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Recounting Modernism

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Houses by three Modernist masters ' Breuer, Neutra, and Schindler ' present different challenges to new architects.

New work on an old house necessarily follows the original text. An archaeological site, original doorknobs and windows, floorboards and foundations become artifacts, embodying history. Every building, made up of thousands of parts, demands thousands of decisions. Whose decisions were they originally? Which ones are worth keeping? When an existing house — in this case, by the notable Modernists Marcel Breuer, Richard Neutra, and Rudolph Schindler — speaks louder than its new designers can, each step forward encounters a host of potential problems. These three forceful architects inspire different approaches to renovation.

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Breuer in Connecticut

If houses are laboratories for architects' ideas, then an architect's own house can be even more experimental — permitting the designer to take chances without the threat of reproach. Marcel Breuer‘s two homes in New Canaan, Connecticut, provided him with the opportunity to conduct such experiments.

The first house, finished in 1947, was a floating, cantilevered box using American balloon-frame construction. Pursuing the Modernist project, Breuer hoped to create an exemplary solution that could be replicated. The October 1948 issue of record noted that "the irresistible appeal of the cantilever" was achieved with "ordinary boards and rough lumber." But the vision was too ambitious: Before moving out, Breuer had to place a fieldstone wall underneath the house's overextended porch, which was failing structurally.

On his second try in New Canaan, in 1951, Breuer decided to commit himself firmly to the ground. Fieldstone walls defined the street facade — massive, serene surfaces that gave monumentality to a modest floor plan. A cypress-clad ceiling and bluestone floor framed the interior in a similarly heavy fashion. The back wall — a series of glass doors opened to the forest behind the house — balanced the composition. While Breuer was a proponent of much of European Modernism (beginning with his time at the Bauhaus, where he studied and taught), he saw that much of its output had become thin and flimsy — a series of insubstantial boxes. Breuer's answer was to reassert the weight of material, but employed as a Modern counterpoint — a concrete mass meeting a thin pane of glass, or a wood structure complementing a heavy stone wall.

The 1951 house was very modestly sized for Breuer's family. "Though he was a famous architect at the time, he didn't think he should live in a grand way," says Robert Gatje, longtime Breuer associate and author of Marcel Breuer: A Memoir (2000). Such modesty, adds Gatje, comes in part from the ethos of efficiency promoted at the Bauhaus.

Breuer lived in the house until 1976, when he sold it to granite contractor Gerald Bratti, who soon started a series of additions and renovations. Designed by longtime Breuer associate Herbert Beckhard, the project was published as a 1981 Record House. He copied Breuer's language, extending the stone walls in multiple directions.

By 2005, the house was threatened when a developer purchased it, planning to build a larger residence on the wooded site. A middle-aged New Canaan couple, who sensed that the house was part of their town's cultural heritage, boldly stepped in and bought it. Their three children, still in high school and college, suggested a more varied lifestyle that was not quite satisfied by Breuer's modest footprint and low ceilings.

The clients soon selected Toshiko Mori, who has worked on a number of renovations and additions to significant Modernist structures, to design an expansion. The Beckhard structures were in poor shape and were demolished. Mori placed her addition in the same spot, adding three bedrooms, a garage, and a living room that doubled the size of the house to about 6,000 square feet.

Mori recalls that the existing Breuer portion was in utter disrepair. The foundations were crumbling, there was significant water damage, the copper radiant heat pipes were shot, and more dangerously, some of the columns lacked footings. The house would have to be taken apart, piece by piece, before it could be rebuilt.

In her addition, Mori followed Breuer's spirit of contrast, albeit questioning and even correcting his initial attempts. For the new addition, she created a glass volume that floats above the heavy mass of the original house. On all sides, the upper floor cantilevers over a bluestone-clad base — a form that echoes Breuer's first house in New Canaan. But in Mori's addition, the steel frame is strong enough to support the cantilever, achieving what Breuer couldn't. Opposing Breuer's stone walls, the addition is wrapped in glass, whose slight green tint and gray mullions cause the volume, at times, to disappear into the surrounding trees. Mori has created an ethereal backdrop to Breuer's hulking figure.

Two strange, angled volumes, each enclosing a flight of stairs, connect the Mori addition and the Breuer original. To get from the ground floor of the addition, which contains a garage and living room, to the second floor's three bedrooms, the owners must take these stairs, and pass through the Breuer house — continually circulating between new and old. While appearing almost jarring from some viewpoints, the diagonal staircase volumes serve to lengthen the connection, slowing the transition between the structures. They also accentuate the difference between the approaches. Where Breuer was composed, Mori is informal.

Within the existing Breuer house, Mori reconsidered the existing low ceiling. Breuer's version (as seen in the 1981 record images, opposite) attempted to bring light in through a band of clerestory windows. Mori decided that the design actually needed two bands. She replaced Breuer's wooden columns with an identically proportioned set of thin steel posts, raising the ceiling more than 3 feet. In one sense, this surgical insertion maintains the smooth exterior composition. But it also changes the character of the Breuer scheme: Pulling apart the solemn, heavy interior, Mori creates a light-filled, spacious volume.

Through these tactics, Mori's alterations maintain the spirit of Breuer's work, even as she abandoned his initial language. In a way, this too follows Breuer, who was never a doctrinaire Modernist and was open to change in his buildings. A few years before the New Canaan houses, he designed a house for Bert and Phyllis Geller on Long Island. He returned a year later to find "every ashtray exactly where he had put it," writes Gatje, in his biography of Breuer. "I've never been so insulted in my life!" Breuer told them. "I designed this house for you to live in, not to keep as some sort of shrine!"

Mori's project — heavy and light, the Breuer of the stone wall and the Breuer of the crisp cantilever — has it both ways. In doing so, she follows Breuer's path, without simply copying it.

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