



So Modern

the contemporary homes of peacock farms

By Laurie Atwater

The cover of the Sunday edition of the New York Times for September 13, 1959 announced: *Russians Fire Rocket to the Moon, Expected to Hit Target Today...*

Inside the pages, a story from Lexington, Massachusetts: *Colony of Contemporary Homes Will Be Repeated Near Boston.*

This article is included in the Peacock Farms 50th anniversary booklet along with others from the *Boston Globe* and *TIME* magazine—all lauding not only the creation of this “colony” as the *Times* put it, but its acceptance in traditional New England—Lexington no less!

This October the Historical Society will be sponsoring a home tour featuring the many examples of mid-twentieth century Modernism in Lexington (See page 32 for details on the House Tour). Included on the tour will be several houses in the historic Peacock Farms neighborhood off Watertown Street in Lexington.

Walter Pierce still lives in the Peacock Farms neighborhood in the house he designed over thirty years ago. He is quick to point out that his house is not the original “Peacock Farms” model—it is a custom contemporary, but it is a fair example of the “modern” style that occurs throughout the streets of the Peacock Farms neighborhood. This house has seen him through family life and is now a stalwart friend in retirement. His wife Marianne Fisker Pierce was a Danish artist formally trained in textile design who went on to explore photography and create collage art later in her life. Marianne’s art is all around the Pierce home. She passed away several years ago. The couple has two sons, Steffen and Christian. Both sons live in the Boston area and are involved in artistic pursuits.

Pierce is a tall man with an elegant manner that speaks of his early southern roots. He is in his eighties now, but retains a youthful manner and enthusiasm for his avocation as we talk at his home

on Trotting Horse Drive about his long career. Pierce graduated from Virginia Polytechnic Institute in 1941 and upon graduating he was commissioned into the Air Force as a Lieutenant where he was stationed with an anti-submarine unit.

After the war he entered the graduate program at the school of Architecture and Urban Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). While at MIT, Pierce studied under Lawrence B. Anderson whom he considers his mentor and friend (Anderson died in 1994). Anderson was a key player in the Modern movement in Boston. Pierce caught Anderson’s excitement and fervor for modernism while he was at MIT and even worked part time with Anderson after he graduated. He also studied under Carl Koch (Carl Koch was one of the pioneers in the prefabricated housing market after World War II and designed the first home for Acorn Homes in Bedford for builder John Richardson Bemis as well as the Snake Hill development in Belmont).

In the early fifties Pierce started his own firm with colleague Danforth Compton.

Come to the Suburbs

It was the early fifties and the post-war demand for housing continued to be high. Young professionals were flocking to the Boston area to work at places like MIT Lincoln Labs and the prestigious universities in Boston and Cambridge. They had an “optimism and hope for the future” says Walter Pierce and they had government-backed VA home loans. New buyers faced a shortage of housing around the country which was being addressed by the development of suburbs. Boston was no different.

The New England landscape was dotted with well-spaced, typical farmhouses. Quickly farmland was being sold off to developers who were



The Pierce home on Trotting Horse Drive. Clockwise: The back corner of the large living space which includes a dining area (not pictured) and one complete wall of windows. Seen from the porch the house seems suspended in the trees and the walls of glass integrate the natural world into the living space. The winding staircase leads from the lower level to the living area above. Pierce’s granddaughter relaxes amid the trees on the deck with a good book.

hard-pressed to keep up with demand. The notion of a “suburban development” outside of major cities à la Levittown, Long Island made it attractive for families to move out of noisy congested multi-families in the city to the peace, quiet and orderliness of the suburbs. Levittown, Long Island was the first fully planned suburb, developed on acres of flat potato fields and organized to include schools, shopping, churches and all of the conveniences of modern suburban life. Capes in the Levittown development boasted 750 feet of living space. Land was flat and barren at first. Houses were built on slabs.

However, developments like Levittown with flat terrain and cookie-cutter conformity to tradition was anathema to a creative group of modern architects working at Harvard and MIT at about the same time. They were proponents

“The value of these communities and these homes has never been greater in showing us a way in which site sensitivity, economy of means and a community spirit can produce housing that is commodious and uplifting without waste and ostentation.”

David N. Fixler, AIA
DOCOMOMO US

(International working party for documentation and conservation of building sites and neighborhoods of the modern movement)
Excerpted from *New England Houses of the Modern Era* an essay from the Peacock Farms 50th Anniversary Book



Architects working in the Modern style embraced technology, mass production and modern materials, but there was another side of the movement. The philosophy that accompanied this school of thought yearned to meld a progressive social movement with design theory. This is clearly evidenced by the emphasis on common land, communal gathering spaces and shared covenants in Lexington’s modern enclaves. This is one of the key differences between the relentless individualism and isolation of the modern suburbs that was spring up everywhere. In the design of the Modern suburb there was still a strong desire for connection—to both community and to nature.

In Lexington the academic enclave of Six Moon Hill had been developed near Pleasant Street beginning in 1948 by The Architects Collaborative (TAC) which was an architectural firm founded by Gropius in 1945 with a group of young architects. These TAC architects developed Moon Hill for themselves and their young families. They created an affordable community of modern homes where they lived in a cooperate environment. They banned fences, preserved open space and encouraged community. Like attracts like, and soon the development attracted other academics. Although the homes were equally priced for the most part, the architects were directly involved and in essence each of the Moon Hill homes was a custom design.

Peacock Farms, the development that Pierce and Compton envisioned and saw through to fruition is a development

of “modern” houses. But this is a vast over simplification of the ambitious challenge that faced these two post-World War II architects and businessmen.

What Compton and Pierce proposed was a subdivision of modern “stock” houses—not custom houses—that would give the appearance of a custom built exclusively for its site. This was a dramatic departure from the traditional builder developments and it required a well-coordinated plan for site development, building design and marketing that would meet the challenge of maintaining the modern aesthetic at an affordable price for a young family.

“In the immediate post-war period,” Pierce wrote in the Peacock Farms 50th anniversary book, “the houses available on the market were primarily traditional Capes and Colonials. Dan Compton and I thought there might be a market for a ready-built contemporary house.” Fortunately many of the people moving into Lexington were coming from other parts of the country and they were more open to these new and exciting homes. “These people came to these houses because they liked them,” Pierce says.

Compton and Pierce wanted to bring the beauty, functionality and affordability of the modern house to a broader market in an appropriate setting. They were convinced that they could make “truly contemporary styling” affordable. Dan Compton spotted a FOR SALE sign on a piece of property off Watertown Street, he purchased it.

This was our “Program” Pierce explains. The two men set about

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understanding the external influences of zoning, climate, views, light, and natural landscape elements combined with the needs and budget of the modern family. From this Program, Pierce says, the initial site design was developed, the original house plan was designed and they were in business.

Peacock Farms—Phase I

The Land. A basin of 45 acres, the land was originally home to a dairy farm and later peacocks were raised there. The original farmhouse at 3 Peacock Farm Road was built around 1830. The land was a rolling landscape of ledge full of ledge, wetlands and woods. Not an easy site to develop but one that offered many aesthetic opportunities for siting modern homes.

The Design. Pierce and Compton were convinced that the style that they loved—the modern home—would be desirable to the young professional even in traditional New England. It was a leap of faith. “Part of the tradition of the traditional house is to have a front door facing the street—no matter what,” Pierce laughs, “with a walk going up to the front door! That was de rigueur—that’s what you did!” Modern houses are most often oriented to the back.

The Budget. The major program goal for the project was to create an *affordable* solution for young families. The initial model “A” Series house sold for under \$20,000. The second model—“Peacock Farms” house (as it came to be known) sold for just under \$24,000.

The Ethos. Making each homeowner a “beneficiary,” codified an arrangement between neighbors that would at once commit them to the preservation of many acres of “common land” and ensure that the architectural integrity of the entire neighborhood would be kept intact through a covenant agreement. Peacock Farms has an elected Board of Directors and all plans for additions to an individual house or use of common land must be submitted for approval. The largest communal project was completed in 1958 with the construction of a neighborhood swimming pool.

Initially the partners developed a single level house plan and built seven of them. from 1953-1954. Then unexpectedly, Danforth Compton passed away in 1955.

Peacock Farms—Phase II

After Compton’s death, Walter Pierce joined with two builders—Harmon White and Edward Green to finish the project. Pierce was to maintain control of the design. “We had to be very strict about allowing the prospective owners to make changes if we wanted to keep the costs down,” Pierce explains. White & Green were sticklers. “They developers job is to stay with the formula,” Pierce says. “The developer house is really a consumer product.” White and

Green were good at marketing the homes and they were committed to the “modern” design, but they did require Pierce to create a second plan to accommodate some of the lots. “With the first houses we had run into a lot of ledge,” Pierce explains.

It was at this point that Pierce developed his award-winning split-level design that could be “stepped down” to conform to the slope of the lot and minimize ledge excavation. The split level design allows the home to be “of the hill” as Frank Lloyd Wright wrote in his biography. “Hill and house should live together each the happier for the other.” Using the land as a reference, the design could be oriented to the unique terrain of the individual lot and the entrance might be on the side of the structure rather than smack dab in the middle as was traditional.

The new design allowed for the happy coexistence structure and nature and the ability to take advantage of the beautiful views available in the Peacock Farms neighborhood—all contributing to the unique appearance of each home—despite the fact that the structure was essentially the same—and the naturalized appearance of the neighborhood as a whole.

To my mind, this is the aspect of the Peacock Farms development that makes it most successful. Not only are the individual houses connected with the exterior, but the streetscape is planned in such a way that the houses almost melt into their surroundings as though they were not even there. Of course, many detractors dismay the “ungroomed” appearance of the lots in a modern development, but the integrity of the land is well-preserved, the absence of lawns and the preservation of the natural canopy make these developments eco-friendly and energy efficient.

The Awards

In 1957, Pierce was awarded the “Homes for Better Living” contest in American Homes magazine for the “Peacock Homes” design. The contest was sponsored by the A.I.A. This design was described in a 1959 article in *The New York Times* as “sleek split-level dwellings with rakishly asymmetrical roofs” and features a fireplace dividing the entrance and the living area. The dramatic living room has a sloping ceiling with exposed beams and floor to ceiling windows.

Pierce later sold the plan to *Better Homes and Gardens*. Pierce has no idea how many of these homes may have been built around the country, but he does know that many were built in the contemporary neighborhoods of Lexington and several surrounding towns.

Bringing the Outside In

Part of the unique experience of being “inside” a Modern home is the feeling that

you are actually suspended between nature and civilization. “One of the Modern precepts is an indoor, outdoor connection visually,” Pierce says. “Think of storefronts,” he says. “If you live in a beautiful site like this and you want to enjoy the view—what better way?”

Glass is the material that most defines the Modern house. Glass at once shelters and exposes—defines and expands the space. Walter Pierce’s living area is glass on two sides. The leafy embrace of the trees through the vast living room windows is breathtaking. Situated on the hill, Pierce’s house makes you feel as though you have climbed up into a tree. The dappled late morning sun creates an endless palate of green as it bounces through the leaves. Birds chatter and sing. Life outside the windows is brimming with activity and if you want to join in, a couple of long strides takes you out onto the second level deck where you have a view of the naturalized front “lawn” and the first floor patio which has grown a dense and velvety layer of moss.

This house is one of the several “custom” designs that Pierce built in the Peacock Farm neighborhood over the years.

Dynamic Living Spaces

The modern house design opened up the traditional floor plan to create “flow.” The modern sensibility stressed efficiency and the dynamic organization of living spaces around actual human behavior and acknowledges the informal nature of family life by creating gathering spaces without walls. There is a “dining corner” Pierce points out—not a dining room. The adjacent kitchen is connected to the living space and bathed in light from the windows that overlook the courtyard.

This is one aspect modern design that really caught on according to Pierce. He points to the fact that today’s kitchens and living areas are often combined without walls and that common-sense convenience factors are taken into consideration when locating the garage next to the kitchen for example to make it easy to unload the groceries.

“It’s interesting—whatever you want to say about these big houses [McMansions], there’s lots of change going on in the interior design which really goes back to what the modern movement was saying about more informal living.”

Pierce withdrew from his firm in 1990, but he has designed many additions for owners of homes in the Peacock Farms neighborhood since then and he is currently working on two more. “Architects never want to stop working,” Pierce laughs. “We love what we do. If we could keep our families alive we would work for free.”

Honesty of Craftsmanship and Materials

“Our generation of architects bought into the idea that even for a layman who doesn’t know about construction or design—when that person enters a house, he ought to have

some feeling about how it is put together, how it works.”

“My mother used to go crazy when I described it this way,” Pierce says, “but it’s honest.” The notion that a building was more honest when its structure was exposed was one of the modernist principles—that form was the product of function and nothing more.

It is clear that Pierce is connected with this idea of the “honesty” in design. “It’s kind of a sensibility when you’re designing,” he says. “It was inherent in the Modern movement. You could say in some ways the Modern movement was preaching simplicity—some people would say austerity. Decoration in the early days of the modern movement was a no-no,” he laughs. “A lot of that is out the window now,” Pierce says with a chuckle.

Despite this anti-decoration dictum, Pierce points out that modern architecture is nevertheless very “sympathetic to things you put on the wall.” He points to the beautiful art on the walls of his living room created by his late wife Marianne. “Also, modern architecture is very sympathetic to good traditional furniture,” he says, and indeed there are several lovely traditional pieces mixed in with the modern furniture in this comfortable living space.

In many ways the “decoration” in the modern house is its purity of line, awareness of light and integration with nature. The actual construction of the Peacock Farms homes is fairly traditional according to Pierce. There is no exposed concrete or steel, the colder materials sometimes associated with the design of Modernist civic buildings. These homes are primarily post and beam construction and incorporate warm wood, cedar siding and lots of glass.

Ultimately however, critics of the modern aesthetic claim that its “simplicity” was cold and sterile and sometime after the 60s, the modern home began to fall out of fashion.

Today, the Modern movement is experiencing a renaissance of sorts. With magazines like *dwel* devoted to modern design, affordability, sustainability and eco friendliness, the linguistics of the Modern movement seem to have been reinvented for a new age. Energy challenges, environmental concerns and the desire to step back from the excess, materialism and alienation of the past twenty years has reinvigorated the conversation and made neighborhoods like Peacock Farms seem more Modern than ever.