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Long Island: A Modern Architecture Lab

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

With eye-opening photographs and surprising discoveries from a forgotten past, the new book "Long Island Modernism: 1930-1980" (W.W. Norton & Company) surveys a wealth of pioneering architecture produced locally by famous builders from around the world. In essays grounded in years' worth of research, author and architectural preservationist Caroline Rob Zaleski examines numerous architecture stars who used parts of Long Island as a sort of laboratory. Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and Mies van der Rohe all built there, and even contemplated a plan to re-establish their Bauhaus school on Long Island after relocating to the U.S. from Nazi Germany. Many other notable homes and buildings conceived for corporate and public use were conceived by the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra, Richard Meier and I.M. Pei, among many others.



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Esto: Ezra Stoller

The Robert and Mary Leonhardt House in Lloyd Neck, 1954-56.

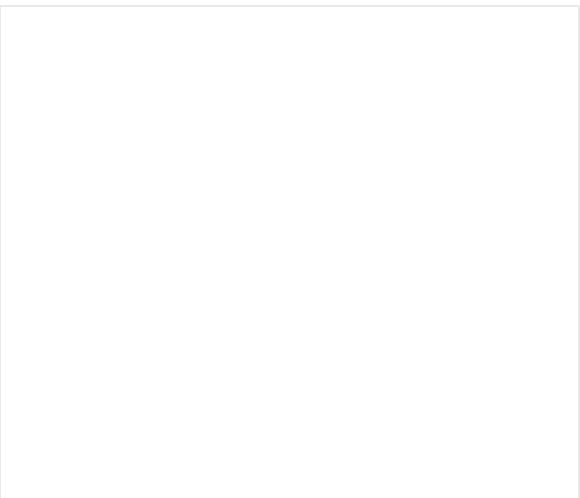
At her home on Central Park West, Ms. Zaleski spoke with The Wall Street Journal recently about designing for a new mid-century mindset, building cheap, and discovering an unexpected fascination for Long Island.

Your book starts, in a way, with the 1939 New York World's Fair. What was its significance?

Robert Moses and the fair's organizers put together a fair to look at the "World of

Tomorrow." It promulgated the concept of New York being the center of a vast regional plan that was dependent on roadways and that idealized and promoted suburbanization. By the mid 1930s, Moses had already built several bridges, including the Triboro, and several expressways. In 1939, there were still families on Long Island that didn't have proper plumbing or electricity. The island really opened up from being an isolated region of great estates and farms when the roadways came. If you have a look at what was in the fair, it was electricity, the automobile, a suburban house for every family. The vision was put on hold for a number of years because of the war, but then it was built out on Long Island postwar.

How did modernist design jibe with the American postwar mind?



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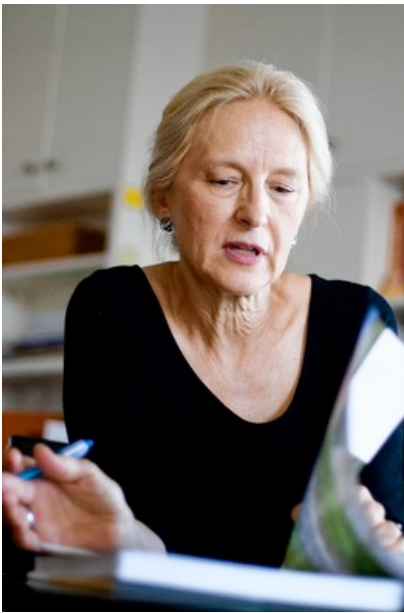
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Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal
Caroline Rob Zaleski, who assembled the book 'Long Island Modernism: 1930-1980.'

There was a mentality that to live the old way, according to the traditions of old Europe, was a passing concept. Americans wanted to promote Americanization and modernity in architecture and the way they lived. Even people who could afford large houses would sell them and downsize to what was called a "maidless house." They embraced modern gadgets and building materials, and it was basically a whole thrust toward people wanting to live more simply. It was this extraordinary period when most Americans wanted to build in a modern way that was associated with looking to the future. It's a concept that's been forgotten today. Of course, typically, when somebody buys empty land on Long Island now, they put a McMansion on it.

How did you first become intrigued by Long Island in particular?

When I came to New York, like most people I lived in a small apartment and in the summer I would beg for invitations to get out to the country. This was before everybody had air-conditioning. What I didn't realize was that Long Island was a hugely interesting place. In some parts of the world, it's large enough to be a country. And it has specific regions. The middle of the island had the second-largest great prairie in the United States. Up until the 1880s, tourists used to go to



Enlarge Image
Robert Perron
Endo Laboratories, Garden City, 1964.

stay at hotels and just look at the prairie grasses.

How did you start finding the houses and buildings in the book?

I spent a lot of time in libraries and would see an article from the '30, '40s or '50s about a house built by a well-known architect, and I'd have to go see if that building was still there. In many cases it would have been demolished years ago. In some cases I would find them. Often the maps had changed. I basically found a lost history, and the biggest surprise of all was to find that some of the people I had studied, these heroic modernists, all showed up, unexpectedly.

What do you mean by "lost history"?

We have this concept today, with stores like Design Within Reach and all the house magazines, that people during the modern period lived in this very rational, severe way. But when I look at many of these photographs, I see that they didn't. They really lived in their houses.

How so?

Marcel Breuer built a house for Bert Geller—the president of a shoe company—using a design that he called "bi-nuclear," with the children's area separated from the adult area by hallways. But I interviewed the Gellers' two sons and, even though all the photos are impeccably tidy and correctly staged as a perfect

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Laurence Kocher

The Kocher Canvas Weekend House, Fort Salonga, 1934.

modern house with everything in its place, when they were growing up they would run all through the house with their friends and prop their bicycles up against a Jackson Pollock nailed to a board.

How many buildings in the book still stand?

About 40%. Sadly, some have been drastically altered. But then some are in fine condition. In order to do this book I had to do site visits and an enormous

amount of networking to get access to some of the buildings. I had to kiss a lot of frogs before getting to meet the prince.

Design of this kind seems much less rarified looking back to the postwar era. Was it?

A theme that carries throughout the book is the concept of affordability—minimal buildings with low-cost materials on small budgets. Around World War II, there wasn't a lot of money around and building materials were restricted. Architects would often have to go buy building materials from the local hardware store. They didn't import. Metal was restricted. The Geller house was built in 1945 with very minimal materials: wood, fieldstones, plain old plywood. This was not a period when people were importing marble from around the world. This is an architecture that was based on using usually local materials. I think there's a lesson there: architects and clients can achieve marvelous and accommodating architecture without needing to truck in materials. If they could do it then, we can do it today.

A version of this article appeared September 7, 2012, on page A23 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Long Island's Modern Architectural Palette.

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