

Modesto Modernism

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Modesto: a Laboratory for Modern Design

Beginning in 1939 and continuing into the 1970s, Modesto was a kind of architecture laboratory where both local and nationally known architects experimented with and designed buildings in a new architectural style, Central Valley Modernism.

Primarily, the architects designed in a way that took the local climate into consideration. They responded to the hot dry summer with architectural features that provided shade and cooling. They responded to the dark wet winter with architectural features that provided light and shelter.

Though Modernist design came to Modesto in the 1920s, little effort was made to adapt it to the conditions in the Central Valley. The first attempts to create a modernism that was appropriate for the



area were made by John Funk with the Heckendorf House and Russell de Lappe with the Stanislaus County Hall of Records, both designed in 1939.

Not all the experimentation was successful. In the early 1970s, Christopher Alexander designed the county mental health clinic that he considered of mixed success. The

complex is still significant because it helped him adjust his theory for later projects.

What really sets Modesto apart, that makes it a model for other cities today, is an architectural style that responds to the local environment but in a way that is aesthetically pleasing.

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Central Valley Modernism

The expression of modernist architecture and design that developed in the Central Valley of California is similar to the Desert Modernism of southern California in that it responds to hot dry

summers, but takes on unique characteristics because of the cooling evening summer breezes and the wet cool winters.

In Modesto and the rest of the Central Valley, modernist buildings often

have walls of windows and glass doors that open to catch the cooling evening breezes. The houses from this period, like John Funk's Heckendorf House, are only one room wide so

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Modesto Architecture Gets National Attention

“One of the things that distinguishes Modesto, really makes it important for us to look at again today, is that not only did these architects solve the practical problems of making a house comfortable in a fairly extreme climate, they did it with good architecture as well, beautiful architecture, something that was not just functional but had an aesthetic life of its own.”

*Allen Hess
Architect
Historian*

Modesto's tradition of cutting edge architecture goes back to the 1870s when the city embraced the Victorian designs of Julian Mourot and Albert Bennett. In the early 20th century, citizens of Modesto hired important West Coast architects and landscapers to design their residential, commercial, government, and landscape projects. Among them were

architects Warren Perry, Henry Smith, William Weeks, Bernard Maybeck, Julia Morgan, Wolfe and Wolfe, Bernard Joseph, and landscapers John McLaren and Howard Gilkey.

Modesto's exposure and influence increased dramatically when the Heckendorf House was featured in many magazines and journals and by its selection by the

Museum of Modern Art in New York for its trend setting traveling exhibit *Built in USA*.

Over the next thirty years, Modesto projects were featured in both popular magazines like *House and Garden* and *Architectural Digest* and professional journals like *Architectural Record*, *Architectural Forum*, and *The American City*.

The Modesto Model (continued from page 1)

The Gallo Winery headquarters building and the former Modesto Savings Bank have tall graceful narrow columns topped with arches, and many of the modernist houses have walls of windows that look out to stunning gardens. Much of the design here has to do with bringing the beauty of nature inside.

Modesto continues to be a model for beautiful climate

conscious design today.

On the north side of the city, the Modesto Irrigation District has built a large solar panel array to generate electricity. LEED certified projects include college buildings, medical clinics, and commercial buildings. The city has also embraced health centered design with its network of bike and walking trails. The Tidewater Trail extends

from the city core through miles of densely populated neighborhoods providing easy walking and biking access to the downtown.

The important lesson of the Modesto Model isn't to build exactly like they built in Modesto, but to build in a way that responds to the local environment, is beautiful, and that improves the quality of life for everyone.

Central Valley Modernism (continued from page 1)

windows could be opened on both sides of the house to create cross-ventilation.

Loggia, colonnades, and porticos are used for shade not just in public buildings like the Stanislaus County Library by Austin, Field, and Fry,

but also in homes like the Thompson House by Joseph Esherick.

In the case of the mental health clinic by Christopher Alexander and the church by Yuasa Hachiro and Jack Herman interior hallways were

minimized and the collection of buildings is connected by outside passageways, porticos, and plazas.

Central Valley Modernism shares with all the other types of Modernism an affinity with the outdoors.

Building a Better Modesto

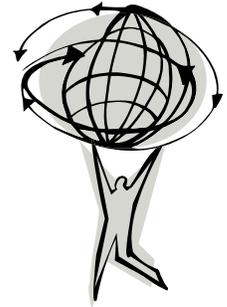
The museum's program, *Building a Better Modesto*, is a series of events and activities for people to learn about, discuss, and research art, architecture, landscape, and urban design specifically to understand their role in creating a more livable city. The program includes talks, discussions, online resources, activities for area teachers and students, movies, tours,

exhibits, and hosting the Modesto International Architecture Festival with the American Institute of Architects Sierra Valley Chapter and other local community partners.

The program was developed by the museum as a way to respond to Modesto's quality of life ranking. According to the American Institute of Architects' *10 Principles for Livable Communities*,

architecture and urban design offer a powerful perspective for exploring and finding remedies for a city's livability issues. The program embodies the museum's guiding philosophy that the arts play a vital role in creative placemaking and quality of life for a city.

Building a Better Modesto is the museum's contribution to creating a more livable Modesto.



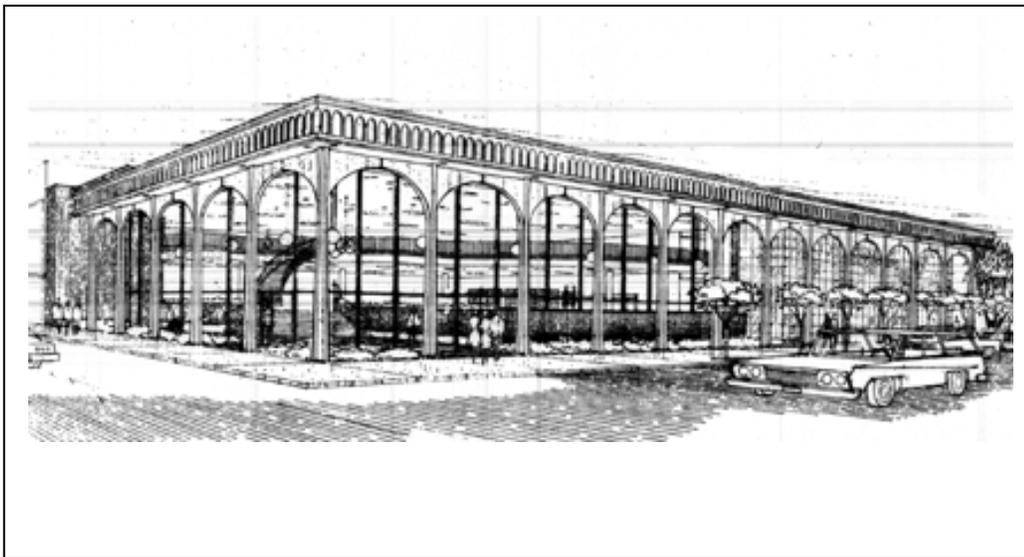
Architects that designed Modernist buildings in Modesto

Local:

- Raymond Abst
- John Bomberger
- Russell de Lappe
- George Hilburn
- Kenneth Kaestner
- Mortensen & Hollstien
- Rudy Potochnik
- Mitchell Van Bourg

Regional, National, and International:

- Christopher Alexander
- Anshen and Allen
- Armet and Davis
- Austin, Field, and Fry
- John S. Bolles
- Walter Thomas Brooks
- Gardner Dailey
- Don Emmons
- Joseph Esherick
- John Funk
- Aaron Green
- Henry Hill
- Clifford May
- Germano Milono
- Palmer and Krisel
- Milton Pflueger
- SOM
- William Turnbull
- Frank Lloyd Wright
- William Wurster



Modernist Landscape Design

Some of the most influential and creative landscape designers of the mid 20th century designed residential, commercial, and government projects in Modesto. Thomas Church, Lawrence Halprin, Robert Royston, and others

designed gardens that were integrated with the buildings. They took advantage of windows and glass doors giving residents something beautiful to look at. The landscapers were often part of the project design team from the beginning

and worked with architects like William Wurster, Gardner Daily, and Walter Thomas Church.

In their designs the garden and pleasure patio became another room of the house for barbeques, lounging, recreation, and other outdoor activities.

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The movie *Modesto Modernism* and this viewer guide are funded by a grant from the Creative Work Fund, 1 Lombard Street, Suite 305, San Francisco, CA 94111, 415.402.2793, creativeworkfund.org. The movie was created by artists Jessica Gomula-Kruzic and Steven Arounsack.

Modesto Art Museum was founded in 2005 and is a 501c3 nonprofit corporation. The mission of the Modesto Art Museum is to provide quality visual arts experiences and to help people develop their aesthetic understanding so they can enjoy and find meaning in the visual arts. To accomplish this mission, the museum sponsors exhibitions, workshops, classes, lectures, publications, performances, readings, tours, movies, and symposia.

The museum is not primarily an archive for art, but a facilitator of and catalyst for creativity in the community. It does not have its own building but brings art into the community through a series of temporary public exhibits and events. The museum has hosted painting, collage, assemblage, multi-media, technology, movie, photo, and sculpture events in a park, a theatre, museums, art galleries, at street fairs, and other community venues.

Modesto Modernism Discussion Questions

After viewing the movie and reading this viewer guide consider the following questions.

1. What important lesson do we learn from the Modesto Model? How can it be implemented in your community today?
2. Identify some of the key characteristics of Central Valley Modernist architecture. What makes it different from the Modernism that developed in the California desert?
3. What are the key issues about quality of life in your community today

and how could good architecture, landscape, and urban design improve the situation?

4. Is there any value in maintaining a city's older buildings? Do they add anything to our quality of life?
5. What qualities contribute to a city's livability? What diminishes a city's livability?

Resources

Helpful organizations:

- American Institute of Architects
- California Main Street Alliance
- California Preservation Foundation
- Docomomo
- National Trust for Historic Preservation