HEAD FOR THE HILLS

If your dream is to own a modernist house, imagine what living in a whole neighbourhood of them might feel like. Find your fantasy in Hollin Hills, a Virginian suburb near Washington DC

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Washington DC is all about power and pastiche. With its monuments and squat Federalist buildings, it's like a second-rate Paris built on a swamp using too much marble and granite. And its suburbs? Neo-colonial houses with scrubbed red brick, columned porticoes and faux gas lamps. But seven miles from DC itself, in Virginia, lies a design Eden – a whole suburb of modernist houses, 450 of them on 240 acres, conceived and built by one architect and one developer.

With a name as pastoral as its location, Hollin Hills is the sort of place where Bertoia chairs and Eames loungers are commonplace enough to be a cliché. It's the sort of place where the houses are glass-fronted and the people liberal. It feels like the setting of an Updike novel. Built between 1949 and 1971, by the early 1970s the community was rife with rumours of wife swapping and kids getting busted for drugs. It is the place where I grew up.

Joseph Rosa, head of architecture and design at the Art Institute of Chicago, says the Hollin Hills project was more important than LA's Case Study Houses because of the scale of the project and because the houses were designed for a specific location. Chrysanthe Broikos, curator at the National Building Museum in Washington, says: 'From early on, people knew it was something special.' The community got its first award in 1950, and, in 1957, the American Institute of Architects named it one of the Ten Buildings in America's Future.

Children raised in Hollin Hills are taught from an early age just how special the community is, and grow up wondering how anyone could live in one of the faux-colonial houses just over the hill. Naturally, the place has also spawned many architects, and the most famous, Michael Sorkin, still uses its tenets in his practice and teaching.

Hollin Hills was the vision of developer Bob Davenport and architect Charles Goodman, who teamed up to bring modernism and progressive values to the suburbs. Davenport, a Department of Agriculture employee with minimal building experience, bought the land in 1946. He'd been a member of Tauxemont, a local cooperative community built before the war, and saw the potential for a progressive neighbourhood with modern architecture. For the masterplan he selected Goodman, the hotshot architect who had designed the US pavilion for the 1939 World's Fair in New York, and whose design for Washington National Airport stands comparison with Eero Saarinen's Washington Dulles Airport and TWA Terminal at JFK, New York.

When Goodman first visited the Hollin Hills site, it was a wilderness. 'Heavily wooded and enigmatic,' he later wrote. 'We started walking through the woods and suddenly noticed we were climbing as we walked. We reached the top, where a broad view of the valley below »

HOLLIN THRILLS

Left, with their butterfly roofs, glass walls and recycled brick, the houses were revolutionary

confronted us. "This," said Bob Davenport, "is to be Hollin Hills."' Though many called the area unbuildable, Goodman loved it, and its difficulties. 'It was the kind of land homebuilders avoided... rugged, hilly and with no roads.'

His plans were radical. There was to be no grid, but, instead, cul-de-sacs and meandering roads that followed the contours of the land, rather than cutting against it. He even set aside areas for communal parkland; landscaped into the ravines between hills, the parks didn't just preserve green space, but also worked as drainage following the natural tributaries.

Goodman didn't fight the terrain, and he didn't try to pack in as many houses as possible. Broikos says: 'He wanted the homes to respond to the site. It's still rare to find a home that isn't facing the street.' And, to maintain the pastoral feel, Goodman and Davenport argued with county officials to avoid putting in the standard gutters, sidewalks and kerbs.

Davenport named the new community's streets after his mother, his wife's family, even the bulls on his farm, while Goodman brought on board some of modernism's best landscape architects. Each house came with its own individual landscape plan designed by Lou Bernard Voigt, Eric Paepcke and Dan Kiley. Fences were forbidden in order to create what the community dubbed 'borrowed views', extending the feel of a common woodland. Meanwhile, children were encouraged to walk across their neighbours' yards, leading to all sorts of voyeuristic thrills.

LEVEL BEST
Above, Kathy McPhee in the open plan upper floor of the house (top) she shares with partner David Armstrong

Goodman had moved to Washington DC from Chicago and was doubtlessly influenced by the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. He designed 12 different house models for buyers to choose from. Some homes were built on hills so they felt like tree houses; others were built into banks where you'd enter on the top floor and exit onto a porch on a lower floor, with views overlooking the valley. His second house plan, the Unit 2, was one storey, and only about 1,050 sq ft (no bigger than a double-wide mobile home). A large brick fireplace anchored one end of the house, which was divided into a kitchen and open-plan living and dining room, with bedrooms tucked behind. Others had a freestanding fireplace in the centre, with the rest of the space spiralling out around it.

Hollin Hills became a great experiment in low-cost housing at a time of great possibility »

in architecture. Goodman even charged visitors 50 cents to see the first Hollin Hills model home when it opened – an outrageous idea when you think of the lengths builders go to now to induce people to visit show homes. Still, more than 1,000 people flocked to the display, and the money was used for the community's parks.

With his use of flat roofs, butterfly roofs and cathedral ceilings, Goodman pioneered a new look in Hollin Hills. Walls of glass, some nearly 30ft long, were paired with wood panelling and recycled brick that riffed on the aesthetics of traditional homes. With their fragments of letters and old signs painted on buildings, the repurposed bricks gave the homes an almost Proustian feel, hinting at a past simmering beneath the surface. It fell to Davenport to source the bricks, a task that involved days and days spent driving around local demolition sites. When one home owner later painted his bricks white, Davenport swore under his breath and would refer to the place as 'the ice box'.

Both Davenport and Goodman were known for being tenacious and irascible, qualities that served them well in forging a new community. With his idealism and cooperative background, Davenport was open to experimentation, and their partnership allowed Goodman to explore new methods of construction to cut costs, save time and prove that their modernist ideal was viable. So, while Davenport hunted down bricks and sold homes, Goodman played around with materials like aluminium, as well as with prefab elements. By the mid-1950s he'd set up a shop at the entrance to the community selling panels that could then be easily installed on site. The panels included a choice of all-glass, all-wood, and wood and glass, allowing them to be customised to the buyer's tastes, as well as to each panel's location – for example, one could choose to have less glass in the bedrooms to afford more privacy.

ORIGINAL THINKING
Top, the Hesch house with its butterfly roof and floor-to-ceiling windows
Above, an original kitchen in Rick Ward's house

Goodman's modular window units allowed for floor-to-ceiling glass, with mass-produced casement windows fitted at the base. With an attic fan installed on the roof, the low windows allowed air to circulate up through the house, the hot air drawn out by the fan, important in an era before central air conditioning.

It turned out not everyone wanted to live 'in a beach house in the woods', as my grandmother called my parents' house in disgust. But, while the modernist vision failed to spread much past Hollin Hills (there are pockets of Goodman homes dotted around the Washington area and a handful of modernist communities in the US), DC's liberals flocked to it. Many early residents hailed from a radical war veterans' group. Others learned of the community from architect friends at Harvard and, during the 1950s, Hollin Hills was settled by those with Utopian world views hoping to build the Great Society. These included World Bank employees, *Washington Post* editors, 'and a few spooks, too', Sorkin adds.

This was an era when the CIA was a left-leaning agency and Yale its recruiting ground. One Hollin Hills resident remembers the 1952 presidential election when Republican candidate Dwight Eisenhower beat Democrat Adlai Stevenson. 'We had one of the few television sets in the community, so we had about ten couples over to watch the results, and we were shocked to find that one of the couples was Republican.' Such shock continues to this day, even though a prominent Republican senator also now lives in the community. One local jokes, 'If we had a cross burning, we could probably scare off all three of the conservatives.'

Hollin Hills' progressive architecture was matched with equally progressive values. At a time when schools were still segregated, it was the only neighbourhood in the area that didn't discriminate against Jews, blacks and Catholics. Instead, the restrictive covenants applied to what you could do with your home – all additions had to be in keeping with the look of the community.

'Those early communistic tendencies instead manifested themselves through the Design Review Committee and anti-sidewalk coalition,' laughs Sorkin. 'In the mid-1950s, there were heated debates about whether to add sidewalks, and even fire hydrants and street lights were problematic. Building squash courts was deemed too élitist, but tennis courts were acceptable. And, according to a 1956 Hollin Hills newsletter, it was 'OK to have no furniture or decent lighting, but not OK to have a knicknack shelf'.

The homes were, of course, ideal for modern furniture, and Davenport used his show homes in part to educate people in how to furnish them. Like the Case Study Houses, they were decorated by Hans and Florence Knoll, and now, not »

surprisingly, the neighbourhood has more architects than any other profession. Young couples with prams pace the streets with lists of homes as if in a gallery, and estate agents have long waiting lists. Places that sold for $10,000 in the 1950s are edging up to the $700,000 mark, while the larger two-storey models are going for a million. People treat their homes like modernist museums, and some residents buy vintage toys and clothes for their children. Discussion groups dedicated to Hollin Hills' original context have sprung up, while others just gossip over how their neighbours' homes are furnished.

Indeed, behind all that glass, there is friction. People call each other, privately at least, 'bozos' and 'jihadists'. A recent residents meeting turned into a heated debate of community aesthetics. The original residents, now in their seventies and eighties, and the newcomers, architects and designers sporting edgy eyewear, tried to follow parliamentary procedure and discussed 'tear-downs' and the validity of the Design Review Committee. More than one speaker said the committee threatened to divide the community in half. While tear-downs – existing structures that people buy to tear down in order to erect a McMansion – afflict suburbs across the States, in Hollin Hills, the issue is particularly poignant.

The big myth of modernism is that its futuristic design means the buildings won't age. But, with homes in Hollin Hills topping 55 years old, their age shows. The Unit 2 models were built using concrete slab-on-grade foundations, and the concrete sometimes gives out. Also, in an area as damp as Virginia, mould and mildew are issues. Other houses have poorly built additions with damaged foundations, while some of the earliest houses (where the construction team was still working out how to build them) have been plagued with chronic problems.

Naturally, everyone at the meeting had an opinion on 'the orange house'. Built on an empty lot in Hollin Hills, its bold colour is out of context with the community's more muted shades, and its acreage bigger than any of its neighbours'. One resident commented, 'Instead of borrowed views, it's more like stealing views.' Many claimed it was too invasive, while another resident, calling himself 'an original settler', said, 'This is vintage Hollin Hills – a wonderful group vigorously agreeing with each other.' Everyone laughed on cue.

The community is currently applying for listed status on the National Register of Historic Places, which would provide tax incentives for preserving homes. Then, truly, those growing up here will know how important their area is. Not only because it's so radically different, but because 50 years on, it's an architectural experiment worth preserving for the future.

The reason Hollin Hills is so rare is not because Goodman and Davenport didn't want to build more. In fact, they'd planned another suburb in Woodbridge, just ten miles away, but they only finished a few houses. Ironically, there just wasn't the interest any more. ★
www.hollinhills.org

MASTER GLASS
Above, industrial designer Jeff Jenkins on his terrace outside his front room (top)