

A Celebrated Architect's House Needs Rescuing

Marcel Breuer's summer home in Wellfleet, Mass., a time capsule of architectural history hidden in the wilderness, has fallen into disrepair.

Aug. 22, 2023, 2:58 p.m. ET



A side view of the summer house that the Modernist architect Marcel Breuer built in Wellfleet, Mass., with the cantilevered porch where family and friends would spend most of their time. Steven Smith for The New York Times

By Helen Stoilas

Helen Stoilas reported from Wellfleet, Mass.

Deep in the woods of Wellfleet, on Cape Cod, down winding and rutted dirt roads, a summer home built in 1949 by the Modernist architect Marcel Breuer sits perched on stilts. Its cantilevered porch, where friends and family would spend much of their time, once had a clear view across three connected kettle ponds, but saplings that dotted the hillside today tower above the house, blocking sightlines.

The four-bedroom structure, now owned by the architect's son, Tamas Breuer, is considered the most significant Modernist house on the Cape and was one of the first completed examples of Breuer's "Long House" design, a simple construction that could be assembled using local materials. It has been left unchanged for decades, a time capsule of architectural history hidden in the wilderness.

But the damp New England weather has taken its toll on the cabinlike building, especially on the north side, where moss and lichen have rotted some of the white cedar cladding and porch rails. A leak in the roof has damaged the birch plywood ceilings in the main living room. And Tamas, who is 80 and likes his privacy — he declined to be interviewed but was welcoming during a tour of the house last week — spends just a month here each year and has wanted to sell the property.



Breuer added a studio space to the house in the 1960s. The collage over the fireplace is by the artist Marty Hall, a friend of Connie Breuer's and the wife of the architect Jack Hall, who built other Modernist homes nearby in Wellfleet. Steven Smith for The New York Times



Breuer's Long Chair, which he designed in London in 1936. Steven Smith for The New York Times



The Wassily chair and a table that Breuer made many versions of using concrete blocks. Here, he added a rough slate top. Steven Smith for The New York Times

The Cape Cod Modern House Trust is in contract to buy the house, and is looking to raise \$1.4 million to preserve the building and its contents, including an art collection with works by friends of Breuer's, like Alexander Calder, Paul Klee, Saul Steinberg and Josef Albers. "In a year, if we can't raise the money, the house could be on the market and it could be demolished," said Peter McMahon, an architect and the founding director of the trust, which documents and restores Modernist properties on the Outer Cape. Although most of the art and books have been removed from the house for cataloging and conservation, many personal items remain, like a woman's yellow robe and handbags hanging on a bedroom closet door, a vintage tabletop TV set with antenna and an upright piano that Breuer's wife, Connie (Constance Crocker Leighton), would play at parties, and that Tamas keeps in tune.



Peter McMahon, an architect and the founding director of the Cape Cod Modern House Trust, on the porch of the Long House in Wellfleet. Steven Smith for The New York Times

The house was built on land Breuer bought with the aim of creating an artistic community, and he soon tempted other Bauhaus friends to join him on the Cape, including the painter and designer Gyorgy Kepes, for whom he built an identical home on Long Pond. The architect Serge Chermayeff lived across the road, where Breuer's mentor Walter Gropius would stay, while the landscape architect Charles Jencks had a home and a studio nearby.

"Breuer wanted to have an intellectual enclave with those who shared his aesthetic points of view," said James Crump, who directed the 2021 documentary "Breuer's Bohemia," interviewing many of the group's surviving family members and friends. They tell of the summers spent in Wellfleet, canoeing across the ponds, sharing meals and socializing at each other's homes, swimming in the adjacent Atlantic waters — often naked.



A leak in the roof has caused some damage to the birch plywood ceiling in the living room. The vintage lamp was designed by the brothers Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Steven Smith for The New York Times

The tradition of spending carefree summers enjoying nature is “a transposition of something that was part of the artistic and lifestyle culture of the Bauhaus,” said Barry Bergdoll, a Breuer expert who teaches art and architectural history at Columbia University.

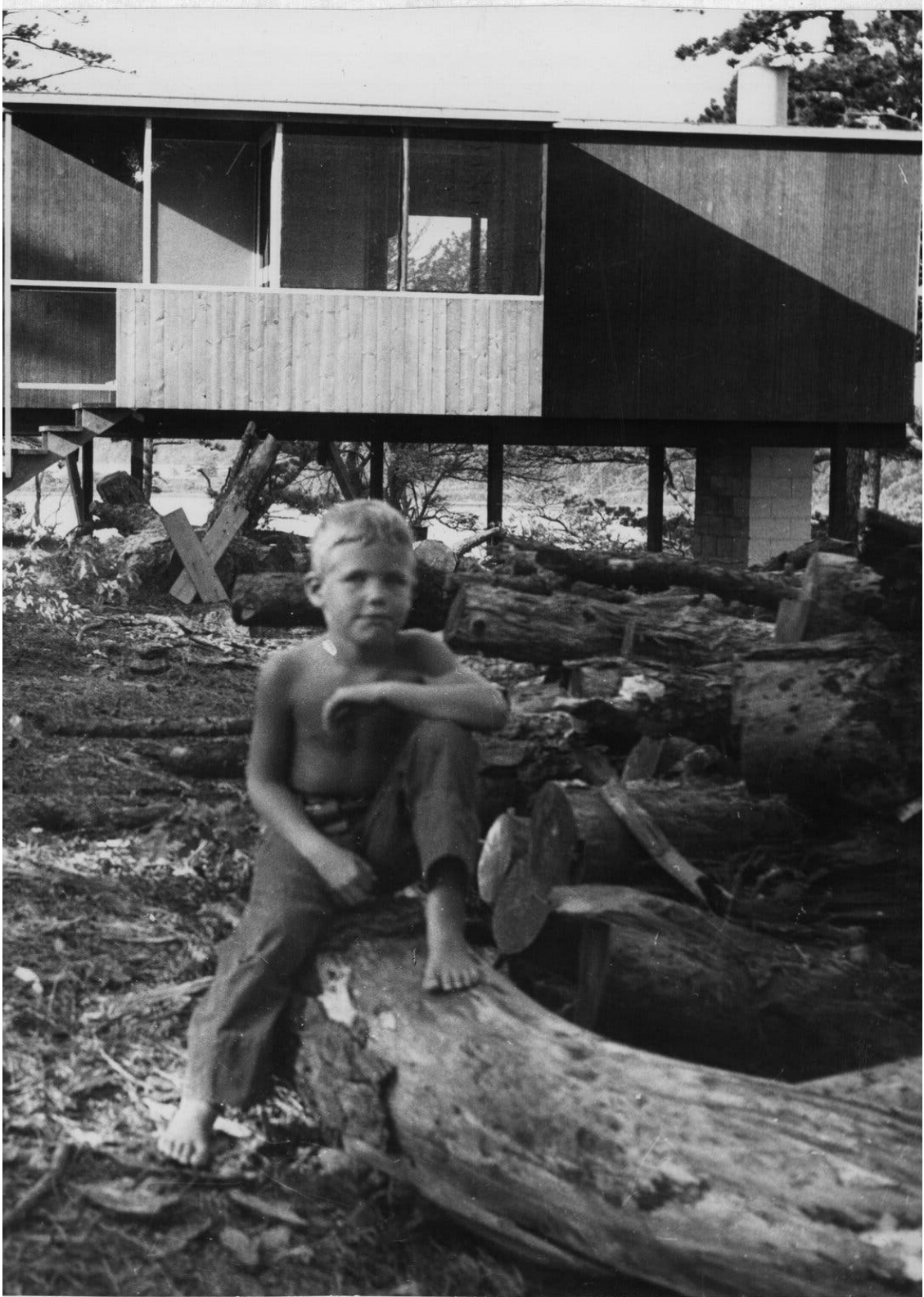
Marta Kuzma, a curator and a former dean of the Yale School of Art, who visited the Breuer house in July, described finding a spirit of experimentalism in every room, from furniture built — and endlessly rearranged — by Breuer using cinder blocks to a necklace made from a found circuit chip. “That sense of whimsy you don’t usually get when you are looking at the Modernist period,” Kuzma said. “On Cape Cod, they were able to just have fun.”



Marcel Breuer outside the Wellfleet house in 1950. He completed his original Long House design for a simple two-bedroom house in 1949, and added a studio and a small apartment with a darkroom for Tamas in the 1960s. Walter Sanders/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Shutterstock



Marcel (Lajko to his friends) and Connie Breuer on the Wellfleet house's entry deck circa 1970. Tamas Breuer



Tamas Breuer in front of the Long House. Circa 1953 — age 10.via Breuer Family



Tamas Breuer, now 80, lives in the Wellfleet house for part of the year. He sits on the cantilevered porch overlooking the kettle ponds. Steven Smith for The New York Times

Breuer's house in Wellfleet sits on a hill overlooking 4.2 acres of undeveloped waterfront, and the town assessor has valued the land alone as worth \$1.2 million. "It's on a huge piece of property," Brian O'Malley, the delegate for Provincetown, said during the assembly meeting. "If it's sold, the impact of development is going to drastically change that entire part of Wellfleet [and] Truro ponds and woods. It would be a great, great loss to the Outer Cape, beyond the house itself."

The surrounding forest is overgrown, and there will need to be some work done to make the site accessible, leveling the driveway, and removing dead pine trees that could fall on the house. But the landscape will most likely be left wild, drawing on Bauhaus ideals of finding inspiration from nature. Henry David Thoreau, after all, stayed in a Wellfleet oysterman's house across Williams Pond in 1850, during his travels through Cape Cod. And the Breuer property's southern border is on the headwaters of the Herring River, which is currently the focus of a \$60 million environmental restoration project led by the National Park Service to return tidal flow and natural salt marshes to the area, lost over the decades because of rising sea levels.



Most of the art and books have been removed from the house for cataloging and conservation, but many personal items remain, including art made by the Breuer's friends. Steven Smith for The New York Times

The land and the historical building are not the only things the trust will be acquiring, since the house contains Breuer's personal art collection and more than 200 books on architecture and design, many of them inscribed to him. An atlas by the Bauhaus graphic designer Herbert Bayer, for example, includes a note that reads, in German: "For Lajko and Connie Breuer, in old friendship," using Breuer's nickname among friends.

"A lot of the art was exchanged when [the family] were all still there," McMahon said, and much of it has been untouched since then. "An Albers woodblock was stuck in an envelope and mailed to [Breuer] — and it was still in the envelope."

Breuer added a studio and a small apartment with a darkroom to the house in the 1960s, to encourage Tamas's interest in photography. "There's hundreds and hundreds of rolls of film," McMahon said, documenting the home from the 1960s to the '80s, as well as everyone who visited. Tamas is helping to put names to the faces that appear on large contact sheets printed from the scanned negatives. "It's like somebody was making a documentary film for 30 years, with these older Bauhaus people visiting and all the local luminaries," McMahon said, "the parties, and bonfires and openings."

If the house were sold on the open market, not only could the architecture be lost and the art scattered through a dealer or auction house, but the new owner could decide to scrap much of this documentation. "It would really be a shame," McMahon said. "It would disappear."