



SELLING MODERNISM

THREE BROKERS' PERSPECTIVES

by Martin Moeller

Germany's famed Bauhaus, the school that became virtually synonymous with modern design in the 1920s and early '30s, was established with the goal of bringing together craftspeople, fine artists, and industrialists to create objects that were beautiful, functional, and widely available. Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius unabashedly argued that good design was a *commodity* with demonstrable value—at the outset, in fact, he envisioned selling objects made by Bauhaus “apprentices” in order to raise revenue for the school. Nevertheless, during the school's existence, Bauhaus products—especially works of architecture—were generally regarded as exceptions rather than norms, accessible to wealthy elites rather than the masses.

After World War II, however, modernism quickly became predominant in both the corporate and residential realms. In the United States, in particular, where new technologies, growing affluence, and suburbanization led to dramatic changes in domestic life, clean-lined, open-plan houses became increasingly popular. Yet modernism never firmly took hold in America, and to this day, most homeowners in this country continue to show a strong preference for houses and apartments in “traditional” architectural styles.

Given this context, the marketplace for modern houses and apartments has remained a relatively small subset of the American real estate industry. Even so, there are many homeowners who eagerly seek modern living environments. Recently, *Blueprints* invited three brokers who specialize in modernist properties to discuss the actual and perceived economic value of modern design in the hard-nosed world of real estate.

Martin Moeller: How did each of you come to be in the business of selling modern houses?

Renee Adelman: I've always been a big fan of modern design and I love selling real estate. Luckily I live in an area that is extremely fertile with modern—especially mid-century—homes. Modern architecture is big in Marin County and San Francisco, I think mainly because of the views—there tend to be lots of windows in modern houses.

Vikas Wadhwa: My interest in real estate was piqued around 2000 with the Internet boom and all the modern design blogs on the web, and through *Dwell* magazine. In 2004-05, I was looking for a home for myself in Chicago and had a really tough time finding something unique and modern until I came across a unit in a Mies van der Rohe-designed high-rise that I completely fell in love with. It had been very gracefully renovated by Gary Lee Partners. At that point, I realized that there must be people out there like me looking for good, unique design, but it's hard to find.

Brian Linder: Having become a general contractor and a licensed architect, for me, becoming a real estate broker was a logical extension of my vision of the architect as master builder. This wasn't so much a career change as an extension of my desire to be in charge of the whole process.

I have often thought that architects have become almost like graphic designers—they are not out on the job site, and sometimes they don't really understand the building process. Similarly, builders and contractors often don't understand design; and neither of [them] really controls the financial process. So I got my broker's license in 1999 and teamed up with a firm that had been marketing architecture as art in a real estate context for 30 years, and later went out on my own. As I tell people now, I'm practicing architecture by selling it.

Moeller: What are some interesting properties with which you have been involved?



Linder: We frequently discover things in the Multiple Listing Service that are jewels, but are being described as having "motivated sellers," or saying "just make an offer," but when you look at it, you say, "Wait, that's architecture!" Sometimes you find out that it's got a real-name architect associated with it. We're always discovering [cases in which] people just don't know what they have. On the sales side, when we market a property, we emphasize the extra value of good design and how we will promote it to the right people. I call it "the 2%"—that's the percentage of buyers who really understand what architecture is.

Wadhwa: The interesting thing about Chicago is that in downtown, we have a lot of high-rises built in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. In some of these high-rises people have done fabulous renovations that are not what you'd expect from the exterior of the building. In that respect, Chicago has spectacular properties that you wouldn't know about just from walking by... I love taking clients to see these completely surprising places.

above: The John DeKeyser "Double Residence," in Hollywood, was designed by the prominent architect R.M. Schindler and completed in 1935. It was listed and sold by Brian Linder, AIA.
Courtesy Marin Modern Real Estate.

opposite: The Miller Hull Partnership of Seattle designed 156 West Superior, which exemplifies the new breed of urban, multi-family residential buildings completed recently in Chicago.
Photo by Nic Lehoux.



left: This house in the Mar Vista area of Los Angeles was designed by Gregory Ain and is part of an enclave of more than 50 modernist houses built in the late 1940s. It was listed and sold by Brian Linder, AIA.
Courtesy Marin Modern Real Estate.



above: This 1930s warehouse in Los Angeles was converted to a live/work property and sold by Brian Linder, AIA.
Photo © 2007 Brian Thomas Jones.com.

below: Mid-century modern house in Marin County, California.
Courtesy Marin Modern Real Estate.

Adelmann: I recently had clients who were the founder of the Art Deco society and his wife. They had tried to sell their house in Mill Valley at the peak of the market, and had not had any luck, so he contacted me. The house was 100% Art Deco—all the fixtures were expensive, vintage pieces. But he said the agent he'd had before just wasn't getting it right. Everyone was walking through the house thinking of what they wanted to redo! So then I listed it and marketed it to the appropriate crowd, working with the mailing list from the Art Deco society plus my own list. We held an open house and got an offer on the first day for way above asking price. The person who bought it ended up changing nothing about the house, and that's exactly the sort of person we hoped would buy it.

A lot of my clients have carefully preserved their homes—like original houses by [mid-century modernist home-builder Joseph] Eichler—and when they sell, they don't want to sell to someone who is going to undo all that hard work.

Moeller: What advice would you give to architects who are eager to create what one might call "marketable modernism"?

Adelmann: I know a lot of architects create homes that are very specifically designed for their clients but not necessarily with an eye toward future owners. A lot of houses are built for couples or single people, and they don't really reflect the demands of families. Architects could take some cues from mid-century modern houses, many of which were very friendly to entertaining and family living.

Wadhwa: What we are starting to see more in Chicago is architects focusing on creating a better indoor-outdoor relationship, even in multifamily housing. There are projects now where you see the inner space flowing out onto the deck with the same type of materials, creating one cohesive living area. In Chicago we get pretty rough winters, but when the weather gets nice, people do enjoy outdoor space and it's great to see it now becoming an extension of the indoor space.

Linder: When people walk into a home and there is only concrete, glass, or steel, their reaction is often, "I could never live here—this is too much like a museum." But if the environment is softened with wood, cork, or other natural materials it can make it much more [appealing].

Another important thing is to establish a connection to the site and to the outdoors. I think that among the current generation of modernists, there is a real emphasis on the sculptural form of the building first, at the expense of any connection to lifestyles or people. I was once the superintendent on site for a project in Bel Air designed by Hugh Newell Jacobsen for the son of the founder of *Architectural Digest*. It was a magnificent house with lots of French limestone and doors that were original works of art. I asked Jacobsen at one point: "You have used lots of historical references, yet the house is clearly modern. How would you describe the style of this house?" His response was wonderful. He said, "Style—what a vulgar word. My homes are about people and entertaining and how they live."

Moeller: What special challenges do you face in marketing modern houses and apartments compared to their traditional counterparts?

Adelmann: The main challenge is trying to hunt down the right buyer. If I'm selling a 100% original home, it's very important for me to find someone who will respect the integrity of the home. I hate it when I have an open house and people walk through and say, "Oh my gosh, this has to be totally remodeled." Luckily, no one who has bought a home of architectural integrity through me has gone on to change much about the house.

Linder: I feel like I'm on a bit of a personal mission. On our web site, we have a photo gallery devoted to architects' work that has nothing to do with the commercial element of our business. It's just that we want to impact our world in such a way that we nudge that percentage [of people who really understand architecture] forward from 2% to 3%. If, in my lifetime, I could influence the built environment by just one percentage point, I'd be thrilled.





I also want architects to understand that their work product has value and that translates to money for people who own their homes. I want architects to have the confidence to say [to clients], "Yes, this may cost more, but your home is going to be worth more when you sell it because it was well designed."

Wadhwa: In terms of challenges, when dealing with modern, unique, or just different properties, it's not always easy to find comparable properties to assess the value. It's difficult to tell your seller, "This is the value of your residence, and we should market it at this price," without having a large amount of specific data behind your assessment of the property's value. It's more of an art than a science.

Linder: That's true, but I am encouraged by how that situation is changing. I now have several architectural appraisers who, though they charge a higher-than-normal fee, are able to compare properties outside of the normal sphere. They can point to other Richard Neutra houses that have sold, for instance, or they can compare similar architectural types in a given area and make a broader assessment of value. We are also seeing that banks are more responsive to the idea that good design carries a price premium.

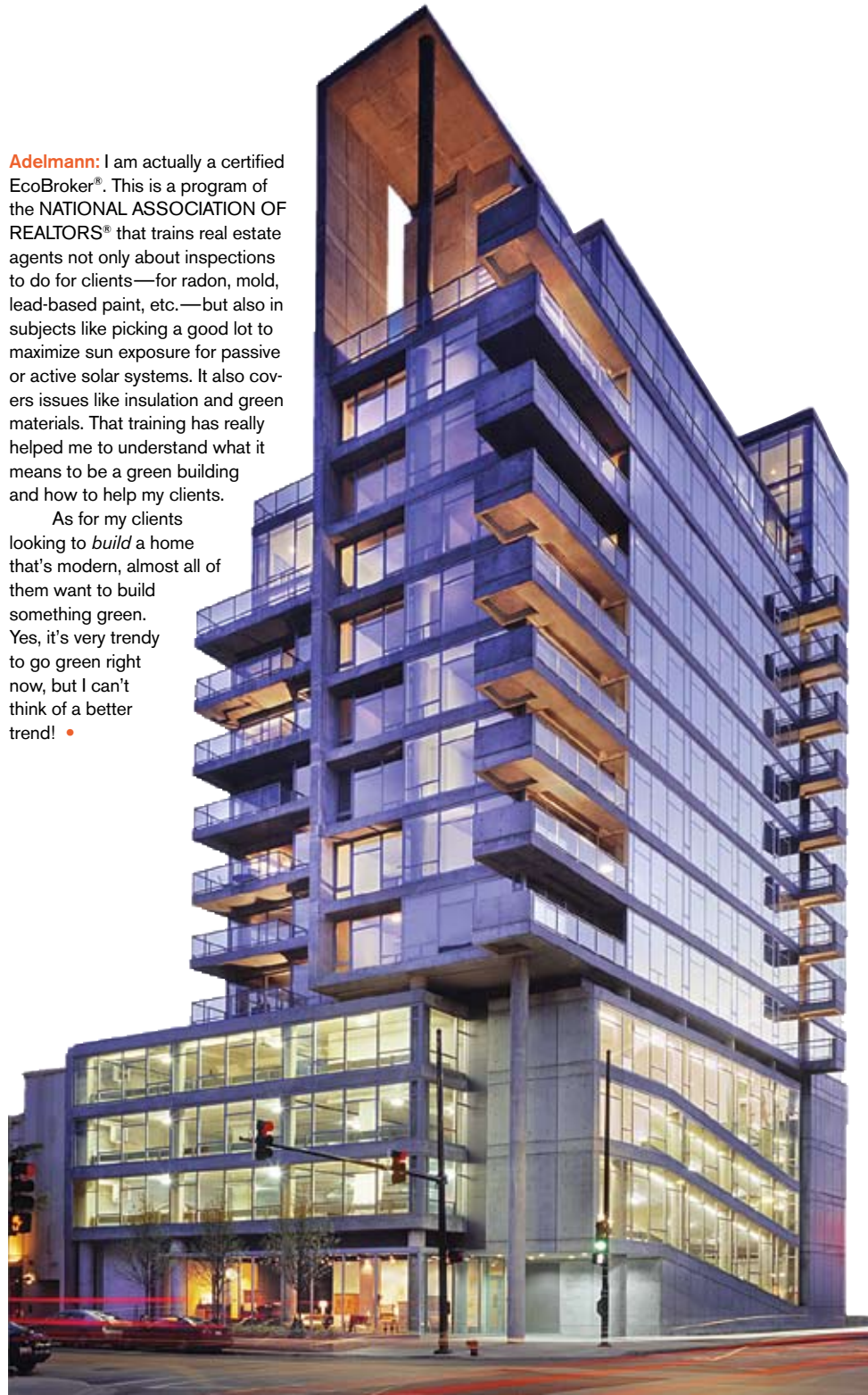
Moeller: Is there a growing interest in green design among your clients?

Linder: It used to be that green design was limited to the Birkenstock-wearing, hippie crowd. There was no marriage between good design and green design. Now we are seeing a number of young architects interested in bringing those two things together. On the other hand, I am seeing a lot of hype surrounding green design—touting a green element because of marketing appeal, not necessarily because it really has anything to do with sustainability.

Wadhwa: I agree with Brian. There are some projects that are marketing themselves as green projects, but when you look a little bit closer you start to realize it's just a marketing ploy. That being said, the City of Chicago, in some cases, is now requiring developers to use green technology and other green elements. Developers haven't embraced it fully on the residential side, because being green is more expensive up front, but everyone is going to have to learn to address this.

Adelmann: I am actually a certified EcoBroker®. This is a program of the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® that trains real estate agents not only about inspections to do for clients—for radon, mold, lead-based paint, etc.—but also in subjects like picking a good lot to maximize sun exposure for passive or active solar systems. It also covers issues like insulation and green materials. That training has really helped me to understand what it means to be a green building and how to help my clients.

As for my clients looking to *build* a home that's modern, almost all of them want to build something green. Yes, it's very trendy to go green right now, but I can't think of a better trend! •



Renee Adelmann is co-founder of Marin Modern Real Estate, a brokerage specializing in modern houses and apartments in Marin County and San Francisco. A California native, she spent time as a young adult in Finland, where she developed a love of modernism.

Brian Linder, AIA, is a licensed architect, contractor, and Realtor whose real estate practice, The Value of Architecture (TVOA), operates out of the Beverly Hills office of Keller Williams Realty. TVOA has affiliates in cities across the country.

Vikas (Vik) Wadhwa is the founder of the realty agency Modern Chicago Homes. He holds an undergraduate degree in economics, and worked as an investment banker with Goldman Sachs and Lehman Brothers before going into real estate.

above: **The Contemporaine**, a residential building in Chicago by Perkins + Will. Photo by James / Stein Kamp Photography.

above left: **Interior of an Art Deco house** in San Francisco. Courtesy Marin Modern Real Estate.