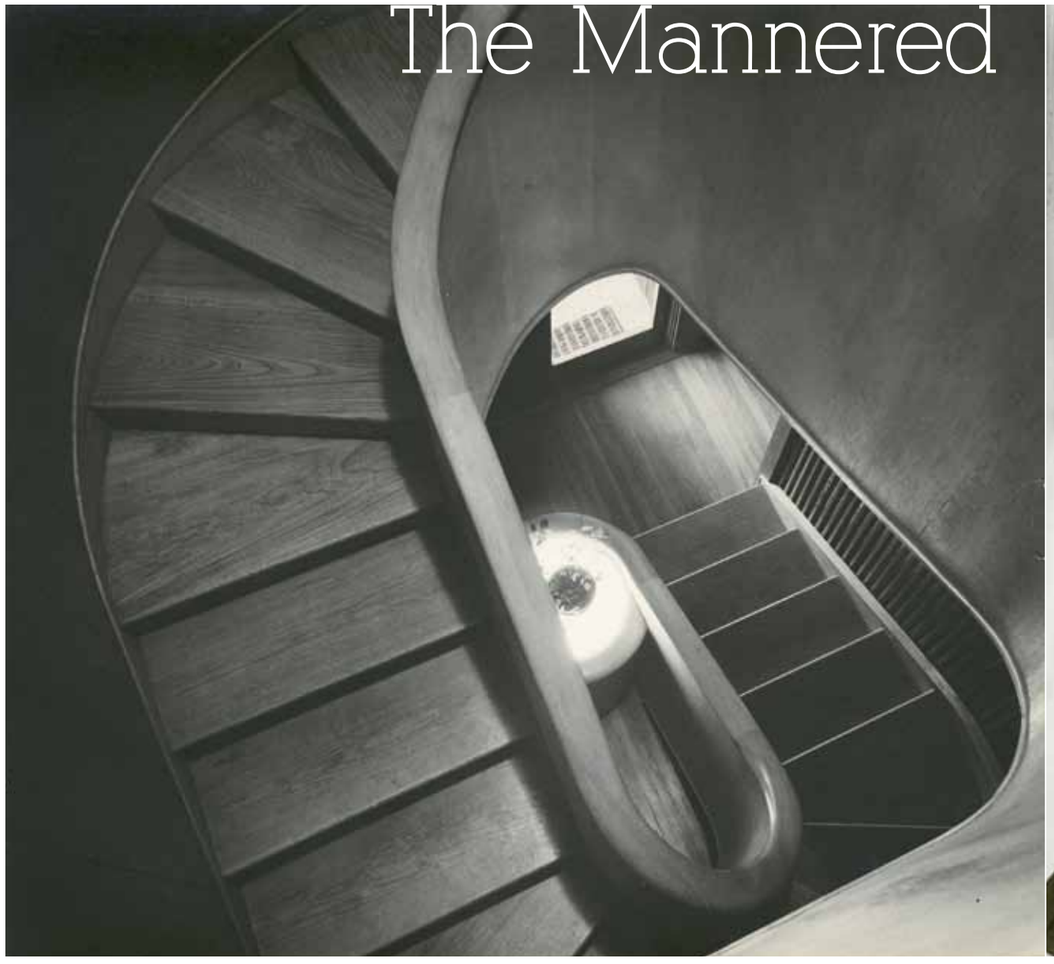
By J. Michael Welton

The Mannered Modernist

From the 1930s to the 1980s architect Harwell Harris sculpted site, light, form, and materials into homes that people embraced as they would a loved one



Harwell Hamilton Harris's career as an architect began with an epiphany.

Preceding pages and above: **Three 1941 photographs by Man Ray of Harwell Hamilton Harris's masterpiece, the Weston Havens residence in Berkeley, California. The images show the building's redwood spiral staircase; the three inverted triangular trusses (or gables) that support the flat roof, middle, and lower levels, and provide shade for the balconies; and the living room, with its built-in furnishings. This was the first and last time the surrealist ever photographed architecture.**

Built by Harris in 1939, the Byron Pumphrey house in Santa Monica, opposite page, top, is an example of California modernism. The long bands of wood siding along the balconies and fascia recall the craft style of Frank Lloyd Wright Usonian house and the work of the frm Greene and Greene.

In 1937, Harris completed a white stucco bungalow, opposite page, below, for famed publisher John Entenza. The curving carport hearkens to the Moderne movement, while the minimalism of the main volume of the house and details such as the ribbon window and sleek stair and railings suggest the influence of International Style architecture.

Born in Southern California in1903, in the mid-1920s he was enrolled as a student at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles when a friend suggested he might like to see Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House. Harris hiked alone up Olive Hill to take a look. "With racing pulse he saw life as form, union, plan, and architecture as a kind of crystallized play, regulating life as though it were music," Harris wrote of himself (oddly, in the third person) years later.

Thus hooked, he began to quest about the city, seeking out the many modernist constructions then rising. One building in particular—the Jardinette Apartments, with its strict yet elegant geometries—held special appeal. He asked for its architect's name, looked up his number in the phone book, and before long found himself standing before Richard Neutra, and with him Rudolph Schindler, at the house and studios the architects and their two families shared on Kings Road in West Hollywood.

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MICHAEL W. FOLONIS ARCHITECTS

Taken with Harris's enthusiasm, Neutra offered him a job, suggesting he could learn more from him than he could in architecture school, while taking technical courses at night. It was 1928. Harris accepted. From there, he would begin a long journey of assimilating and blending the sleek modernism of Neutra, the garden-edged rooms of Schindler, the unbridled naturalism of Wright, and, for good measure, the warmth of the California arts and crafts designs of Greene and Greene.

"The real key to Harris is that he made modern architecture into something that people could love," says Frank Harmon, who taught with him at North Carolina State University's School of Design in the 1980s. "People thought of modern as cold and austere, but he used the site, the climate, and the materials to make a modern architecture that people wanted to touch."

In the early 1930s Harris left Neutra and Schindler, and in 1935 built a home for himself and his wife on a lush hillside. It was tiny—less than five hundred square feet—a single room communing with a ravine covered in ferns and live oaks. A miniscule kitchen sat off to the side. Rush mats lay on the floor; redwood beams supported the ceiling. A garden hose served as outdoor shower.

Harris called it the Fellowship Park house. It was built with simple means, from salvaged materials, for less than a thousand dollars. And it was eloquent and unforgettable. "It was a shanty, but it was the most beautiful shanty I've ever seen," says Harmon. "We're talking Shangri-La."

In 1937 Harris received one of his signal commissions when John Entenza—the editor and publisher, from 1940, of the influential magazine *Arts and Architecture*, and the guiding hand of the postwar Case Study House program—asked Harris to design a house for him in Santa Monica. Harris delivered a modernist treasure: a white stucco bungalow that included a graceful curving porte cochere. Architect Michael Folonis, who not long ago completed a meticulous restoration of the house, says, "When

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While serving as dean of the University of Texas school of architecture, Harris was chosen in 1954 by House Beautiful to design a model "Pace Setter" house. Designed with the help of six students, the Craftsman-style building extended redwood eaves (shown above) and in interior courtyard (bottom). The house was displayed at the 1955 Texas State Fair, and later dismantled and moved to Dallas.

I first saw it, the place was uninhabitable. But under all the mess, you could see there was a gem waiting to emerge. Many poor changes had been made to the house, but Harris's original design intentions were so clear it was as if he was there, advising us what to do."

Two years later Harris began work on the structure for which he is best known: the Weston Havens house in Berkeley, California. Perched on a promontory overlooking San Francisco Bay, the house is an amazing feat of design—a stack of three inverted gables set on a plinth, sheathed in redwood inside and out. Man Ray was moved to photograph it. The American Institute of Architects would name it—along with Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater—one of the best buildings in the nation. Harris would describe the Havens house to *House Beautiful as* "an extension of the sky, the water, the hills...a sky house, more than an earth house."

Despite his lack of an academic degree, Harris was so admired that in 1952 he took over as dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Texas in Austin. He immediately took charge, recruiting a posse of modernists that would include some of the most influential educators in the nation—such as the British-born Colin Rowe, who went on to teach and write at Cornell; and John Hejduk, later dean of the Cooper Union. The group became known as the Texas Rangers because of their collective disdain for architectural orthodoxies. But big minds often come with big egos, and, sick of the backbiting among the faculty members, Harris left the school in 1955 and set up a practice in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Three years later he was selected to renovate the 1908 National Farmers' Bank of Owatonna, Minnesota, the first of Louis Sullivan's "jewel box" banks, and the victim of a lackluster 1940 remodeling. Harris restored the bank to its original understated grandeur. "It's a measure of the breadth of his genius— a demonstrated respect for the past and the shoulders he stood on," Harmon says .

Harris began teaching at the N. C. State School of Design in Raleigh in 1962. Almost immediately he purchased an inexpensive urban lot in a disheveled bohemian neighborhood near both the school and the city's seventy-two-acre Pullen Park. There he built his last home and office. Its design was a diagrammatic expression of his life and work—because the two were no longer to be divided. He interlocked a pair of L shapes—one of Schindler's favorite forms—to reflect the separate functions inside. Where they join, an open balcony attached to his studio overlooks an immense living space below, which in turn blossoms into a two-story screened porch.

At its main entrance, visitors face a modern

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Because it was sited on a noisy streetcorner, Harris designed the 1963 First Unitarian Church of Dallas, opposite page, with thick, windowless walls to block sound. Natural light came from apertures in the roof.

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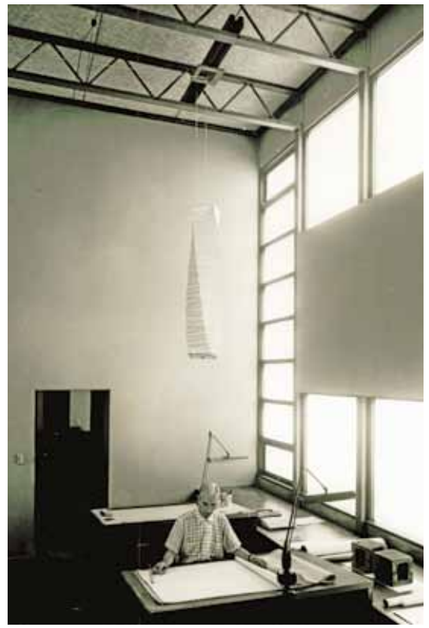

stucco facade with no ornament and no windows. The one seemingly decorative element is a freestanding streetlamp at the entry in the arts and crafts style, but it also cleverly disguises a plumbing vent pipe. It's a building positioned to take maximum advantage of its narrow site, while blocking less-than-optimal surrounding vistas. "He was interested in the light but not the views," says faculty member Roger Clark. "Harwell thought of this building as paradise," Harmon adds. "You cross over a bridge to get to it—almost every house he did had a bridge over plantings or a garden—and into paradise. He believed that architecture was about a better way of life that was balanced, just and beautiful."

A house, Harris, who died in 1990, once said, is a portrait of the person who lives there. At his home and office on Cox Avenue in Raleigh, he painted a picture of an architect who had learned his lessons well over a forty-year span. It's the expression of an architect seeking to live in harmony with all that surrounds him. It's a building that's lithe but muscular, small but expansive, brilliant but opaque—much like the man himself.

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Harris's house and studio on Cox Avenue in Raleigh, North Carolina, is known locally as "the Box on Cox," because of its unadorned and windowless streetside facades, as shown in images opposite page, far left and center, and this page, left. The house was divided into living and work volumes, much like the celebrated Charles and Ray Eames House in Pacific Palisades, California, and employs the same "X-trusses" as roof beams. The photo opposite page right shows the living space; the photo above shows Harris at work in his home office. The Arts & Crafts-style streetlight conceals the plumbing ventilation vent pipe.