

Modesto Modernism

A self-guided tour of mid 20th century buildings, landscapes, and art



AIA Sierra Valley
A Chapter of the American Institute of Architects

MODESTO

Art museum

Introduction to Modesto Modernism

In the middle decades of the 20th century, the Modernist architecture of Modesto, California, was on the cutting edge and it received national attention. In the 1940s, the New York Museum of Modern Art published three books featuring Modesto architecture and a photo of a Modesto home was on the cover of the catalogue for its 1944 exhibition on modern architecture. From the 1940s through the 1960s, many books, journals, and magazines published articles on Modesto buildings. The city's national stature in architecture began with the Heckendorf House designed by John Funk in 1939. The success of that house and the national attention it received inspired Modesto residents to hire other major designers for their landscape, commercial, residential, and government projects.

The Modesto Art Museum has documented more than 85 Modernist buildings and landscapes in Modesto from 1939 to 1972 by noted 20th century designers including John Funk, William Wurster, Frank Lloyd Wright, Gardner Dailey, Joseph Eichler, William Turnbull, Joseph Esherick, SOM, Thomas Church, and many more. Modesto was a model for other cities and a laboratory in the development of a distinctive California style. This tour will introduce you to a small sample of Modesto's best mid 20th century public art and architecture.

Homes and gardens are not open to the public. Please respect private property.



1. 800 Scenic
Stanislaus County Clinic, 1972
Christopher Alexander (b. 1936)
with Nacht and Lewis of Sacramento

Austrian architect Christopher Alexander is widely known for his theories particularly the development of a pattern language of design. This project is a collection of buildings grouped around common outdoor areas. Alexander considered this project at best of mixed results, but it was significant because it helped him recognize weaknesses in his theory.

“Up until that time I assumed that if you did the patterns correctly, from a social point of view, and you put together the overall layout of the building in terms of those patterns, it would be quite alright to build it in whatever contemporary way

that was considered normal. But then I began to realize that it was not going to work that way.” *The Search for Beauty*

2. 1500 I Street
Stanislaus County Library, 1971
Austin, Field, and Fry

A tall loggia on three sides, huge overhanging eaves, and an elevated podium make this an example of modernist classic architecture. Originally, neo-classical chandeliers similar to the two light fixtures flanking the entrance graced the entire colonnade. They were removed in 2006. Notice the sun screen on the porte-cochere on the back of the building.

3. 1100 I Street
Hall of Records, 1939
Russell Guerne Delappe (1897-1955)

Designed by Modesto architect Russell Guerne Delappe, this is the first county government building in California in the International Style of architecture using steel, concrete, and glass blocks. The continuous window strips and the glass enclosed stairway on the west end of the building are reminiscent of the Bauhaus building in Dessau, Germany.



4. 801 11th Street
Modesto City Hall, 1959
Milton T. Pflueger (1907-1993)

In 1961, Modesto's new city government building, designed by the San Francisco firm of Milton T. Pflueger, made the cover of *The American City Magazine* (May 1961). “Modesto's new municipal building reflects a growing tendency among progressive local governments to make what used to be called “City Hall” into an attractive, charming, and functional civic center. The building, with its garden court and attractive landscaping, sets an example for others who will construct office structures in the city.” Be sure to descend to the lower level garden to fully experience the design of the building. The top floor was added in 1978.

5. 800 11th Street
Stanislaus County Courthouse, 1960
Mitchell Van Bourg

Van Bourg was a student of Walter Gropius at Harvard. The long strips of windows are characteristic of the International or Bauhaus style developed by Gropius.



6. 833 10th Street
Originally Modesto Savings and Loan, 1965
Mortensen & Hollstien

Tall narrow arches and a loggia on two sides make this an example of modernist classic architecture. Notice the distinctive interior light fixture, bubble ceiling lights, the curving stairway, and the sweeping mezzanine level. The sunburst wall clock is typical of the period, as is the large fluted concrete planter that passes through the glass wall. Be sure to see the arch doorway on the south side of the building. Attractive by day, the building is dazzling when fully lit at night.

7. 1124 J Street
Originally the Bank of California, 1959
Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (SOM)

The two story building is nearly square. The lower floor is a glass covered stand for the larger porous concrete block covered second floor that seems to float above it. The lattice-like blocks create a permeable envelope around the second floor.



8. 1025 13th Street
AT&T Building, 1949, 1961
Clarence Peterson
Wendell Spackman (1911-1981)

The façade is clad in huge grey ceramic tiles joined to the building with silver rivets that create a large geometric pattern. The windows are separated by shallow rectangular attached columns, reminiscent of radiator fins. They give the building a soaring effect making it look much taller than its four floors. The original building was two floors with the top two added in 1961. The rivets were added in the early 2000s.



9. 215 Patricia
Heckendorf House, 1939
John Funk (1908-1993)

This simple 3 bedroom house is one of the most influential works of modernist architecture in California. It was selected by the Museum of Modern Art in New York for their trend-setting 1944 traveling exhibit, *Built in USA*. An image of the house is on the cover of the exhibition catalogue. The text reads, "The house is set far back shielded from the street by a sunny fenced garden, and the rooms are arranged in a long narrow block to get light and air from both sides." The house was featured in two other important Museum of Modern Art publications, *What Is Modern Architecture* in 1942, and *So You Want to Build a House* in 1946. Many journals, magazines, and books have articles about the house. *Architectural Forum* printed, "Brilliant design . . . new and tangible evidence of California's leadership in the field of modern domestic architecture." The house is a national architecture treasure, but mostly obscured by the fence.

Notice the Suburban Lodge (1958) on the corner of McHenry and Hintze, and the typical 1950s – 60s Tiki Lounge at 932 McHenry.

10. 602 Magnolia
Hiatt House, 1939-1941
Gardner Dailey (1895-1967)
Joseph Esherick (1914-1998)
Landscape by Thomas Church (1902-1978)

The best place to see the house is from the bridge crossing the canal to the south. This is one of at least three Modesto homes by Dailey. Together with William Wurster, Dailey is credited with bringing modern architecture to northern California. He helped create the Second Bay Tradition blending International with California Ranch style. Esherick did some of the detailing on the house while working for Dailey.

11. 1009 Brady
Clint Thompson House, 1965
Joseph Esherick (1914-1998)
Interior design by Andrew Delfino (1920-2000)
Landscape by Thomas Church (1902-1978)

Esherick, winner of the American Institute of Architect's Gold Medal, designed houses at Sea Ranch, the Cannery in San Francisco, and the Monterey Bay Aquarium among many other projects. *House and Garden* recommended the design of this house in their 1965 *Building Guide*. "Esherick took advantage of 19 discreetly placed skylights, a trellised loggia, and 10 feet high sliding glass doors and walls to bring in winter sunlight and external brightness at dusk, without subjecting the interior to the sledgehammer blows of mid summer Modesto sun."

12. 1010 Brady
Everett Turner House, 1941
William Wurster (1895-1973)
Landscape (1942) by Thomas Church (1902-1978)

Dean of the UC Berkeley School of Architecture and founder of the UC Berkeley College of Environmental Design, Wurster helped define the Second Bay Tradition and the modern California ranch house. Wurster and Church first started working as a team in the 1930s, and did several projects in Modesto.

In 1946, *Progressive Architecture* wrote of the house, "The rooms are tall and airy; the tall, double hung windows equipped with operable shutters, are a flexible

means for controlling light and ventilation; the deep porch ceilings are sunshades as well as part of the roof construction; brick walls help retard the penetration of heat; even the pitched roof is an insulation device."

13. 1015 Brady
J. E. Griffin House, 1956
Germano Milono (1913-1978)

This is one of at least three buildings designed by Milono in Modesto. In contrast to the altered house he designed at 908 Carolyn (1955), this one retains its typical modernist design with carport and flat roof.



14. 401 Mensinger
Barton House, 1967
Walter Thomas Brooks
Landscape by Thomas Church (1902-1978)

The house is best seen from across Sycamore. Many think it was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright because it is similar to his style. The house is the first of Brooks' gabled house series with long clerestory windows stretching the length of the building. This is one of at least a dozen landscapes in Modesto by Thomas Church, creator of the modern California garden style. He believed there should be a strong link between indoors and outdoors. He also developed the kidney shaped swimming pool.

15. 1104 Wellesley
Paul and Ora Mae Crane House, 1951
Rudy Potochnik (1916-2003)

Rudy Potochnik came to Modesto with his three partners Gordon and Gale Nutson, and Howard Ten Brink in 1946. They had been conscientious objectors together doing alternative service during WWII in Michigan. Besides progressive design, as in this house, they were known for their progressive social outlook that included providing housing for Modesto area minorities who had been excluded from local developments. Beyond architecture, their firm, Wolverine, was about

building community. The house is in excellent condition including the original color.

16. 1227 Princeton
Helen E. Harmon House, 1955
Henry Hill (1913-1985)

Henry Hill studied architecture under Walter Gropius at Harvard and was a key figure in the development of the Second Bay Tradition of California architecture. He combined features of European modernism with California ranch style. Typical of his design is the use of walls of many windows like the glass doors leading to the driveway.



17. 1529 Oakwood
Mid-century Modern House, 1954
Architect unknown
Landscape architect: Luciole Design Inc.

A typical non-descript tract home was transformed into a beautiful example of modern design with a renovation that is sensitive to scale and surroundings.

18. 1330 College
Roosevelt School, 1950
Fred Swartz (1885-1968) and William Hyberg (1909-1995)

This is a characteristic mid 20th century school building with large walls of windows. The school was photographed by Julius Shulman.

19. 500 West Granger
Our Lady of Fatima Church, 1954
Vincent R. Rancy

A large neo-basilican rectangular church with a bas relief decorated pediment over the main entrance. The tower/cross is more than 75 feet tall.



20. 2509 McHenry
Originally World Savings, 1972
Peters, Caulfield, & Clayberg

Concrete, glass, and corrugated steel shape a building that combines brutalism and modernism. From the front, the building is a soaring right triangle sitting on a glass base. From the back, the building takes on a completely different look with massive concrete bunkers studded with deep set windows. The interior ceiling is filled with natural light from windows that are not immediately visible from the bank lobby.



21. 2406 Harcourt
Richard. J. Giddings House, 1962
Donn Emmons (1910-1997) of Wurster,
Bernardi, & Emmons
Landscape by Lawrence Halprin (1916-2009)

22. 2410 Harcourt
Jack Jones House, 1963
William Wurster (1895-1973) of Wurster,
Bernardi, & Emmons
Landscape by Thomas Church (1902-1978)

The intact yard at 2406 may be the only Halprin landscape in Modesto. Halprin was famous at the time for designing the master plan for the 1962 Seattle World's Fair (1958-62). The same year as the Giddings House, Halprin and Wurster began working on Ghirardelli Square which would become a model for reuse of old urban industrial sites.

23. Notice the typical mid 20th century Grace Davis High School (1959) at 1200 West Rumble Road by Raymond Abst and John Bomberger.



24. 1700 Standiford
Sculpture, Forma X II, 1969
Arnaldo Pomodoro (b. 1926)

Pomodoro's sculptures are in plazas, gardens, and museums in many cities including Roma, Paris, San Francisco, and Dublin. This one was previously in Milano, Berkeley, and New York. "Today I think of my sculptures as crystals, or nuclei, or as eyes, or signal fires; and I see them as relating to borders and voyages, to the worlds of complexity and imagination." Arnaldo Pomodoro, 2008

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<http://modestoartmuseum.org>

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Maps are not to scale.

