

Deco Destinations: Gropius House

By Jim Linz

During a recent trip to Waltham, Massachusetts to research Waltham clocks of the 1930s, I took time out to visit a few other nearby attractions, including Gropius House, the 1937 home of Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius.



Gropius House, Lincoln, Massachusetts

This area is steeped in history. It was here that Paul Revere (best known as the founder of the Revere Copper and Brass Company) rode through every Middlesex village and farm warning that "The British are Coming." It was here that Paul Revere was captured. And it was here that Henry David Thoreau wrote "On Walden's Pond." It's a good idea to combine a visit to Gropius House with a visit to these other attractions.

Walter Gropius

Walter Gropius was born May 18, 1883 in Berlin, Germany. After studying architecture in Munich and Berlin, Gropius began his career as an assistant to Peter Behrens between 1908 and 1910, before setting up a private practice in Berlin. He served in the First World War from 1914-1918.

(Continued on page 8)

(Continued from page 7)

Following his war service, Gropius was selected Director of the grand-ducal Saxon School of Arts and Crafts and the grand-ducal Saxon School for the Fine Arts. He unified the two schools under the name "State Bauhaus in Weimar."

Gropius remained with the Bauhaus until 1928, at which time he reentered private practice in Berlin. He first visited the United States that same year.

Gropius, his architect wife Ilse Frank, and their young daughter Beate fled Germany in 1934 to escape the Nazi's, initially settling in London where Gropius established a partnership with Maxwell Fry.

Three years later, however, he accepted a position as Professor of Architecture at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, becoming Department Chairman in 1938, a position he held until 1952.

From 1938 to 1941, Gropius also maintained a private practice in partnership with his old friend Marcel Breuer who lived in a home Gropius built for him down the hill from Gropius House.



Gropius died July 5, 1969 in Boston.

Marcel Breuer's house as seen from Gropius House.

The Bauhaus

Gropius founded the Bauhaus, in Weimar, Germany, in 1919 based in part on the works of English designer William Morris and Scottish Arts and Crafts architect Charles Rennie Macintosh. Although commonly used to describe the design movement developed by Gropius, the Bauhaus was actually a German school of design. Gropius believed that modern art and architecture should be responsive to the needs and influences of industry, but that good designs must be both aesthetic and soundly engineered.

(Continued on page 9)

(Continued from page 8)

The Bauhaus offered courses in sculpture, painting and other crafts; typography; architecture, and both commercial and industrial design. The overall style that emerged from the school's teaching was marked by the almost total absence of ornament and ostentatious facades. The school's first extensive exhibition was held in 1923.

The Bauhaus School moved, in 1925, to a group of glass and concrete buildings in Dessau that Gropius designed specifically for the school. The Bauhaus style was also refined to more clearly emphasize the functionality of buildings and the use of basic, unadorned materials. Faculty included Hungarian designer Marcel Breuer, Swiss painter Paul Klee, and Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky.

In 1930, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe assumed direction of the Bauhaus. Two years later, the school was briefly moved to Berlin, before being closed by the Nazis in 1933.

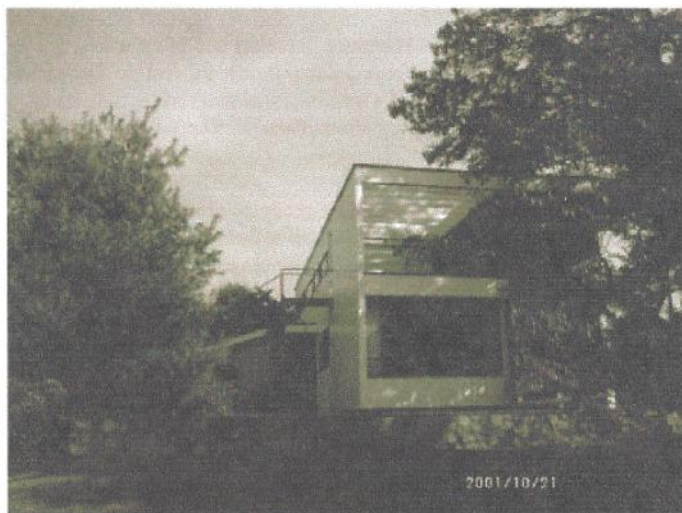


View of the rear and side showing the sun den and screened patio.

During its brief life, however, the Bauhaus became known worldwide, becoming the dominant force in what came to be known as the International Style.

(Continued on page 10)

(Continued from page 9)



Many Bauhaus faculty fled Germany, often settling in the United States.

Gropius House

In designing his American home, Gropius adapted his Bauhaus principles to the traditional farmhouse architecture of historic New England.

For the foundation and retaining walls, he chose locally quarried fieldstone rather than concrete. Other features typical of New England homes such as a brick chimney, wood painted white, and a screened porch were also included.

Gropius was so impressed with clapboard siding that he made extensive use of it in the interior of the home, albeit in a vertical rather than horizontal installation.

True to his Bauhaus principles, Gropius relied almost exclusively on factory made, commercially available building supplies, ordering what he needed from catalogs and supply houses. One notable exception was the rail custom made to follow the spiral staircase. Although quite stunning in appearance, the staircase would be a nightmare for a family with young

(Continued on page 11)

(Continued from page 10)

children. The only protection both on the open side of the staircase and on the landing above is chrome tubing spaced at about 12 to 15 inches. Of course, Gropius' only daughter was well beyond the age where the novel stair rail would pose a risk.



The Gropius House was the first of four modern houses located among the largely farming community of Lincoln, Massachusetts. Marcel Breuer worked with Gropius on the design of three of the houses, including his own residence located within view of Gropius House.

Although Gropius borrowed heavily from the American farmhouse style, the Bauhaus style still predominated. The home has an asymmetrical plan with flat roof and ribbon windows. A second story walled terrace expanded daughter Beate's living space. An external spiral staircase gave Beate direct access to her bedroom. The placement of the spiral staircase directly outside the expansive window of Walter and Ilse's office, however, gave the parents a degree of control over their daughter's comings and goings.

The house has a compact, open floor plan that largely eliminates halls and wasted space. Materials like steel columns and glass block more typically found in industrial buildings were widely used in Gropius House. Although the house is small by today's standards, it made maximum use of



space. Kitchens and baths were stacked to make more efficient use of space, but were outfitted with the latest fixtures and appliances, including a dishwasher and disposal.

The need for gutters and downspouts was eliminated by creating a central drainage system emptying into a dry well. Similarly, the home was created to be energy efficient, relying on passive solar gain to keep energy costs low in the winter. Similarly, overhangs helped keep the home cool in the summer.

The Furnishings

Gropius House was designed, in part, to accommodate the furnishings Gropius brought with him from Dessau. For example, the massive two-person desk in Gropius' office was designed by Marcel Breuer for the Director's House in Dessau. Despite its size, the desk fits nicely in the small office situated against the front wall in front of a vast plate glass window.

Although many of the original furnishings remain, including a wide range of furniture designed by Marcel Breuer, the furnishings also include gifts and purchases made during the 1940s-1950s. The walls are filled with works of art given to Gropius by his friends and students. Included are works by such renowned artists and sculptors as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy,

Josef Albers, and Henry Moore.

The walls, which include the use of vertically applied clapboards in the entrance foyer, are painted in subdued tones of whites, grays, and earth tones.

Visiting Gropius House

Gropius House is located near Boston at 68 Baker Bridge Road in Lincoln, Massachusetts. The home is maintained by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA).

Guided tours of Gropius House are offered at 11 am and 12, 1, 2, 3, and 4 pm Saturdays and Sundays from October 16th to May 31st. From June 1st to October 15th tours are also available on Wednesday-Friday.

To reach Gropius House, take I-95/128 north to Route 2 West. Drive approximately 4-1/2 miles then turn left onto Route 126 south. Pass Walden Pond (Yes Henry, it is Thoreau's Walden Pond.) and then turn left onto Baker Bridge Road. Gropius House is about half a mile on the right.



Rear view showing the screened patio



Front Entrance