

Wallace K. Harrison (1895-1981)

Modernist Architect

Wallace K. Harrison is considered one of the great American architects of the twentieth century. Early in his career, he built a summer house in Huntington, where he did a significant amount of his design work.

Born in Worchester, Massachusetts, Harrison moved to New York in 1916 and secured an apprenticeship with McKim, Mead & White, the leading architectural firm of the day. After serving in the navy in World War I, Harrison attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He returned to New York in 1923 and in 1927 joined the architectural firm of Helme & Corbett. The firm later became known as Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray and in that incarnation participated in the design of Rockefeller Center.

Rockefeller Center, considered among the best urban mixed-use developments in the country, was the first of many large public projects for Harrison. His later commissions include the Trylon and Perisphere at the 1939 World's Fair, LaGuardia Airport, the United Nations, Lincoln Center and the Nelson Rockefeller Empire State Plaza in Albany.

In 1956, *Time* magazine rated Harrison "equal to Frank Lloyd Wright, LeCorbusier and other modern masters." (*American National Biography*, ed. John A. Garraty & Mark C. Carnes, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, vol. 10, p.223). Nelson Rockefeller considered him "the greatest architect in the twentieth century." ("Everything Everybody Ever Wanted" by William Kennedy in *The Atlantic*, May 1983 vol. 251, p 77). In 1967, he was awarded the Gold Medal by the American Institute of Architects.

In 1931 Harrison purchased 11 acres of land in West Hills to build a summer retreat in the new International style of architecture. At first, he purchased and moved to the site a house known as the Aluminaire House, which was a prefabricated house created for an architectural exhibition in New York City. In order to accommodate his growing family, Harrison built an extension onto the Aluminaire House as "an exercise in how to fit circles together." The extension consisted of a circular living room, 32 feet in diameter with a 16 foot high ceiling. Over the years the house continued to grow and in 1940, the Aluminaire House was moved to another part of the property. The Aluminaire House was eventually disassembled and donated to the New York Institute of Technology in Central Islip.

Harrison would bring his work – including draftsman – out to Huntington. To provide a suitable workspace, he converted a potato barn on the property into a small model shop. In 1950, he added the 42-foot diameter round studio building. That building has recently been demolished.

The Harrison Estate, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, represents the leading edge of the International style, which first appeared in Europe in the 1920s. Introduction of the style to the United States preceded Harrison's house by only a few years: Richard Neutra designed the Lovell House in Los Angeles in 1928. Harrison's use of circles – in the living room, dining room, studio, pool and even in concrete paving stones in the walkways – foreshadowed the use of this form in later Modern architecture.

The Harrison Estate was a laboratory for the ideas Harrison expressed in his architecture, including the United Nations building, among others¹. It was also a social and intellectual gathering ground for key figures of the 20th century throughout the 1930s until the late 1960s. Besides Nelson Rockefeller, other luminaries including Robert Moses, LeCorbusier, Chagall and Leger were frequent visitors and long staying houseguests². For instance, Leger, considered one of the greatest artists of the 20th Century, spent most of the World War II years in residence at the Harrison property where he painted a large mural in the main house living room and at the bottom of the circular swimming pool.

The Harrison Estate provides a fascinating case study in how European Modernism came into the United States through Long Island as a primary gateway. The style eventually took off as a style for corporate buildings, the new suburbia and its houses, hospitals and schools among other building types.

*For more information contact the **Huntington Historical Society**, 209 Main Street, Huntington, NY 11743
631-427-7045; FAX: 631-427-7056*



Cover of Time magazine, Sept. 22, 1952

¹ See Newhouse, Victoria, *Wallace K. Harrison, Architect*, Rizzoli, 1989

² This information based on Victoria Newhouse's book, *ibid.*, and from first person interviews by Caroline Zaleski with Iris Leski, Kina Leski, Virginia Dillilo, Antonia Dillilo and Margot Glasier Collins.