

Modesto Modernism Guide

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Modesto: a Laboratory for Modern Design

Beginning in 1939 and continuing into the 1970s, Modesto was an 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 (above) 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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Watch the award winning video *Modesto Modernism*, <https://vimeo.com/81278783>

“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*



One of Modesto’s finest Modernist buildings, the 1939 Hall of Records designed by Modesto architect Russell Guerne DeLappe, is celebrated in a limited edition fine art print commissioned by the Modesto Art Museum. The print, first in a series, was designed by Jordi Camps and printed by Paul Acevedo.

The Modesto Laboratory (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 can 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.

Modesto Architecture Gets National Attention

Modesto's tradition of cutting edge architecture goes back to the 1800s 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 in the New York

Museum of Modern Art's trend setting traveling exhibit *Built in USA*.

Through the 1970s, Modesto projects were featured in magazines like *House and Garden* and *Architectural Digest* and professional journals like *Architectural Record*, *Architectural Forum*, and *The American City*, and they were photographed by Julius Shulman and Philip Fein.

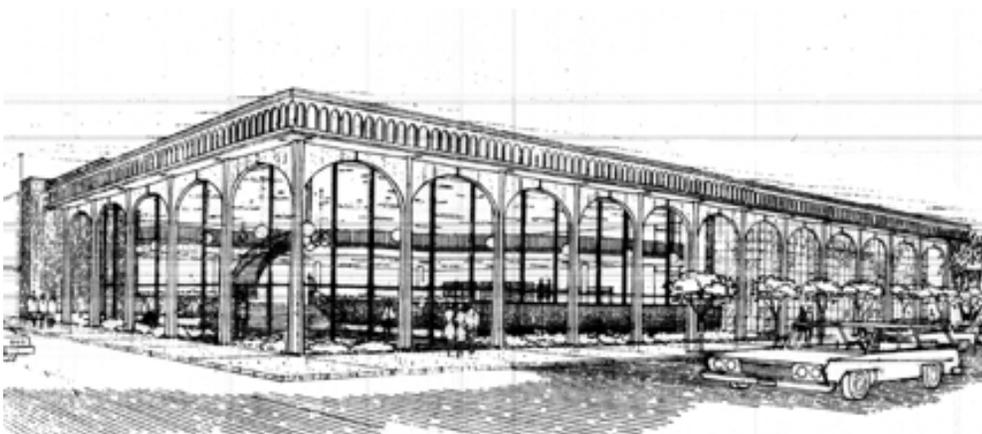
Architects that designed Modernist buildings in Modesto

Local:

Raymond Abst
John Bomberger
Russell DeLappe
George Hilburn
Kenneth Kaestner
Mortensen & Hollstien
Rudy Potochnik
Jim Shade
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
Harry Devine
Don Emmons
Joseph Esherick
Raymond Franceschi
John Funk
Aaron Green
Yuasa Hachiro
Henry Hill
Clifford May
Germano Milono
Wayne Osaki
Palmer and Krisel
Milton Pflueger
SOM
Swartz and Huberg
William Turnbull
Beverly Willis
Frank Lloyd Wright
William Wurster



Modesto Savings and Loan Building by Mortensen and Hollstien, 1965

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 barbecues, lounging, recreation, and other outdoor activities.



modestoartmuseum.org

The movie *Modesto Modernism* and this viewer guide were funded by a grant from the Creative Work Fund in San Francisco, creativeworkfund.org. The movie was created by artists Jessica Gomula-Kruzic and Steven Arounsack.

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, design, landscape, and urban design specifically to understand their role in creating a more livable city. The program includes talks, discussions, workshops, online resources, activities for area teachers and students, movies, tours, exhibits, and hosting MADWeek with the American Institute of Architects Sierra Valley Chapter and other community partners.



Stanislaus County Courthouse by Mitchell Van Bourg, completed 1960

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

Text by Robert Barzan
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