The Meaning of Modernism

It’s that time of year again – the time when PBN focuses on all things modern architecture in Western New York. Always one of our most controversial areas of focus, our ModernWNY event allows our members to learn more about the modern era in Buffalo and beyond.

Modern architecture is about more than just aesthetics or style. Tied closely with urban renewal, practitioners and theorists of the modern age in architecture were idealists, often seeking to “fix” societal issues through interventions in the built environment. Most modernists were not simply experimenting with form for form’s sake, but were trying to sanitize the unsanitary, de-densify the over-crowded, and provide light and air and parks to those going without such necessities. Whether or not they were successful in their endeavors is still being debated today, but it is important to view the physical work they left behind through a lens of understanding what city residents were experiencing at the time, and the goals the modernists were trying to accomplish.

Western New York is an ideal place to study modernism. Partially because we have many high-style, pedigreed examples of modern architecture that put us (literally) on the map of must-visit areas for modernism aficionados. But also because some of our most celebrated modern sites exist cheek to jowl with other styles – both older and newer – allowing us to really see what those practitioners were seeing and reacting to at the time.

One such modern architect was the well-known Robert T. Coles, whose work paired architecture with efforts to improve the urban environment for those who lived in it. Our self-guided tour “A Modern Man: The Work of Robert T. Coles” highlights 22 Coles-designed sites in WNY, providing an excellent example of what modernists sought to accomplish.

We hope that you are able to join some of our ModernWNY events this year. We promise: whether you love the buildings or hate them, you will absolutely learn from them. And as we consider how we may move ahead into the next chapter of building in our communities, that’s really the most important thing.
Happy summer, friends!

Like many of you, the PBN staff has been working to stay cool in this unprecedentedly warm Western New York summer. While we will be somewhat protected from the worst of the impacts of a changing global climate, we are still feeling its effects and feeling great sympathy for those communities suffering the most. Rather than feeling despondent, however, we have doubled down on our work as one part of reducing the human contributions to global climate change.

Did you know that 40% of global natural resource extraction goes toward construction, and that demolition and construction account for about 40% of all carbon emissions in the world? The best choice for the planet is to re-use the buildings we’ve already got. The energy cost to build newer “energy-efficient” buildings rarely exceeds the energy use of their construction and only about a quarter of a building’s total carbon footprint comes from energy usage; the rest comes in the form of “up-front” carbon – that is, the construction of the building in the first place. Given the short expected lifespan of newer construction and the somewhat marginal benefits of even the most energy-efficient building operations, the greenest building is the one that is already built!

Your support is what helps us bring you all of the important work you will see summarized in these pages. I hope you will take some time to read the newsletter, participate in some events, and remind yourself that YOU are making a difference in Western New York and beyond.

Yours,

Jessie Fisher
Executive Director
After canceling the 2020 Preservation Awards, Preservation Buffalo Niagara was thrilled to see the return of our largest annual celebration. This year our awards were held virtually, produced by Get Fokus’d Productions, and featured two keynote speakers: Buffalo native and producer/director Susan Hunt and Jonathan Moody, president and CEO of the award-winning Columbus, Ohio-based architecture firm Moody Nolan.

Thank you to everyone who attended and to our sponsors—Buffalo Spree, Boston Valley Terra Cotta, Buffalove Development, Morris Masonry Restoration LLC, Preservation Studios, and Young + Wright Architectural—and to Stitch Buffalo, the Story Garage, and Woodhouse Day Spa for donating prizes.

JOIN US IN CONGRATULATING THE WINNERS OF THE 2021 PRESERVATION AWARDS!

616 Niagara Street

616 Niagara is a three-story, 33,700 sq. ft. historic adaptive reuse project that creatively combines four buildings, built between 1908 and 1911, into one contiguous project featuring ground-floor commercial space and seventeen residential units. This was accomplished with the addition of a one-story connecting atrium structure, several new openings in the existing load-bearing masonry walls, and new staircases and corridors. This project presented significant challenges with respect to floor heights, structural stability of the existing structures, and code compliance, which resulted in unique, dynamic spaces that blend modern amenities with historic charm and saved some of the last remaining Italianate style buildings from this era in downtown Niagara Falls.

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The Silos at Elk Street are a testament to creativity and devotion to remembering our past to build our future. This project involved converting the site of the former William A. Kreiner and Sons Malting Company buildings into office and residential space, along with space for a potential brewery tenant.

Built between 1894 and 1936, the buildings had been abandoned for more than 30 years when Young + Wright reclaimed them as the site of their firm. To make the buildings inhabitable, they repaired the brick walls, cleaned the concrete silos, replaced the roof, installed new entrances, and reinstalled windows in the existing masonry openings. While much of the graffiti was painted over, the firm kept some of the work of local artists. Much of the malting machinery was also kept (including one of the original steeping tanks, which was turned into a “think tank”), and five circular ceiling clouds with corresponding areas of gymnasium flooring were installed where the other tanks had been located. Rather than changing the buildings to suit a new office, according to Shawn Wright, “We are putting an architectural office in a museum dedicated to explaining the malting process.”

Prior to 2018, this century-old building – a slim, two-story, triple-brick shell – had experienced neglect and was deteriorating. Two large leaks in the roof had caused damage, windows were rotten, the rear brick wall was bulging due to years of water infiltration and freeze-thaw, and the ornamental millwork at the top of the front facade had blown off during a windstorm. The building was not fit for occupancy.

The planning and execution of the rehabilitation into residential and café space took place over three years. The design component of the project is open-ended and ongoing as change continues to occur in buildings – through weathering, repair, adaptation, and addition. In revitalizing the building for occupancy, design interventions concentrated on the basic ingredients of any good space: increased natural light and air circulation, a restrained interior aesthetic, and timeless, durable surfaces and finishes. New elements inserted into the building do not pretend to be old but are humble and respectful of the existing building’s stature and presence.
Western New York Land Conservancy

Preservation is about more than protecting individual buildings; it is also about protecting the special character of the places we love that are important to their communities. By providing permanent protection to land with significant conservation value, the Western New York Land Conservancy provides a critical function in our preservation field. Their work ensures a future in which natural areas, working farmlands, wildlife habitats, and scenic beauties are cherished and protected as part of the landscape and character of Western New York. Significant achievements include the Stella Niagara Preserve, Owens Falls Sanctuary, and their latest project, the Riverline, utilizing an abandoned part of Buffalo’s railroad history to create a new public space.

SACRA Construction Skills Training Program

For preservation to be successful, we must have craftspeople who are able to care for our historic resources. SACRA (Society for the Advancement of Construction Related Arts) is a comprehensive, 15-week career training program in carpentry and woodworking that provides skill-building, work readiness, and job placement services to unemployed and underemployed adults in Buffalo. SACRA’s mission is to provide hands-on, experiential, community-based learning in the building arts while creating inspiring, wonderful places. SACRA students work with tradespeople, artisans, artists, architects, apprentices, and others to design and build impactful projects that combine art, design, and construction, create wonder in the built environment, and empower people through creative action.

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Mitch Nowakowski
Representing several local historic districts, Council Member Mitch Nowakowski has shown tremendous leadership early in his career on the Buffalo Common Council as a staunch advocate for preservation. Tackling the issues both legislatively and with innovative solutions to persistent preservation problems, the representative for the Fillmore District has shown a willingness to bring stakeholders to the table to turn challenges into opportunities. His understanding of the ways that historic preservation has a positive impact on neighborhoods has led Council Member Nowakowski to roll up his sleeves to address the opportunities for preservation that exist in not only the Fillmore District, but across the region. He represents the next generation of legislators who will ensure our history is preserved as the best way to move us to a successful future.

Broderick Park Project
Buffalo Quarters Historical Society and Friends of Broderick Park have transformed Broderick Park into an International Freedom Memorial Park that utilizes the Niagara River to promote the history of the Underground Railroad in the Buffalo area, uncovering and sharing this site’s rich history and increasing international awareness of Buffalo’s role in the Underground Railroad. As the last stop on the Underground Railroad, thousands of enslaved Africans who had escaped human bondage crossed the Niagara River into Canada here in search of a better life. Thanks to the awardees’ efforts, Broderick Park is a jewel in the City of Buffalo’s park system, steeped in international, national, and local history. Their continuing efforts have resulted in the park being designated a National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Site, in addition to a wealth of physical and interpretive enhancements being added to the site. Future plans include an ambitious public art initiative that will continue to add beauty to Broderick Park through art that reflects the importance of the site with regards to the Underground Railroad and Black history in Buffalo.
Cats of Brutalism

Cats of Brutalism is directed by Emily Battaglia, Madelaine Ong, and Michaela Senay, three Master of Architecture students at the University at Buffalo. The Instagram account originally started off as part of a studio project focused on the past, present, and future of the Earl W. Brydges Public Library in Niagara Falls, NY, designed by American architect Paul Rudolph.

As a response to the Internet’s obsession with all things cat, the account aims to capture the intrigue of a cat-loving public in combination with a common architecture and design audience. The juxtaposition of brutalist buildings with super-scaled cats as a means of introducing warmth, softness, and whimsy to the often-perceived-as cold, hard, and severe forms of brutalism is an intentional pairing, absurd but also fitting – the rough textures, complex forms, and often compartmentalized and/or aggregate massing of brutalism offer the ideal post for scratching, climbing, hiding, and perching, as cats do. We applaud their leadership in this area and in bringing a fresh new perspective to the art of preservation.
OAK STREET BUILDING COLLAPSE
On July 2, 2021, downtown Buffalo saw another devastating building collapse at 324 North Oak Street. A contributing resource to the Genesee Gateway Certified Local Historic District, it was built in 1881 as the George Urban Mill. While the building had been underutilized for over 20 years by its previous owner, the property had been purchased by Legacy Development in 2020, and they had been working to stabilize and rehabilitate the landmark.

PRESERVE NEW YORK GRANT AwarDEES Announced
The Preservation League of New York State awarded three Western New York projects with 2021 Preserve New York grants. A signature grant program of the New York State Council on the Arts and the Preservation League of New York State, the Preserve New York program funds projects that identify, document, and preserve New York State’s cultural and historic buildings, structures, and landscapes through grants for historic structure reports (HSR), cultural landscape reports (CLR), and cultural resource surveys (CRS). 32 applicants in 25 New York State counties were awarded a total of almost $300,000 this round, including the City of Jamestown in Chautauqua County, who received $10,000 for a Cultural Resource Survey of the Park West neighborhood, and in Buffalo, the University Heights Collaborative received $9,120 for a Cultural Resource Survey of the University District and the Western New York Minority Media Professionals, Inc.

received $10,000 for a Building Condition Report of the Sattler Theatre/Buffalo Theatre at 512 Broadway. Congratulations to all the 2021 Preserve New York awardees.

BLUE-RIBBON PANEL REPORT
In July 2021 PBN released Preserving the Queen City: A Framework for Protecting Historic Buffalo, a report with recommendations for preventing demolitions in Buffalo as part of a larger endeavor to help identify, protect, and restore Buffalo’s historic architecture. The report was produced by a blue-ribbon panel formed in partnership with State Senator Sean M. Ryan, Niagara District Council Member David A. Rivera, and Fillmore District Council Member Mitch Nowakowski last year to outline a path towards creating a community preservation plan for the City of Buffalo. You can read the whole report by visiting https://bit.ly/PreservingtheQueenCity.

VOELKER’S LANES LANDMARK Nomination
At their July 8, 2021 meeting, the Buffalo Preservation Board recommended the landmarking of Voelker’s Lanes, 680–692 Amherst Street. Since c. 1886, Voelker’s has been a community landmark as a saloon, hotel, and now bowling alley. Now having received the recommendation of the Preservation Board, the nomination is on to a public hearing before the Common Council’s Legislation Committee.
PROGRESS CONTINUES ON THE EAST SIDE COMMERCIAL BUILDING STABILIZATION FUND

We continue to move forward with the East Side Commercial Building Stabilization Fund’s round-one awardees. With the pilot nature of this first round of this groundbreaking new program, we are “building the bike as we ride it”, but if all goes as planned, construction will start late this summer. With COVID-related labor and supply shortages, there may be delays in this timeline, but we feel optimistic that all first-round awardees will complete their projects by the end of fall. After an evaluation process on this first round and a review of our existing applications late this year, we then plan to reach out to applicants about the second round of funding in early 2022.

PARAMOUNT LODGE – 248 EAST UTICA

The Paramount Lodge, originally built as an Oddfellows Hall, has a long and storied history in its community, most especially hosting a who’s who of Buffalo’s prominent African American community leaders. This building was first identified as National Register Eligible in a Community Resource Survey sponsored by PBN in 2010 completed by Martin Wachadlo and Frank Kowsky. We are thrilled to announce that PBN has procured a grant from the Preservation League of NYS to help list the Lodge on the National Register, as well as to hire architect Barbara Campagna to perform an existing conditions survey of the building. These are critical steps to ensuring that this remains a viable part of the community for future generations.

ELMWOOD VILLAGE LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT

Members of the Elmwood Village community are trying to decide whether to add the protections of a Local Historic District to their existing National Register status. Alarmed by the recent uptick in demolitions of buildings listed on the National Register, community members approached PBN to provide technical assistance as they host a series of community meetings. Based upon feedback at those meetings, the community will decide whether and how to move forward with this potential landmarking. More information can be found at landmarkev.org.
Brutalism gets a bad rap out there. Yes, it’s “brutal”. Yes, it’s big honking piles of concrete. But, just like any other architectural style, Brutalism evolved as a distinct artistic movement with a unique and thought-out ethos.

The term “Brutalism” derives from the French phrase béton brut, meaning raw concrete. It was coined by British husband-and-wife architect duo Alison and Peter Smithson and further popularized by architecture critic Reyner Banham who referred to it as “New Brutalism”. The Smithsons were inspired by the work of famed architect Le Corbusier, notably his Cite Radieuse in Marseilles and the buildings of Chandigarh, India. With these buildings Le Corbusier replaced the smooth white surfaces emblematic of 1920s and 1930s architecture with expanses of raw concrete. What the Smithsons, and other early Brutalist style architects, aimed for was a reinvigoration of “street culture” that was either destroyed during WWII or was being removed as part of ambitious rebuilding campaigns in cities all across Europe.

The key movement in the emergence of Brutalism came in 1956 with the “This is Tomorrow” exhibit at London’s Whitechapel Art Gallery. Conceived by architect and writer Theo Crosby, the show was a collaborative exhibit with 38 participants forming 12 groups. Each group, comprised of artists, designers, and architects, worked toward producing one artwork around the theme of a “modern way of living”. The outcome transformed the Whitechapel Gallery into a vibrant interactive space of installations.

The defining feature of Brutalism is the use of raw concrete, which gives the building a visceral roughness. Brutalist buildings explore the sculptural potential of this material, either by utilizing dramatic angles or by using void-like window openings to form modular elements. By incorporating a sculptural form to the building, designers showed the emotional and expressive depths that concrete can hold. Another common characteristic is the concept of “streets in the sky”. Whether it was to navigate within a single building or travel between neighboring complexes, Brutalist buildings often have spacious “street decks” or corridors that encourage social interactions once common on actual streets.

Notable local examples of Brutalism include: The Buffalo News Building at 1 News Plaza in Buffalo; Earl W. Bridges Building/Niagara Falls Public Library at 1425 Main Street in Niagara Falls; Buffalo City Court Building at 50 Delaware Avenue, Buffalo; and the Shoreline Apartments at 262 Niagara Street, Buffalo.

Do you have a great example of Brutalism in your community? Share it to social media with the hashtag: #PBNbrutalism 🏙️

**BUFFALO NEWS BUILDING**

1 News Plaza, Buffalo  
1973; Edward Durell Stone

Sculptural form: In the Buffalo News Building it’s created by the void-like window openings and at the Niagara Falls Public Library by the large angled dormers and roof line.

**NIAGARA FALLS PUBLIC LIBRARY**

1425 Main Street, Niagara Falls  
1969-74; Paul Rudolph

“Street deck” style, outdoor walkways  
Rough expanses of raw concrete
PRESERVATION BUFFALO NIAGARA
SUMMER 2021

MODERN WNY
2021 EVENT LINEUP

DRIVE YOURSELF MODERN
2021
Self-Guided Tour
Ongoing
$25 PBN Members / $30 General Public

PBN’s Drive Yourself MODern is a 14-stop widespread self-guided driving tour which highlights some of the many fine examples of modern-era architecture throughout Western New York. From James H. Johnson and Tom Hamilton’s St. John the Baptist Church in Lockport to Pfohl, Roberts and Biggie’s City Court Building in Buffalo, experience a vast range of modern-era architectural styles.

Don’t hesitate. Get your travelogue and let PBN take the wheel.

A MODERN MAN: THE WORK OF ROBERT T. COLES
Self-Guided Tour
Ongoing
$25 PBN Members/ $30 General Public

Robert Traynham Coles is known for his focus on public buildings designed to serve their local communities. From the Frank E. Merriweather Jr. Library, modeled after an African village, to the Brutalist-style Utica metro rail station, discover the work of the master architect in this self-guided tour of 22 Coles-designed sites in WNY. During September, get your Robert T. Coles travelogue and experience the mark that this pioneering African American architect left on our region.

THE ABCS OF MODERNISM
Virtual Lecture
September 13 | 6PM – 8PM
$10 Suggested Donation

On September 13, join Christiana Limniatis for the ABC’s of Modernism and learn why “B is for Brutalism”. This virtual lecture will expand on the terminology, key people, and key places of modernism and leave you sure of why exactly:

A is for asymmetrical
C is for cantilevered projections
N is for New Formalism

DELWARE ACRES
In-Person Walking Tour
September 15 | 6PM – 8PM
$20 PBN Members / $25 General Public
$10 Delaware Acres Travelogue Add-On

Once touted by realtors for its property placements and moderate prices and considered to be the ideal location for suburban homes in the city, Delaware Acres (one of the original subdivision names for the neighborhood north of Delaware Park) is an area richly appreciated in Buffalo’s history. Join Preservation Buffalo Niagara on September 15 for this guided walking tour which will explore its beginning as a notable piece of Buffalo’s built landscape. AND, make sure to add-on a Delaware Acres Travelogue (2020) to take along with you. Please be informed that social distancing policies will be in effect.

MODERN NIAGARA FALLS
In-Person Walking Tour
September 18 | 11AM – 1PM
$20 PBN Members / $25 General Public

While the long historical heritage of Niagara Falls cannot be denied, Niagara Falls gained many examples of modern architecture during the city’s urban renewal efforts. On September 18, see some of these sites such as the Carborundum Office Complex and the former Native American Center for the Living Arts with your guide Christiana Limniatis, Preservation Buffalo Niagara’s Director of Preservation Services.

Please be informed that social distancing policies will be in effect.

We can hardly believe it, but PBN is preparing to celebrate the modern architecture, design, art, and culture of the Western New York region for its third year. This year, from September 13 to September 18, ModernWNY will strive to celebrate and highlight the evolution of modernism in the area via two self-guided tours, two in-person tours, and one virtual lecture.

Check out our lineup below!