

The Architecture of Alfred Browning Parker

MIAMI'S MAVERICK MODERNIST

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Foreword by Robert McCarter



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Along This New but Ancient Way:

Alfred Browning Parker and Modern Architecture in Florida

This Florida house aims for the highest goal to which architecture can aspire: organic architecture. Along this new but ancient way a home where the enlightened mind can flower, where people can develop their fullest potentials, is still a possibility.

- Frank Lloyd Wright on Parker's Royal Road house, *House Beautiful*, November 1953

Alfred Browning Parker may rightly be called Florida's foremost modern architect. This ranking rests not on any chronological priority but rather on the remarkable length of his practice, the early and extensive national recognition his architecture received, and the constructive influence of his works on generations of Florida architects.¹ For sixty-five years, from 1945 to the first decade of the twenty-first century, Parker's buildings have exemplified a regionally inflected modern architecture's characteristics of engagement and enhancement of the environment; accommodation of the landform and plant life of the site;

forthright expression of construction, engagement of local building traditions, authenticity of materials, and the use of natural materials from the region; ability to house new and differing lifestyles; and spatial freedom combined with the sense of place. In his architecture, Parker has consistently made unique places where contemporary cultural, social, and domestic aspirations are realized in harmony with the climate, topography, and environment of Florida.

In order to understand Parker's place in Florida modern architecture, we need to briefly examine the overlapping paths by which modern architecture became established in Florida. From the beginning of human habitation in Florida, in the settlements of the Native Americans, the way in which it was necessary to build was largely determined by environmental and climatic demands. This environmental imperative led to the development of diverse types of architecture that, consistently across cultures, were appropriate to the subtropical humidity and subtly varied but uniformly fragile ecology of the peninsula. Early buildings in Florida included both stereotomic, ground-engaging mass structures, such as the shell and earth mounds at Mound Key and Lake Jackson dating from 500–800 AD that were built by Native Americans, and the shell-stone forts built by European settlers at St. Augustine and the Dry Tortugas dating from 1670–1800; as well as tectonic, lightweight, wood-framed platform-and-roof structures, which created shade and were open to the breezes, such as the thatch-roofed houses of the Seminoles, and the metal-roofed “Cracker” houses of the earliest European settler farmers.

Modern architecture, understood in this nonstylistic, environmental definition, first arrived in Florida with the young Bernard Maybeck—famous for his later works in California—who was the construction architect for Carrère and Hastings's Ponce de Leon and Alcazar Hotels, built in St. Augustine in 1885–86. Rather than the design of the buildings, it was their innovative construction, including the deployment of cast concrete incorporating local coral stone as aggregate and using iron railroad rails as a kind of primitive reinforcement over openings, that marked these works as modern. The adaptation of new construction techniques to regional traditions of building and locally available materials is perhaps the most important constant we can follow though the works of succeeding generations of Florida modern architects.

As regards modern architecture, Florida could be said to have been “Wright from the start.”¹² While not well known, the earliest examples of what is formally recognized as the modern tradition in Florida were the works of 1910–20 of Henry John Klutho in Jacksonville and Antonin Nechodoma in Tampa and Puerto Rico, both of whom were directly inspired by the Prairie Period works of Frank Lloyd Wright.¹³ Related to

Florida as part of the Caribbean region, we might also note the work of Heinrich Klumb, who worked for Wright at Taliesin from 1929 to 1934, later collaborating with Louis Kahn in Philadelphia in 1937 before moving permanently to Puerto Rico, where he realized a number of environmentally inflected designs of the highest caliber.

Wright himself brought his regionally and environmentally determined interpretation of modern architecture to Florida in the late 1930s when he began work on what would eventually be the largest collection of his buildings anywhere in the world, Florida Southern College in Lakeland. Wright's designs, which received the widest possible publicity, predated and paralleled the arrival of the Art Moderne-style hotels in Miami Beach, and they had a far greater impact on the evolution of modern architecture in Florida. Contemporary with Fallingwater, the Johnson Wax Building, Taliesin West, and the first of the Usonian Houses, the buildings of Florida Southern College were markedly different from these other works by Wright, in particular in the manner in which he used two scales of concrete to respond to the landscape of existing citrus orchards. Near the ground, and close to where people walked in the shade of the citrus trees and his low, cantilevered canopied esplanades, Wright made the building walls of small-scale, custom-designed, intricately detailed concrete blocks, often with colored glass inserts. Above the trees, and visible only from a distance, Wright made the walls of large-scale, smooth-plastered monolithic cast concrete, which stood and shone in the strong Florida sunlight. In February 1939, at the very beginning of the construction of Florida Southern College, which extended from 1938 to Wright's death in 1959, Parker first began to correspond with Wright.

Despite Wright's consistent efforts to adapt his designs to local conditions, in the years immediately following World War II, International Style architecture appeared to have achieved universal dominance, its standardized formula intended to be the same around the world. Yet it is hardly coincidental that, exactly at this moment of universal stylistic unification, several important outbreaks of regional architectural character were also taking place, including the Bay Area School in San Francisco, the Case Study Houses in Los Angeles, and the Sarasota School in Florida. Contrary to its universal aspirations, articulated in the Museum of Modern Art's International Style exhibit in 1932, the constructed embodiment of modern architectural principles seemed to require their being grounded in the unique characteristics of a particular place and time.

Wright's ongoing work in Lakeland both served as an inspiration for those young architects already

living in Florida, including Parker, and drew a new generation of young architects to Florida, most notably Paul Rudolph, who came to Sarasota to work with Ralph Twitchell in 1941 and again from 1946 to 1951. It is important to note, however, that before his partnership with Rudolph, Twitchell had already engaged Wright's work in the design of several houses built in 1940–42. Like many of the regional modernist movements, the Sarasota architects did not see themselves as unified in their interpretation of modern architecture, and yet despite their remarkable diversity, the designs of such architects as Victor Lundy, Tim Seibert, William Rupp, Mark Hampton, Gene Leedy, and Carl Abbott all show to a greater or lesser degree the influence of Wright's increasingly regionally-inflected work.

While the Sarasota School has received the most publicity in recent years, modern architecture had in fact been practiced in the Miami and Fort Lauderdale area since the early 1930s, before Wright began work on Florida Southern College. This other regional movement, which we might call the "tropical modern school," has arguably had a more significant influence than the Sarasota group on the long-term development of modern architecture in Florida. This South Florida group includes both the Wright-inspired works of Parker, Wahl Snyder, Robert Hansen, Robert Bradford Browne, and George Reed and the more International Style-inspired works of Rufus Nims, Robert Law Weed, Robert Little, Russell Pancoast, and Igor Polevitsky.

Another regional interpretation of modern architecture in Florida is what I have called the "concrete block school," which sought to engage concrete blocks, those "cast-offs" (to use Wright's term) of the construction industry that Wright had been endeavoring to ennoble since the early 1920s. In addition to Wright, this group was inspired by the brief three-year career of Jacksonville architect Robert Ernest, who realized three built works of his own design, all constructed with concrete blocks. Of particular relevance to this discussion is Ernest's Becker House of 1960, with its unique, locally fabricated, rhomboid-shaped concrete blocks and Wright-inspired hexagonal planning grid. In addition to Ernest, the members of this "concrete block school" include Lowell Lotspeich, Milton Harry, Don Alford, and Donald Singer, and we should note in particular the Wright-inspired works of Dan Duckham, Robert Broward, Jack Clark, and William Morgan.

For architects around the world searching for alternatives to the universal formula of the International Style, the work of these regional schools in Florida came as a revelation, embodying an entirely new vision of the relation of modern architecture to its place. Today the concept of "critical regionalism," first

bly articulated by Wright disciple Harwell Hamilton Harris in 1954 and later championed by the most important architectural historian of our time, Kenneth Frampton, calls for exactly this kind of regionally inflected modern architecture, true to the universal intentions of spatial liberation, yet capable of engaging local climate, landscape, building traditions, and materials. While united by the intention to appropriately adapt modern architecture to Florida, and sharing an ecologically balanced approach, the wide variety of designs among the members of these regional architectural communities also defies the stereotypical representation of modern architecture as lacking richness and diversity.

Parker may be considered the leader of the Wright-inspired “organic school” of Florida architecture, which included members from a number of the regional schools, such as Broward, Duckham, Snyder, Hansen, Reed, Browne, Lundy, Singer, Morgan, and Clark, as well as Nils Schweitzer, who oversaw construction of Florida Southern College for Wright, Will Miller, and even Rudolph, whose Burkhardt House of 1956 is related to both Wright’s work and his Japanese sources of inspiration. Wright’s architecture was embraced by these diverse practitioners not only because it was modern but, more important, because it was regional; it was profoundly affected by the place in which it was built. Yet while Wright was, for most architects, necessarily always at some distance, many of Florida’s modern architects, such as Singer, looked to Parker as much as to Wright, particularly given Parker’s numerous built works that engaged the climate, economy, building traditions, and lifestyle of Florida.⁴

Parker was in many ways a follower of Wright, yet Parker’s work is dramatically inflected by the tropical climate and oceanfront geology, a context in which Wright only rarely worked. The need to lift the main levels of the house above the storm surge on waterfront sites, which we see in all Parker’s works, would appear to make impossible Wright’s typical concrete floor slab set directly into the ground, a feature of virtually all of Wright’s Usonian Houses after 1935. One example we have of a Wright-designed house built on an oceanfront site, the Fuller House of 1951 in Pass Christian, Mississippi, was in fact lifted a full floor off the ground on concrete block piers. While this could protect against normal storm surge, it unfortunately proved to be no protection against Hurricane Camille, which destroyed the house in 1969.

Parker also followed Wright in viewing the affordable middle-class house as one of the absolutely essential challenges for modern architects to meet. Like Wright’s Usonian Houses of 1935–59, Parker designed a series of affordable houses, pointedly published as being the houses of “a house painter” and “a postman,” as well as speculative development houses. Also like Wright, Parker endeavored to engage new

construction technology while continuing local craft traditions. In this, Parker's own Royal Road house, built in Coconut Grove in 1952, is a perfect example, with its local scrap stone walls and advanced cantilevered concrete floor slab construction. In building the concrete floor slabs of this house, Parker employed a system of construction new to Florida at that time, and the concrete formwork in which the cantilevered floors were cast was shared with his friend Rufus Nims, who used it on his Adler House in Miami Beach that same year.⁵ This incident is indicative of an important aspect of the early modern architecture in Florida, in that Parker and Nims, whose work followed Wright and the International Style respectively, shared a modern agenda of building in the tropics that was more important than any formal style.

What sets Parker apart from his Florida contemporaries, even Rudolph, is the national recognition and extensive publicity he received for his designs starting in the 1950s, including several *Life* and *Look* magazine house profiles and, most notably, repeated publication in the leading home-owner magazine of the time, *House Beautiful*. When Parker's 1952 Royal Road House was chosen as the Pace Setter House of 1954 by *House Beautiful* magazine, the 143-page article began with a quote from Wright, one of his few positive comments on the work of a contemporary architect: "This Florida house aims for the highest goal to which architecture can aspire: organic architecture. Along this new but ancient way a home where the enlightened mind can flower, where people can develop their fullest potentials, is still a possibility."⁶ Like Wright, Parker was a close friend of the photographer, Ezra Stoller, and of the editor of *House Beautiful*, Elizabeth Gordon. At least partly as a result of these relationships, Parker had houses of his design selected as *House Beautiful* Pace Setter Houses in 1954, 1959, and 1965, and in *The House Beautiful Treasury of Contemporary American Homes*, published in 1958, six of the twenty-three houses not by Wright are by Parker, a total exceeded only by Wright himself, with nine.

What Parker shares with his Florida contemporaries is his engagement of the tropical environment. Parker, who was educated in Florida and did postgraduate work in Mexico City, was always acutely aware that great architecture has its roots anchored deeply in its regional context.⁷ In this, Parker's work is part of the living tradition of modern architecture—that is, modern architecture practiced as a way of designing and building that, from generation to generation and contemporary to contemporary, shares not a fixed style or set of forms but the same fundamental ordering principles. Primary among these for Parker would be minimizing energy, material, and damage to the environment while maximizing the richness of

the experiences of the inhabitants, the accommodation of a lifestyle appropriate to the tropics, and the engagement of each building with its natural environment and climate.

Before air-conditioning, uniformly flat site grading, and "landscaping" made all places and climates alike and separated us from our place in the natural world, architects had no choice but to engage their climate. This was an environment imperative, having nothing to do with our contemporary expectation of a "choice" of style for our buildings. In Parker's engagement of this tradition of ecologically responsive building, both the vernacular and the work of his predecessors became critical—not to be able to learn from form or style, but to learn methods of construction that would last and techniques for the appropriate engagement of climate. Parker's buildings were built largely before air-conditioning, and they take advantage of prevailing breezes and employ sun-shading, nestling into their sites, adjusting themselves to nature without in any way imitating it. This sense of economy, of gaining the maximum benefit for the enrichment of the inhabitants' daily rituals, over the lifetime of a building, from the smallest energy and material investment, has always been part of the best modern architecture—and an ethical imperative for Alfred Browning Parker. Following this modern tradition, the work illustrated here, like the best architecture around the world, is defined first and foremost by the quality of our experience of inhabiting it.

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LONDON RESIDENCE

Coral Gables, Florida ■ 1965 ■ Built project—extant

Perspective preliminary study, Courtesy of the A. B. Parker Collection, University of Florida Libraries.

The Kirk and Bea Landon residential commission singularly owed itself to Bea Landon's longtime dream of living in a home designed by Parker. (Her other dream was to own a Henry Moore sculpture, which she achieved as well.)²⁸ Shortly after marrying Kirk Landon, the owner of American Bankers Insurance Company of Florida, she retained Parker in late April 1965 to design their home on an oversized waterfront lot in the gated community of Gables Estates in Coral Gables. Bea was passionate about the arts, and the large brick home Parker designed was a refined and distinguished solution with spacious interiors and an understated courtyard with a fanciful pool, all complementing and accommodating their extensive collection of two- and three-dimensional contemporary abstract and pop artworks.





Above, pool and terrace. Note spiral staircase from pool to upper diving platform; left, Pool, terrace, and loggia beyond. © Bo Parker Photographer.





Landon residence.
Living area. Photo by
author.

The waterfront lot is an irregular one, located at the cul-de-sac terminating Casuarina Concourse, just down the street from the Parker-designed Magnuson residence. For privacy, Parker wrapped an assemblage of organized functional components, sheltered below a single encompassing hipped roof, around a pool and terrace. The separate component buildings include a garage with shop and boat storage, a small guest house, a pool building with a dressing room and sauna, and the primary residence. The primary residence has a skylit living area of exceptional size, 24 feet wide and more than 60 feet long, divided into east and west living rooms by a massive but whimsical brick fireplace chimney positioned on an angle and extending out through the exterior wall onto the pool terrace. The lower level also contains a dining area, kitchen with breakfast porch, large playroom with lounge, and two bedrooms with individual bathrooms and a smaller playroom between. A library loft and the master bedroom suite with east- and west-facing exterior decks are located on a second floor, above the kitchen and playroom.

Parker utilized brick as the predominant material for both the exterior and interior wall surfaces, with a tiled hipped roof.