

SURVEY AND RESEARCH REPORT ON
The Robert and Elizabeth Lassiter House



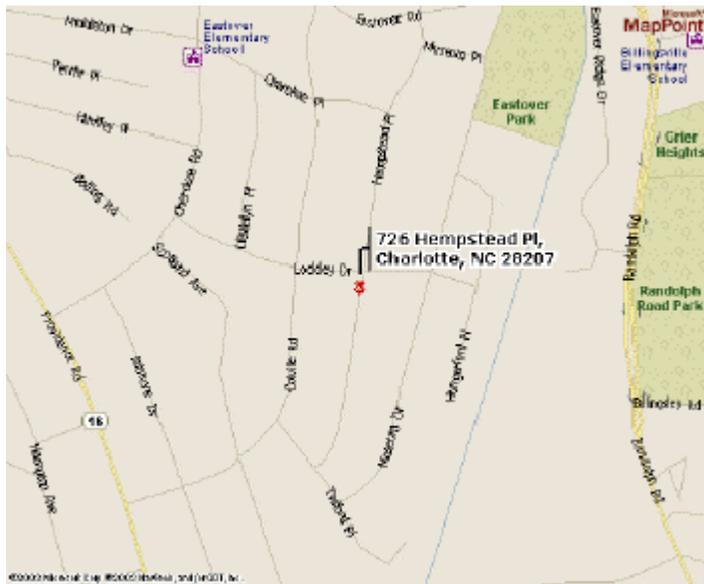
1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Robert and Elizabeth Lassiter House is located at 726 Hempstead Place, Charlotte, North Carolina.

2. Name and address of the present owner of the property: The present owner of the property is:

Elizabeth Lassiter
726 Hempstead Place
Charlotte, NC

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. Maps depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map depicting the location of the property.



5. Current deed book and tax parcel information for the property: The tax parcel number of the property is 155-132-11

6. UTM coordinate: 17 516588E 3894103N

7. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property.

8. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property.

9. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets criteria for designation set forth in N. C. G. S. 160A-400.5:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Robert and Elizabeth Lassiter House does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

- 1) The Lassiter House is significant as the oldest identified surviving Modernist Style home in Charlotte.

- 2) The Lassiter House is one of the earliest examples of the work of A.G. Odell Jr., one of the most important and prolific North Carolina architects of the 20th century.
- 3) The Lassiter House is extremely rare as a fully realized example of Modernist Style residential architecture.
- 4) The Lassiter House is important as an early example of the movement after World War Two to apply technology to residential architecture.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission contends that the physical and architectural description which is included in this report demonstrates that the Robert and Elizabeth Lassiter House meets this criterion.

10. Ad Valorem tax appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a designated "historic landmark." The current total appraised value of the improvements is \$144,600. The current appraised value of the lot is \$780,000. The current total value is \$924,600.

Date of preparation of this report: August 2003

Prepared by: Stewart Gray

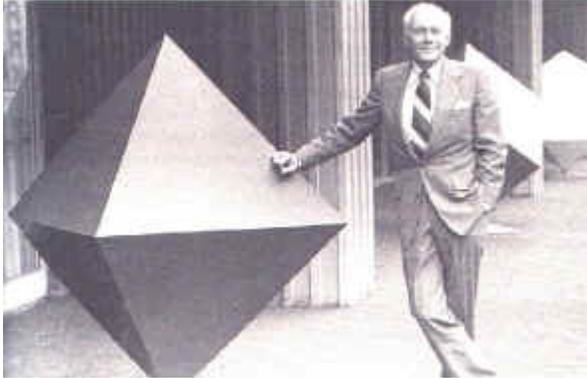


The Lassiter House, located on Hempstead Place in the Eastover Neighborhood in Charlotte, is significant as the oldest identified fully realized Modernist Style houses in the city. It is also one of the few surviving homes designed by architect A. G. Odell, who was among the most prominent North Carolina architects of the 20th century. The Modernist Style in residential architecture was never fully embraced in Charlotte, and surviving examples continue to be threatened with demolition.

Historical Overview



The Lassiter House was built in 1951 during the nation's great post-World War Two building boom. The building boom was brought on by years of stagnant homebuilding due at first to the Great Depression and then to material and labor shortages during World War II. After serving in the Navy, Charlotte native Robert Lassiter brought his bride Elizabeth to his hometown where they found a house in south Charlotte. Elizabeth Lassiter, who was from the State of Washington, remembers that the housing market around Charlotte was extremely tight and that they felt very lucky to have found any house at all. Elizabeth Lassiter contracted polio soon after her move to Charlotte and wanted a one-story house that would be completely accessible to a wheelchair. Around 1949 the Lassiters asked A. G. Odell Jr. to design a new home that would suit their needs.^[1]



A.G. Odell Jr.

A Cabarrus County native and a member of one of North Carolina's most prominent textile families, A. G. Odell, Jr. opened an office in Charlotte 1940^[2]. Odell graduated from architecture school at Cornell University and then attended the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, one of the world's premier arts and architecture schools. Indeed, Odell was considered the best-trained architect in Charlotte.^[3] In the years following the World War II, Odell quickly established himself as the leading designer of commercial and institutional buildings in Charlotte. By the mid-1950s, Odell's work included the Main Branch of the Charlotte Public Library, Charlotte's first enclosed shopping center, the Charlottetown Mall, and the groundbreaking Wachovia Tower, Charlotte's first Modernist Style skyscraper. Odell's greatest achievement was arguably the design of the original Charlotte Coliseum.

The former Charlotte Coliseum (now known as Independence Arena) and Ovens Auditorium, Charlotte's first municipal stadium and auditorium, were hailed as "architectural marvels" by architects, public officials, and Charlotteans when they first opened to a crowd of thousands in 1955. North Carolina Governor Luther Hodges proclaimed the Coliseum "a perfect building,"^[4]



Praise was not limited to the local press or state officials. The Coliseum project secured Odell's reputation as an architect of national significance.

From the moment that Odell & Associates unveiled the first model, the Coliseum was featured in professional architecture journals and trade publications. The building's legendary claim to fame is that it was the largest free-span dome in the world at the time it was built...and it received international notice in an article in a Madrid journal. Look published a three-quarter page color photograph of the "world's biggest dome." [5]

Odell's success continued and in 1966 Odell was honored as a recipient of the North Carolina Award for Fine Arts. Awarded by the General Assembly, it is the highest honor the state of North Carolina can bestow. Other recipients have included: Frank Porter Graham, John Morehead, Reynolds Price, Charlotteans Mary and Harry Dalton, and Modernist Architecture proponent Henry L. Kamphoefner, former Dean of the School of Design at NC State University.

Projects for Odell's firm, Odell and Associates, included the Blue Cross Blue Shield Building near Chapel Hill, the Concordia Church, and the 1965 "Charlotte Central Area Plan." With the center city plan, Odell embraced the philosophy of the "Radiant City," espoused by Swiss-born European architect Le Corbusier, where:

Urban cores should be hygienic, antiseptic, and ordered -- not cluttered, begrimed, and haphazard. The tradition of mixing functions in a single structure or neighborhood was an anathema to Corbusier. The city of the future would be divided into discreet sections devoted to specific purposes – working, living, leisure – connected to one another by expressways. [6]

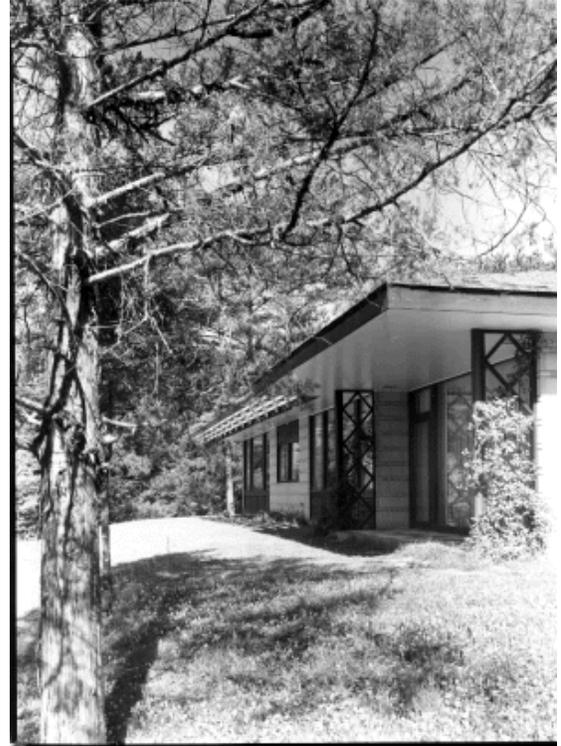
While the plan was never fully realized, it was utilized and the present landscape of the center city owes much to Odell's design. One important element of plan was the Charlotte Civic Center. Designed by Odell, this massive and stark building acted as a catalyst for more Modernist or International Style buildings in the center city.

Odell's fame was largely the result of his commercial and institutional work, but early in his career Odell designed several modernist homes for Charlotte clients including the Kenneth Shupp House, the first Modernist Style home built in Charlotte. Odell continued to publicize his residential designs through the mid-1950s. In 1954 as President of the North Carolina Chapter of the AIA, Odell began publishing the *Southern Architect*, which later became the *Journal of North Carolina Architecture*. The primer issue, with the Charlotte Coliseum on the cover, featured

five pages of Odell's work with photographs of three residences. In 1955 the *Southern Architect* again featured Odell's residential work with photographs and a floor plan of the Spencer Bell House in Charlotte. Odell found that he could provide good value for his homebuilding clients by utilizing the Modernist Style. In an interview with the Charlotte Observer at the time of his retirement in 1982, Odell said "I was trying to sell contemporary more on the economics than aesthetics...(traditional design homes) didn't give as much space for the dollar."^[7]



J. Spencer Bell House



Kenneth Shupp House

Although never fully embraced by the home buying public, especially in any fully realized form, Modernist Style homes were the vanguard in post-World War II residential design. In the *California Book of Homes*, a plan-book sold in bookstores and newsstands, Editor Leslie R. Griffin wrote in the introduction:

The basic concepts of architectural home designing have undergone revolutionary changes for the better. The hallowed basic concepts have been pushed, prodded and shaped to keep pace with this great country and its people – who have themselves been involved in a revolution of spirit and mind in the last twenty years. From the chaos of the past, architectural practice and thought has emerged shoulder to shoulder with the ideals of freedom that have kept our country great...^[8]

The newness of the style and its utilization and integration of technology was seen as an answer to the troubled years of the Depression and the tumult of the war. Victory and prosperity and the resulting consumer culture drove the demand for “new and improved” products, including homes. Fully-realized Modernist Style homes were not simply an “improved” version of the traditional home form, but in many cases a completely different building type. Considered a “machine for living,”^[9] fully-realized Modernist Style home designs shared few structural components, building materials, or spatial planning with traditional designs. Griffin goes on to list the tangible effects of the Modernist Style on residential architecture:

1. Today’s planning is functional. The want of the family are appraised and a step-saving floor plan is laid out: then, after the living functions have been provided for, the shell is put on the house. Previously, the house was built after a traditional pattern, a “French Provincial”, “Colonial”, or something similar.

2. Exterior design has changed. Modern lines are simple lines – no gingerbread or other unnecessary ornamentation.

3. Modern conveniences have taken over. The modern kitchen and laundry are so well known to the housewife today that any description would be superfluous.

4. The two-story house is out. In the West, with rare exceptions such as building on a hillside location, owners want living on one floor.

5. Open planning is in. Present habits of informal living, plus the perfection of modern conveniences have made open planning possible. The formal dining room has been replaced by the large Pullman kitchen. Hallways and entry-ways are fewer...^[10]



Lassiter
House
Foyer

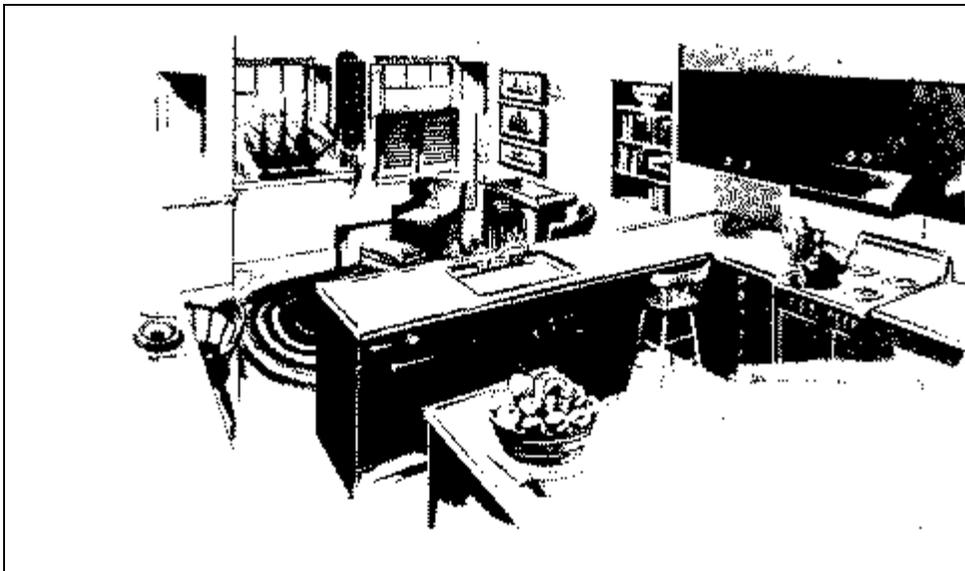
It was in this context of radical change that the Lassiter House was designed. Odell and Robert Lassiter were friends, and Elizabeth Lassiter recalls that Charlotte was a much smaller town in the late 1940's and that it was "only natural" that Odell would design their house. Elizabeth Lassiter was familiar with Modernist Style architecture. Being from the West Coast, she was an admirer of Portland architect Pietro Belluschi (1899-1994), a leading national spokesman for the Modernist Style and Dean of the M.I.T. School of Architecture^[11]. Belluschi had produced numerous successful home designs and was considered pragmatic when compared with other proponents of the style such as Phillip Johnson.^[12] With Belluschi's style in mind, Elizabeth Lassiter and Odell "put our heads together"^[13] and developed the plan for the Lassiter Family's home.

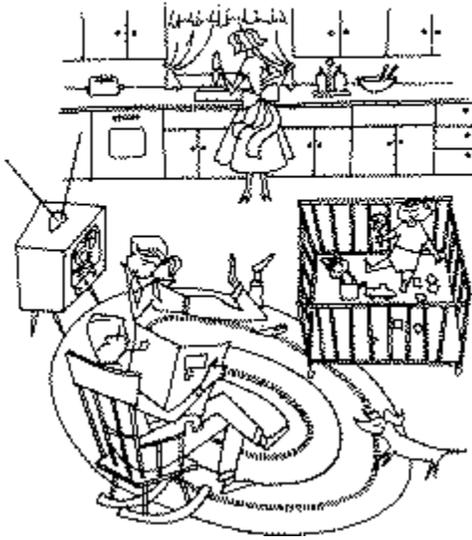
Odell assisted in every phase of planning and construction for the Lassiter House. He accompanied the Lassiters when they picked out the lot on Hempstead Place, a brand new neighborhood street being developed by prominent developer E. C. Griffith, and Elizabeth Lassiter recalls that Griffith himself wrote the deed. Odell urged them to

choose lot number 726 because its rising topography would allow him to design a private site.

Elizabeth Lassiter wanted to make sure that her new home could accommodate someone with restricted mobility and found the Modernist Style design well suited to her special needs. Modernist Style homes are generally low, and the one-story Lassiter House is set level with the grade, eliminating all need for steps. Modernist Style designs utilized modern materials such as steel beams to allow for open floor plans without interruption by interior load-bearing walls. The Lassiter House's open floor plan along with wide hallways, and doorways, were designed to accommodate a wheelchair. Wall-to-wall carpet was chosen because slick floors could be dangerous for someone using crutches. A pool was planned for the backyard, so that Elizabeth Lassiter could exercise, but problems with getting materials and skilled labor delayed the pool for several years. ^[14]

Elizabeth Lassiter had specific non-Modernist plans for her kitchen. She recalls that Odell suggested an open-plan for the kitchen. He suggested a kitchen/family room with a place for "Robert to sit there reading the paper in a big chair, smoking a pipe,"^[15] while Elizabeth cooked supper. She was not impressed, and directed Odell to design a small kitchen for a paid cook, with a butler pantry/serving area to further isolate the kitchen from the dining room and the rest of the house. Even with this traditional kitchen/dinning room layout, Odell was able to utilize modern innovations such as a dinning table on a track that could be completely set in the serving area and pushed through an opening in the dinning room wall. When the meal was over it would be retracted, dirty plates and all.





Odell envisioned a kitchen/family room for the Lassiter House. This was one element of Modernist Style home design not embraced by Elizabeth Lassiter. The result was a compact traditional kitchen design. ^[16]

Elizabeth Lassiter's other major disagreement with Odell involved storage space. The Modernist Style emphasized clean lines, no clutter. In these concrete-floored "machines for living" there were usually no attics or basements, and the open-floor plan eliminated many of the possible locations for closets. Odell suggested to the Lassiters that they should not "have a lot of stuff,"^[17] and that they did not need storage. Embracing post-World War II consumerism, Odell suggested that if something was broken or if you did not need it, you could just throw it away. Elizabeth Lassiter was not convinced and instructed Odell to design generous storage space.

While Elizabeth Lassiter was involved in every aspect of the interior design, the Lassiters gave Odell a free hand in designing the exterior of the house. Typically the design of a Modernist Style house concentrated more on the needs of the occupants than on impressing the public. Whereas traditional home design often incorporated either an imposing or ornate façade, Modernist Style homes often presented their simplest elevation to the street and would sometimes, as is the case with the Lassiter House, lack a "front door." This concept of a very private or personal space is reflected in Odell's landscaping plan for the Lassiter House. From the road, the most prominent feature of the Lassiter Residence is a large, plain, masonry retaining wall.

Architect-designed homes, and Modernist Style homes in particular often conform to the landscape. Odell embraced this concept with the Lassiter House. It was his intention that the house look like it had risen out of the lot.^[18] While "outdoor living" was nothing new in the South with its history of porches, screened porches, and sleeping porches, the Modernist Style architects pushed the very floor plans of their

homes into the outdoors with trellis-covered terraces and open patios. The outdoors was brought into the houses by the extensive use of windows and glass doors, usually to the rear of the house. In the Lassiter House the living room literally opens onto a covered patio via massive sliding glass wall panels that were designed by Odell. The blurring of the interior and exterior spaces was reinforced by Odell with exterior wall materials such as brick and redwood siding being featured on interior walls.

Odell's state-of-the-art design for the Lassiter House proved to be very practical over time. With an addition in the 1970's to accommodate guests, the house has served members of the Lassiter Family for over fifty years.

Odell characterized architecture as "90% business and 10% art." At the time of his retirement in 1982, Odell and Associates was the largest architectural-engineering firm in the Carolinas, with billings in 1981 of \$6.6 million. At the time of his retirement, Odell and his firm had been credited with designing an astounding 2,000 buildings. However, it was his early commercial and institutional work from the 1950's and 60's in the Modernist and International Styles that was most admired by the public and his peers. While not typical of the work that made him recognized as one of the most important 20th Century North Carolina architects, the Lassiter House is significant as one of Odell's early works in the Modernist Style. The Lassiter House holds further significance locally as a rare example of the Modernist Style applied to residential architecture, and as among the oldest recorded surviving Modernist Style homes in Charlotte.^[19]

Architectural Description



View From Hempstead Place



East Elevation

The Robert and Elizabeth Lassiter House is a low flat-roofed one-story frame house that originally consisted of three sections. The principal section is relatively square and includes the kitchen, dining room, and living room. A distinct entrance and foyer connect the principal section to the bedroom wing, which extends to the west. The house faces east on a neighborhood lot raised above the street and buttressed at the sidewalk-level by a tall masonry retaining wall, overgrown with ivy. The house is generally hidden by trees and bushes and by the topography of the site, although it is partially visible when approached from the north.



Typical Neighborhood
Home

While most of the neighboring homes have a front walkway, access to the Lassiter House is limited to the driveway, with the principal entrance to the house facing north. Tall shrubs planted close to the house on the north elevation obscure the flat-roofed garage, which extends from the north elevation. The bushes part only enough to reveal the entrance. Opaque glass in two large sidelights and three fixed transoms surround an original louvered wooden screen door. Behind the louvered door hangs a wide solid-core door with a Contemporary Style doorknob. A generous eave protects the entrance. This extended overhang continues around the house; however much of the overhanging eave on the north and east elevations is cut away, leaving a framework that maintains only the outline of the eave. All exterior walls are covered with vertical redwood siding that runs uninterrupted from the eaves nearly to the grade.

The fenestration in the east elevation is limited to the northeast corner where a large pane of glass is glazed directly into the wall. Directly beneath the large window are three metal-framed awning window units. A window-unit air conditioner has replaced one of the lower sash. This glazed wall illuminates the dining room. Abutting the windows to the south is another solid-core door, with a louvered screen door and topped with a transom.



On the south elevation the overhang is solid and forms a porch supported by redwood framing, which has been enclosed with glass. A major gabled bedroom addition was added in the 1970's. The addition begins at the west end of the porch and extends to the beginning of the bedroom wing. The addition, designed by A.G. Odell Jr. and Associates, is covered by the same vertical redwood siding found on the rest of the house. While the north gabled wall of the addition is blank, the south wall features two large fixed triangular windows set in the gable.

The bedroom wing features windows oriented to the south and designed to take advantage of direct sunlight. Three-part windows with short upper and lower fixed sash and a large operable center sash are set in the wall. A recessed entrance borders a large directly glazed window illuminating the master bedroom. The west wall of the bedroom wing is blank.



The interior of the Lassiter House has retained a high degree of integrity, with original features such as light and bath fixtures, wall finishes, and interior doors and hardware. The interior floor plan is generally open, reflecting Modernist Style design and the need for wheelchair accessibility. A bank of tall windows in the foyer look into a small, enclosed garden formed when the bedroom addition was added. The living room features large sliding glazed wall panels that allow the room to be opened to a porch that has been turned into a sunroom. Another original feature of the living room is large brick fireplace with minimal trim and a long simple brick hearth. A wood box integrated with the fireplace was converted into a television cabinet.



The dining room contained one of the most innovative elements of the interior design, a wooden slab table mounted on rollers that could be retracted into the butler's pantry to be set with dishes or to be cleaned after a meal. The wall opening for the table has

been covered with paneling. The butler's pantry and the kitchen contain many original features such as cabinetry, counters, and sinks. Built-ins include a telephone cabinet/desk and a small breakfast table.



The bedroom wing is comprised of two bedrooms single-loaded off of a long hall lined with storage closets. The master bedroom contains a small brick fireplace with a tall shallow trapezoid-shaped brick hearth. The bathrooms are largely original, and feature Carrara glass tile from Italy.

[1] Interview with Elizabeth Lassiter, July 2003.

[2] Lew Powell, "A Designing Man, Looking Back on the Career A.G. Odell Built" Charlotte Observer, August 15, 1982.

[3] Interview with Harold Cooler, AIA, July 2003. Cooler practiced in Charlotte at the same time as Odell.

[4] Lara Ramsey "Addendum To Survey And Research Report On Ovens Auditorium And The Charlotte Coliseum(Former)" Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 2001.

[5] Dr. Paula Stathakis, "Survey And Research Report On Ovens Auditorium And The Charlotte Coliseum" Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1990.

[6] “Center City Survey Of Historic Places, Charlotte Civic Center”, Dr. Dan Morrill, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 2003.

[7] Lew Powell.

[8] Leslie R. Griffin, Ed., *California Book of Homes*, Home Publications, Inc., Los Altos, 1954, p.4.

[9] Report on “Post World War Two Survey of Charlotte-Mecklenburg,” Sherry Joines Wyatt & Sarah Woodard for David E. Gall Architects.

[10] Ibid

[11] *TechTalk*, MIT News Office, Cambridge, Mass March 2, 1994.

[12] Merideth Clausen, Pietro Belluschi: Modern American Architect, Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1994, p. 9.

[13] Interview with Elizabeth Lassiter.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Drawings featured in "U.S. Steel's: Kitchen Planning Book", 1956..

[17] Interview with Elizabeth Lassiter.Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Based on the "Post World War Two Survey of Charlotte-Mecklenburg," by Sherry Joines Wyatt & Sarah Woodard, it appears that the Lassiter House is the oldest surviving home designed by Odell in Charlotte. The Bell and Spencer Houses have been destroyed and the Shupp House cannot be located.