specification: it had steel beams, walnut walls and cabinetry, terrazzo floors and marble-lined bathrooms, there were down-lighters, sliding pocket doors, cantilevered storage and an amazing cooling system that even watered the garden. The only element we added was a swimming pool, following Mark Hampton's design for the original outdoor concrete decking, and inside the house, we reinstated the grasscloth on the fireplace wall.

Much of the original purpose-built furniture had been auctioned off by the previous owners, but luckily for us some of the items didn't sell and were returned to the property, including the stained glass screens that divided the dining area from the main living space. We have now added our own furniture, choosing original pieces by American designers. The walnut-faced kitchen cabinets and the original white Formica worktops remain intact. Amazingly even the General Electric refrigerator still works!

### **What else does the area have to offer?**

The house is located just off Lake Hollingsworth in Lakeland, the site of the largest group of buildings designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the world. The iconic campus of Florida Southern College is being fully restored and some unbuilt projects are finally being constructed, the highlight being the Waterdome with its 45ft high water jets. Many of the buildings are open and there are regular tours available. Winter Haven is just a 20-minute drive, with its multitude of Gene Leedy-designed buildings (he still lives in the town), and Sarasota is 1hr 20 minutes away, where you can take a self-drive tour to see buildings designed by architects such as Paul Rudolph, Ralph Twitchell, Jack West, Carl Abbott and Guy Peterson. Many are situated on the islands running along the Gulf coast, from Lido Shores to Casey Keys. The famed Umbrella House, designed by Rudolph in 1953, is currently undergoing restoration and the owners plan to open it to visitors.

*Soon MidCentury readers will be able to experience this stunning piece of architecture: the Hampton House will be available to rent from Autumn 2013. For details and reservations, email [florida@centuryd.com](mailto:florida@centuryd.com).*



Previous page: Mark Hampton House, Lakeland, front exterior. Above: Mark Hampton House, Lakeland, rear exterior.

*Photographs by Andrew Wood, from 'Living Retro' by Andrew Weaving, published by Ryland Peters & Small. Additional archive photographs from c.1956 by Alexander Georges, courtesy of Andrew Weaving.*



Above: Bedroom, c.1956.  
Right: Sitting Room, a walnut panel slides on a track set into the hearth, concealing a TV that has been recessed into the grasscloth-covered walls; a stained glass screen separates the dining room. Scissor chair by Pierre Jeanneret for Knoll, 1951; Time Life stool by Charles and Ray Eames for Herman Miller, 1960; Floor lamp, after a design by Giacometti; Sunflower clock by George Nelson for Howard Miller.

