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Panel strives to get a handle on Modern architecture

By [Roger Showley](#)
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It's popular to be modern — up-to-date, with it, in the know. But when it comes to modernist architecture, developers, regulators, residents, even some architects, don't know wrong from Wright.

In response, a committee of the San Diego Architectural Foundation, composed of some veteran modernist architects, spent the last two years debating what is Modern (with a capital “M”) architecture, and recently completed a 50-page survey of the subject with examples here and elsewhere.

“The concern was that midcentury, 20th century architecture was being torn down in the absence of understanding its value,” said architect Jack Carpenter, a member of the committee.

Now, officials, interested residents and members of the building industry can read before they react to proposals to alter, demolish or preserve buildings dating from about 1940. Besides architecture, the publication covers modernist principles and examples related to landscape architecture, land planning and art.

The booklet includes many photographs depicting various examples of modernist design and thumbnail sketches of some San Diego modernists, such as Irving J. Gill, an early pioneer at the turn of the 20th century, and Lloyd Ruocco, who promoted the new thinking after World War II. There's also a list of 69 “master” architects active in San Diego who the committee considered as leaders in the modernist movement.

What is Modern architecture? The authors quote various sources to say that it is a philosophy, not a style, that sought to simplify design, eliminate superfluous ornament, and let form follow function.

In San Diego, Carpenter said, some additional principles proved more practical than in other places because of the pleasant year-round weather. Those included a seamless connection between indoor and outdoor spaces.

“Modernist architecture in Southern California is unique in that we can use much more conventional materials, a lot more indoor-outdoor living,” Carpenter said.

He said this fall the foundation plans to hold an artist's studio-type session for the public with veteran

modernist architect Robert Mosher, who served on the steering committee.

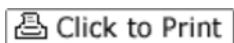
In another nod to Modernism, the Mingei International Museum in Balboa Park offers an exhibition through Jan. 10, "Masters of Mid-Century California Modernism," focusing on Evelyn and Jerome Ackerman's design and decorative arts work over the past 50 years. Information: (619) 239-0003 and mingei.org.

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