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# 5 Houses That Became Icons of Modernism

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From May 15 to 18, 2018, admirers of 20th-century architecture will travel to New Canaan, Connecticut, where Midcentury Modern houses reign supreme. The three-day [Iconic Houses Conference](#) [Link: <http://www.iconichouses.org/news/conference-announcement-2018>], which is

organized by the Iconic Houses Network, includes 11 properties on view that were built between 50 and 80 years ago. Three are museums (the [Glass House](#) [Link: /glass-house] , Manitoga, and the Marcel Breuer House), while the others are private residences.

The unique landmarks on tour were designed by influential architects like Philip Johnson, Eliot Noyes, and Marcel Breuer, among others. In addition to tours in New Canaan, the conference will also take participants to Cape Cod, Cambridge, Boston, and the Pocantico Hills, where five more houses such as the Marcel Breuer House are available to view. (The Breuer House is on the grounds of [Kykuit](#) [Link: /kykuit] , one of the National Trust's [Historic Sites](#) [Link: /historic-sites] .) In New Canaan, where the bulk of the conference takes place, many of the houses are about a ten-minute drive apart from each other. However, they can feel secluded and private.

"[These houses] are often so remote," says Natascha Drabbe, founding director of Iconic Houses Network and organizer of the conference. "They were sometimes designed for places that were hard to build. The architects may not have had a large budget, so they bought plots that were not desirable. Through their creativity, though, they [were able to] make something out of it."

The conference is one of only a few opportunities the public will have to view such a diverse and exemplary collection of Modernist showpieces in just three days.

Ben Asen

The Breuer house is on site at Kykuit.

The Marcel Breuer House at Pocantico (1949) is part of the pre-conference house tour.

"We can't turn every iconic house into a museum," notes Drabbe. But, for the ones that are typically closed to the public, "you can see these [private] houses being lived in, you can see how they function." That's one of the goals of the gathering in May. Attendees can catch a glimpse of what it's like to live in and be stewards of houses photographed and dissected in dozens of architecture books and publications. Some of the house's owners will speak on just this subject, explaining

how they make their homes livable while preserving the structures' integrity.

Other discussions will involve the future of house museums and how to create new models for showing historic houses to the public, not only in America, but also in places like Latin America and Asia that have their own must-see collections of Modernist properties.

Whether museums or private homes, the sites featured in the Iconic Houses Conference all have excellent stewards who understand and appreciate the significance of their properties.

A few highlights on the tour include:

### **Philip Johnson's Glass House**

Philip Johnson designed the one-story glass and steel house for his personal residence in 1949, and he lived at the 49-acre property for 58 years until his death in 2005. In 2007, it opened as a National Trust Historic Site.

"You could spend a whole day at the Glass House," adds Drabbe. The house isn't the only worthwhile structure on the site, though. Johnson used the space to experiment on a dozen other structures, including a light-filled [sculpture gallery](#) [Link: /inside-the-newly-restored-sculpture-gallery-at-philip-johnsons-glass-house] and brick guest house.

The Glass House became iconic almost immediately after its construction. Johnson is widely credited with helping popularize Modernist architecture in the United States.

Hilary Lewis, the Glass House's chief curator and creative director (as well as the conference co-chair), [discusses](#) [Link: <http://www.iconichouses.org/news/ihc18-hilary-lewis-on-philip-johnson-and-his-glass-house>] the balance of recognizing Johnson's intention for the site while evolving it for today's audience.

### **The Ball House**

While the Glass House may be one of the most recognizable houses in the area, the Ball House, another Johnson creation in New Canaan, is equally as illustrative of

his characteristic preference for glass. From the outside, the house looks modestly sized, but the white masonry exterior walls disguise spacious 10-foot-tall living spaces inside. In 2008, the house was saved from demolition. The previous owner, an architect, secured from the town the rights to preserve the house and develop the 2.2-acre property. It sold in 2015 to the current owner, also an architect, who plans to construct a new house at the rear of the property and may turn the historic house into an art gallery open to the public.

“This is important,” says Drabbe, “because it’s an example of how you can keep the integrity intact. [The owner’s] new house will coexist with an existing hidden gem.”

## **Eliot Noyes House II**

While Eliot Noyes spent two decades primarily designing products for IBM, Noyes got an early start in architecture, receiving his masters in architecture from Harvard in 1938. He was part of the “Harvard Five,” a group of Modern architects and designers living in New Canaan that included Philip Johnson, Marcel Breuer, John Johansen, and Landis Gores. The five grew to be friends, but the moniker didn’t develop until years later.

Noyes’ expertise in architecture is evident throughout the Northeast. He designed two houses in New Canaan for himself and his family, but today only one remains. This International Style house is organized into a “private” and “public” section—one that contains the bedrooms, and another that houses the living areas. To use the restroom, one must cross the courtyard, no matter what season. While that may seem like a design flaw, Noyes intentionally wished to integrate the house with its surroundings, and his philosophy followed form over function more often than not. (Noyes’ son, Frederick, will be speaking at the conference about growing up in the Noyes House.)

## **John Rayward House/Tirranna**

“Most of these houses are beautiful because of their settings,” says Drabbe, and Tirranna is a perfect example of how the New Canaan architects structured their Modernist homes to relate to the landscape.

Frank Lloyd Wright designed Tirranna in 1955, the same year that Noyes built his

house. The aboriginal name means “running waters,” a fitting name given that Wright designed the house near the Noroton River for John Rayward, an Australian.

Tirranna reflects the curving shapes Wright favored near the end of his career (the architect was in his late 80s when he designed Tirranna). The house is shaped like a horseshoe (as is the pool), but it has the quintessential character of a Wright-designed property, including the house’s symbiotic relationship with the natural landscape and the use of clerestory windows and built-ins inside.

## **Manitoga**

A member of the National Trust’s [Historic Artists’ Homes and Studios](https://artistshomes.org/) [Link: <https://artistshomes.org/>] program, Manitoga is a 75-acre site in Garrison, New York, that was home to Russel Wright, an industrial designer who is most known for his affordable “American Modern” dinnerware. Built from 1957 to 1961 into a massive block of granite overlooking a quarry, Manitoga served as his home and studio. When he needed to decompress, Wright would step through an overgrown path into a hidden room. The house cleverly emulates Wright’s desire to embed his house in nature—sliding glass panels in the bathroom have pressed ferns from the property, and he decorated a ceiling with pine needles.

Check out all of the houses on tour and those speaking at the conference (including Katherine Malone-France, our vice president for historic sites), by going to the [Iconic Houses website](http://www.iconichouses.org/) [Link: <http://www.iconichouses.org/news/conference-announcement-2018>].

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