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Modern Civics

New Canaan rallied to preserve a Gores pool house, but can it save its stock of midcentury houses?

By Belinda Lanks
Posted July 17, 2006

In 1951, three years after parting professional company with Philip Johnson (with whom he worked on the Glass House), Landis Gores was struck by polio. That alone could account for his low profile among the Harvard Five. "People didn't want someone on-site in a wheelchair," says Pamela Gores, his widow and contractor on all of his projects. "It made them nervous." While his Modernist cohorts circled the globe amassing international acclaim, Gores did the vast majority of his work on the architectural outskirts—including a Connecticut pool house that, thanks to the efforts of the New Canaan Historical Society, recently escaped demolition.

The pavilion—built in 1959 for a prominent society couple, Jack and Jane Irwin—attracted the attention of the Historical Society last year, after the Irwin heirs sold the estate to the town with the stipulation that it be used as a public park. "I heard the town was planning to demolish the building and felt there should be some way to preserve it," says William Earls, author of *The Harvard Five in New Canaan* and a member of Friends of the Gores Pavilion, a committee of the Historical Society. "My input was not well received at the time, but eventually a study was made by an independent group and charrettes were held." The resulting park plan called for keeping the pool house.

Now, Friends of the Gores Pavilion hopes to raise \$150,000 to convert the pool house into a museum honoring New Canaan's Modern architectural heritage. The great room, with its monolithic dove gray fireplace, would be kept as a period space and used as a meeting place by small groups; the flanking wings (formerly changing rooms) would be intimate galleries. The museum designation is fitting because the pool house is a monument to the New Canaan movement's unique blend of Prairie and International architectural styles. "With its low-slung hip roof and massive chimney, it appears to be purely Prairie," Earls says. "But upon inspection, the details—especially of the windows and slender columns—are truly International."

The town council, however, may have different ideas for the space. "They didn't say it directly," says Gores's grandson, Gabe Gilligan, "but I kind of inferred from their discussion that they want to use it as a museum from April to October and to store their snowblowers in the winter." Still, at least for the time being, the pavilion has dodged the wrecking ball. Other Modernist homes won't be so fortunate, according to Janet Lindstrom, the Historical Society's executive director. In fact Gores's own semi-subterranean House for All Seasons, designed for energy efficiency, was recently purchased by a developer who plans to replace it with another—no doubt larger—structure. "That one is definitely going down," she says.

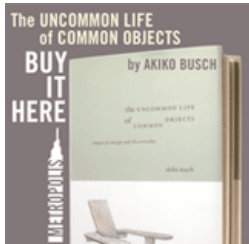
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Pamela Gores outside the New Canaan home her husband designed for them. The house is now on the National Register of Historic Places.
Photo: Evelyn Dilworth



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