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# Modernism's Beachhead

The Pavilion (center) was a breakthrough modernist design constructed in Blue Hill. It's flanked on the right by Hammer & Tongs blacksmith shop and on the left by the 1842 Stevens building, home to the legendary Rowantrees Pottery studio.



## WHY

did **Blue Hill Pavilion**, Maine's most exciting structure of 1946, last just a dozen years before it was deemed "too New York" and demolished? 'Twas provincial taste that killed the beast.

BY BRAD EMERSON

For the first half of the 20th century, the advance of modern art and architecture was viewed with alarm and suspicion by many. Blue Hill was no exception. Oh, there'd been flirtations with modernism in the village of mostly white clapboards and gray shingles, but not so much as to threaten public safety. In 1911, a Chicago bottled-water tycoon erected a small, Prairie-style summer house—modern, but not so radical as to disturb the populace unduly. In 1938, an artistic heiress risked an International-Style villa on the shore east of town, but life went on. In 1946, Walter Gropius and The Architect's Collaborative (TAC) designed a gull-wing-roof house in nearby Brooklin, which caused slight sputtering ('looks like a school!'). Little did the good people of the region suspect that the modern movement was about to strike Blue Hill with hurricane

(Continued on page 74)

Thousands of Maine People and Vacationers have already Visited the New Blue Hill Pavilion . . . Have You?

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Clear white Austria DINNERWARE and hand-blown Maine POTTERY in deep-lined spaced glass. Silver TANKARDS extra large and long, of the hand-worked variety, and hand-ground sets of wares also.

Between 9:00 and 11:30 each morning, Coffee and cream-topped Steaks are served informally in the Gallery Shop, together with an assortment of hot biscuits, coffee, cake and breakfast noods for which Blue Hill is famous.

Exhibitions

- Printed
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- Outkridge
- Parent
- Stones, Clams, Shell
- Kays, Cili Kays Club
- Avery, Seide
- Ruffel Grogan
- Sculpture and eggs
- George Ellis
- Sculpture
- Mirrored Surfaces
- Printings on Glass
- William and Marguerite
- Torvik, Dollar Store

BLUE HILL PAVILION can be reached by taking Route 1 from Camden, then Route 12 beyond Redington, from New Harbor, take Route 3 to Stevens, then Route 172 to Blue Hill.

\* Gallery Shop, Coffee Bar and Bakery Open Until After Christmas

COURTESY BLUE HILL PUBLIC LIBRARY (2)

## INSIDE STORY

*Modernism's Beachhead* (continued from page 41)

force: LYNN THOMPSON and DOROTHY CHESTER HEYWOOD, both born in the 19th century, had arrived in town.

An artist and writer, Thompson was the mother of architect Benjamin Thompson, who was working on the Brooklin project with TAC. Thus introduced to the area, she and partner Dee Heywood bought a large old summer house at a low postwar price, and in the time-honored tradition of architects' mothers everywhere, Thompson commissioned her son to give the French Provincial house a makeover. Out went the curved staircase, in went risers suspended by rods from the ceiling. Out went the French doors, replaced by a wall of glass. "That lovely old house!" cried the people. Thompson and Heywood were only warming up.

Thompson is remembered as kind and generous, and in the opinion of her daughter-in-law, Jane Thompson, typified the "pioneer, get it done" spirit that prevailed after the war. Heywood was quieter and more methodical but no less visionary in outlook. They threw themselves into the cultural life of the community.

Thompson assembled a collection of fifty works of avant-garde art, including Rothko, Pollock, Motherwell, Klee, Picasso, and Rouault, purchased in New York through the Betty Parsons and Downtown Galleries. She offered to exhibit her collection at the local library as a fundraiser. Fearful that modern art alone was not a sufficient draw, she offered blueberry pie as the refreshment, calling the exhibit "Picasso & Pie." Thompson made it known in the local newspapers that she would personally bake a pie and air-freight it to Picasso in France, that he might participate from afar in the opening (history does not record his reaction). The exhibit was a runaway success, and Thompson and Heywood were emboldened to begin a new, bigger adventure.

In 1948, Heywood invested in Adelaide Pearson's Rowantrees Pottery in Blue Hill. Heywood wanted to diversify the business, founded during the Depression to boost the local economy, by adding a weaving line. She opened a Rowantrees showroom in Manhattan, probably designed by Ben Thompson. In Blue Hill, they purchased the 1842 Stevens building,

to which they added a radically modern wing called the Pavilion.

It is not known why Thompson did not use her son for the design—although surely he had input—but rather called upon Eaton Tarbell Associates of Bangor. Tarbell as-

a sleek, handcrafted design with clear nods to Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West and Rudolph Schindler's Rodriguez house in Los Angeles. Tempered by traditional Maine materials and scale and with its skewed side elevations and the front canti-

## Blueberries & Picasso

The main salon at the Rowantrees Pavilion, ca. 1950, featured modern decor and views of Blue Hill Bay.



**BLUEHILL MASSACRE:** Up here with the gulls, Lynn Thompson assembled 50 works by Rothko, Pollock, Motherwell, Klee, Picasso, and Rouault, purchased in New York through the Betty Parsons and Downtown Galleries...calling her exhibit "Picasso & Pie." Soon her son's company station wagon was making runs from Harvard Square to Blue Hill, bearing modern furniture from his Design Research flagship store to sell at the Pavilion. Next season, the Pavilion was advertising Noguchi lamps, Jens Risom furniture and more, making it the unofficial first outpost of the store that brought modern design to America. In 1967, an insurance agent whose tastes ran to something more traditional demolished the building vilified as just "too New York."

signed the product to chief designer Cooper Milliken, who'd recently graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. With bold patrons who had a generous budget and wanted something outside the box, Milliken, a quiet intellectual, produced

levered over the millstream, the building arrived just in time for the mid-century. It was the first new commercial building erected in the village's commercial district since the late 1800s, and its progressive design caused uproar. Sheila Varnum of Row-



antrees remembers that many felt the project was just “too New York.”

Inside, natural materials and sloping walls combined with exposed joinery to create drama. Glass walls captured light and views of the nearby harbor. It was a stunning building, one of the most daring of its era in Maine. The opening was attended by Robert Motherwell and Betty Parsons. Unfortunately, the Rowantrees joint venture did not succeed, the New York showroom was shuttered, and the business was recast as The Blue Hill Pavilion. Although Thompson claimed never to hold a mixing spoon until after she was fifty, she and Heywood opened a full restaurant. In attempts to increase cash flow, they offered the option of mail-ordering their cakes and pies. Local weaving continued to be featured, and for the first time in the area, French cheeses were available, a fact that did not go unnoticed in a *New York Times* article. Art exhibits, which had first been mostly on consignment from the Metropolitan Gallery in New York, shifted to local under the direction of Francis Hamabe, hired in 1951 as art director.

In 1955, when Ben Thompson founded Design Research—the first retail store devoted to modern furnishings—his mother, ever a step ahead, had a member of his office staff making runs via station wagon to Blue Hill bearing DR inventory to sell at the Pavilion. By the next season, the Pavilion was advertising Danish pottery, Noguchi lamps, and Jens Risom furniture, making it the unofficial first outpost of the store that brought modern design to America.

By the 1960s, despite critical and popular acclaim, the Pavilion continued to be a financial and physical drain, and Lynn Thompson, now seventy, moved to Cambridge. The Pavilion was leased and became a tea-room and gift shop until it was finally shuttered two years later. In 1964, Thompson wrote a slim cookbook-memoir of the venture, titled *Picasso and Pie*, which remains a cult classic. Ironically, the building would stand only three more years, demolished in 1967 by its new owner, an insurance agent whose tastes ran to something more traditional. One of Maine’s gutsiest adventures into the new lasted barely a dozen years. ■

Brad Emerson is an antiques dealer and writer living in Blue Hill. Follow his blog on local architecture at [thedowneastdilettante.blogspot.com](http://thedowneastdilettante.blogspot.com).



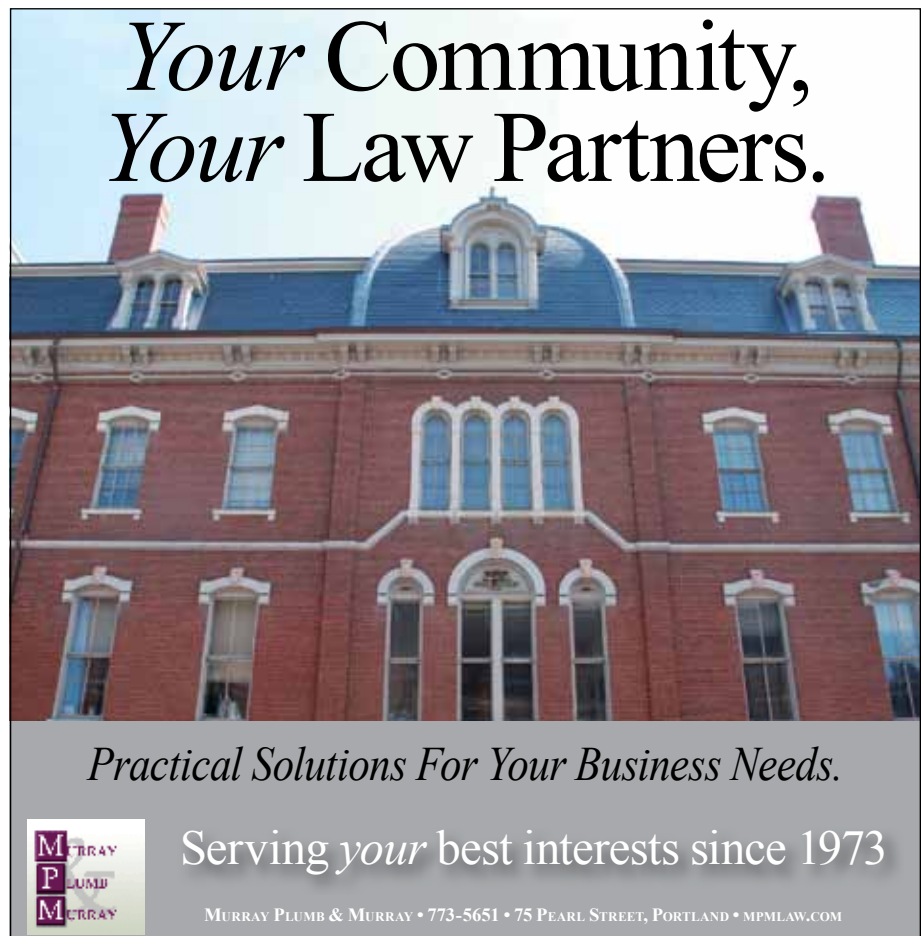
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