

HISTORIC RESOURCES

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Overview

Preservation of historic or significant buildings and sites is an important way for New Canaan to provide a sense of identity and stability, preserve community character, and enhance the Town's historical heritage.

New Canaan is a unique community in terms of historic preservation because:

- it established the second local historic district in Connecticut (after Litchfield), and
- it is the home for over 80 "Modern" houses built by world-famous architects between 1948 and 1968.

New Canaan is unique for the diversity of historic resources that it contains ...

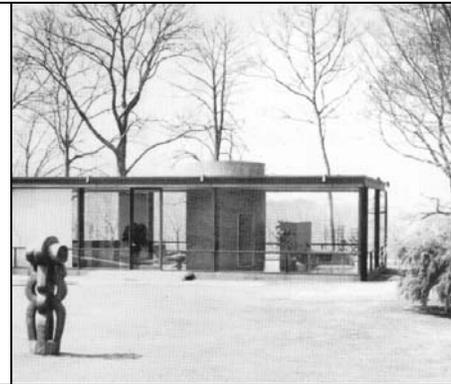
Historic Building



Historic Sign



Historic "Modern" House



Historic Resources

Historic resources were identified from:

- the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP),
- the State Register of Historic Places (SRHP), and
- the New Canaan Historical Society.

Philip Johnson’s “Glass House” has also been designated a National Historic Landmark.

More information on individual resources can be obtained at the New Canaan Historical Society.

Acronyms

NRHP	National Register of Historic Places
SRHP	State Register of Historic Places
NHL	National Historic Landmark
LHD	Local Historic District

Maintain Identification / Recognition Programs

Identifying and recognizing historic properties is the first step to preserving them. The foldout map on the facing page identifies the location of recognized historic resources in New Canaan.

Districts		NHL	NRHP	SRHP	LHD
New Canaan Center	Park St. / Oenoke Ave. (20 +/- properties)				
Sites					
Philip Johnson’s “Glass House”	Ponus Ridge Road				
Hanford-Davenport House	353 Oenoke Ridge				
Merritt Parkway	Route 15				
John Rogers Studio	33 Oenoke Ridge				
Residence	192 Cross Ridge Road				
Hanford-Silliman House	13 Oenoke Ridge				
Comstock-Benson House	46 Main Street				
Parsonage	1 Park Street				
Maples Inn	179 Oenoke Ridge				
Sellecks Corner Church	Barnegat Road				
Tirrana (Frank Lloyd Wright)	432 Frogtown Road				
Little Red Schoolhouse	Carter Street				
Ponus Memorial Tomb	Ponus Ridge @ Davenport				
Nathan Seeley House	Old Stamford Road				
Residence	63 Park Street				
Residence	Silvermine Road				
Residence	Carter Street				
Residence	Carter Street				
Marcel Breuer House	Weed Street				
Eliot Noyes House	Country Club Road				
John M. Johansen House	Ponus Ridge Road				
Eric Boissonnas House	Logan Road				
Hodgson House	Ponus Ridge Road				
Landis Gore House	Cross Ridge Road				

Sources: New Canaan Historical Society, State Historic Commission. Some resources without addresses have not been mapped.

Update the Historic Resource Survey

The New Canaan Historical Society had a Historic Resource Study completed in 1987. During the planning period, it may be desirable to update the historic resource survey to identify any additional properties of historic significance in New Canaan. This may include the “Modern” houses and other resources.

There has also been little investigation of archeological resources in New Canaan. During the planning period, it may be desirable to undertake an assessment of those sites with the greatest potential for containing archeological resources.

Nominate Properties for the Registers of Historic Places

While designation as a National Historic Landmark or listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) is largely ceremonial (see sidebar), it does increase the recognition of an area’s historic relevance and encourages preservation. Appropriate areas could be nominated by the New Canaan Historical Society for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

New Canaan may wish to consider requesting that New Canaan Center be considered for designation as a district on the National Register of Historic Places. This designation will not hinder land use activities in this area, will provide some protection from state- or federally-funded projects, and make some property owners eligible for tax credits for qualifying property improvements.

Continue to Recognize Locally Significant Resources

Over the years, the Historical Society has been quite active in identifying historic properties and has “plaqued” at least 48 different buildings in New Canaan that are 100 or more years old. Such efforts help increase the visibility of these historic resources and help encourage their preservation.

National Register

People typically assume the National Register of Historic Places is a protective program when it is actually only a recognition program.

This recognition entitles a property owner to display a commemorative plaque but only directly affects activities involving federal and/or state funding. It has little or no impact on the activities of the private sector. For renovations to income-producing properties, preservation tax credits are available if renovation is conducted in accordance with federal guidelines.

State Register

Listing on the State Register of Historic Places (SRHP) is also largely ceremonial. This recognition also only directly affects activities involving federal and/or state funding and has little or no impact on the activities of the private sector.

Historic Resource Preservation Plan
(lift page up)

Modern Houses

The New Canaan “Moderns” were built because of New Canaan’s proximity to New York City (where many of the architects worked), the availability of modestly-priced land (often with dramatic topographic or other features), and the interest of these architects in living near each other and exploring architectural innovations.

Recognition of “Moderns”

Seven of New Canaan’s Modern houses already appear on the State’s Register of Historic Places. Of them, three were designed by Philip Johnson; one each by Marcel Breuer, Eliot Noyes, John Johansen, and Landis Gores. An eighth, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, was added to the list in 1979, and the Johansen house was demolished in the late 1970s.

In addition, Philip Johnson’s “Glass House” (perhaps the best known of the “Moderns”) was named a National Historic Landmark in 1997. As an indication of the significance of this particular resource, the property has been deeded to the National Trust For Historic Preservation and will be managed as a significant historical resource for the benefit of the general public.

Protect the “Modern Houses”

New Canaan contains a significant concentration of “Modern Houses” – acclaimed and award-winning houses built between 1947 and 1968 – designed by a group of famous architects. According to knowledgeable sources, New Canaan has arguably one of the most important concentrations of Modern Movement residential architecture in the country. An inventory by the New Canaan Historical Society found that almost 100 “Modern” houses had been built in New Canaan but that only about 85 remain. People come to New Canaan to see the “Modern” houses and reflect on their role in architecture and design.

Although these houses do not readily fit people’s image of a historic resource, they represent an important era in architectural design. According to an article in the Spring 2001 edition of the “Connecticut Preservation News”:

“Most New Canaan residents were hostile to these houses when they were built. Today, attitudes range from reverence to contempt, with the majority registering indifference.

“This mindset is certainly not unique to New Canaan. The widely held, yet generally vague negative attitude surrounding Modern architecture is a reflection of the fact that forms and ideas so new, so foreign, to a culture accustomed to a steady flow of revival style periods were difficult to understand and accept. At mid-century, Modern houses were puzzling oddities to a population raised in traditional houses that had changed little stylistically over the previous century.”

It is interesting that, on a national (and international) scale, attention is paid to architectural gems such as Frank Lloyd Wright’s “Fallingwater” as an outstanding example of dramatic design and architectural innovation, while the significant concentration of “Modern” houses in New Canaan goes relatively unnoticed.

While these houses do not represent the mainstream of what many people in New Canaan consider to be a historical resource, their national (and international) importance is expected to increase over time. The fact that there is such a significant concentration in New Canaan calls for promulgation of strategies to help preserve these resources.

Modify Regulations

It has been suggested that lot coverage limitations and other zoning requirements penalize owners of “Modern” houses because they were often built as one-story structures. This is an unfortunate occurrence and can be addressed.

New Canaan should create a special section in the Zoning Regulations to relax, by Special Permit, the dimensional and/or other standards (such as lot coverage) for a property that has a “Modern” house provided that the historic integrity of the property is maintained. In addition, the Town could establish a demolition delay period for a “Modern” house.

Maintain and Enhance Regulatory Programs

Local Historic District

New Canaan was one of the first communities in Connecticut to establish a local Historic District Commission and this has aided in the preservation of the historic character of the community. A local historic district provides the most regulatory protection for historic resource since any activity that affects the exterior appearance of a property in the district must obtain a Certificate of Appropriateness from the local Historic District Commission (HDC).

While no potential new local historic districts have been identified, it may be desirable to establish such a district in the future as more information becomes available. Establishing a local historic district requires adoption of a local ordinance (approved by the local legislative body) and approval by two-thirds of the properties to be included in the district.

Village District

State Statutes (CGS 8-2j) allow a Planning & Zoning Commission to establish a “Village District” with aesthetic and other controls in identified village areas in order to protect the unique character of the area. A village district differs from a historic district in that a village district can be established by the Commission without the consent of the property owners as is required for a local historic district. The Commission may wish to consider establishing a village district in the New Canaan Center area to “protect the distinctive character, landscape and historic structures” of that area.

Demolition Delay Regulation

A demolition delay ordinance requires a waiting period of 90 days or some other period before an identified historic structure (or any structure more than 50 years old) can be demolished. However, it does not prevent demolition. The waiting period allows for discussions of ways to preserve the structure, move it, or document its historic significance. Some states allow a one-year demolition delay in established historic districts.

New Canaan does not have a demolition delay ordinance and may be the only town in the area without one. New Canaan should adopt a demolition delay ordinance to aid in the protection of historic resources.

Certified Local Government

The State Historical Commission has a Certified Local Government program that provides historic preservation grants and technical assistance to eligible communities.

The requirements for the program are to have a local Historic District Commission that meets certain criteria (New Canaan appears to be eligible for designation).

New Canaan should apply to be recognized as a Certified Local Government and grants should be pursued to assist in local historic preservation efforts.

Encourage Historic Preservation Efforts

Recognize and Support Primary Organizations

The primary organizations that have been working to preserve historic resources in New Canaan are the New Canaan Historical Society (a private non-profit organization) and the Historic District Commission (a regulatory body established by the Town). These efforts should continue to be encouraged.

Promote “Sensitive Ownership”

The most effective means of preserving historic resources is ownership by people or organizations that are sensitive to the historic significance of the resource and are financially and emotionally committed to maintaining that resource. Sensitive ownership should be encouraged and supported. In particular, educational programs and technical assistance related to historic preservation can be effective tools to assist owners of historic resources.

This is especially true for the “Modern” houses. The main threat to the “Modern” houses at the present time is change in ownership. The current owners of these properties generally bought them because they were “Modern” houses.

However, responsible ownership cannot be legislated and cannot always be relied upon. When owners of a historic or “Modern” house seek to sell their property, they typically look for buyers that are interested in living in such a house. Unfortunately, there have been situations where disingenuous buyers have claimed that they planned to preserve the house but have then demolished it. Unless there are deed restrictions placed on the property, this potential for a disingenuous buyer will always exist. In a community like New Canaan (where “teardowns” are a factor), some people may attempt to purchase an historic house simply for the underlying property. The Historical Society (or others) could work with existing property owners to establish historic preservation easements or deed restrictions to preserve the historic or “Modern” house prior to, or as part of, a private sale.

Coordination of Efforts

Historic preservation efforts are more successful when they are coordinated between groups interested in historic preservation. The Historical Society appears to be the appropriate organization to coordinate such efforts in New Canaan.

Historic Resource Protection Implementation Program

Maintain Identification / Recognition Programs

What	Who	Priority	Done
 1. Update the historic resource survey.	HS	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
 2. Undertake an archeological resource survey.	HS	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
 3. Nominate appropriate areas for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.	HS	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
 4. Consider encouraging National Register Historic District recognition in the Center to make tax credits available.	HS	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
 5. Continue to “plaque” historic and significant buildings.	HS	2	<input type="checkbox"/>

Maintain and Enhance Regulatory Programs

What	Who	Priority	Done
6. Maintain the local historic district and support the Historic District Commission.	TC	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
 7. Consider establishing a Village District in the Town Center area.	PZC	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
 8. Consider modifying zoning regulations to encourage preservation of recognized historic properties.	PZC	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
 9. Adopt a demolition delay ordinance with a tiered approach (30-day review period and a 90-day delay for historic houses or “Modern” houses).	TC	1	<input type="checkbox"/>

Legend

- BOE** Board of Education
- BOF** Board of Finance
- BOS** Board of Selectmen
- DOT** Connecticut Dept of Transportation
- EC** Environmental Commission
- FD** Fire Department
- HD** Health Department
- HS** New Canaan Historical Society
- PW** Public Works Department
- PZC** Planning & Zoning Commission
- P&R** Parks and Recreation
- Staff** Town Staff
- TC** Town Council
- Town** Town staff and agencies

Priorities

1	High Priority
2	Moderate Priority
3	Lower Priority

Priorities

	Strategy
	Task

Protect the “Modern Houses”

What	Who	Priority	Done
 10. Update the list of “Modern” houses.	HS	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
 11. Nominate the “Modern” houses as a thematic National Register Historic District.	HS	1	<input type="checkbox"/>

Encourage Historic Preservation Efforts

What	Who	Priority	Done
12. Encourage the New Canaan Historical Society to continue to coordinate historic preservation efforts.	All	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Maintain the Historic District Commission to oversee exterior improvements in designated historic districts.	All	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
 14. Apply for Certified Local Government status in order to receive funds from the Connecticut Historical Commission.	HS	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Continue to encourage “sensitive ownership”.	Town	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Work with owners to establish covenants or historic preservation easements to protect historic or “Modern” houses.	HS	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Continue to provide educational programs and technical assistance related to historic preservation.	HS	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. Coordinate with the efforts of other groups also interested in historic preservation.	All	2	<input type="checkbox"/>