



SURVEY AND RESEARCH REPORT
FOR THE
PRAISE CONNOR AND HARRIET LEE HOUSE

3714 COUNTRY RIDGE ROAD
CHARLOTTE, NC 28226



Emily and Lara Ramsey

March 1, 2002

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Praise Connor and Harriet Lee House is located at 3714 Country Ridge Road in Charlotte, North Carolina.

2. Name, address, and phone number of the current owner of the property:

Leslie E. Fleck, Jr. and wife, Dorothy H. Fleck

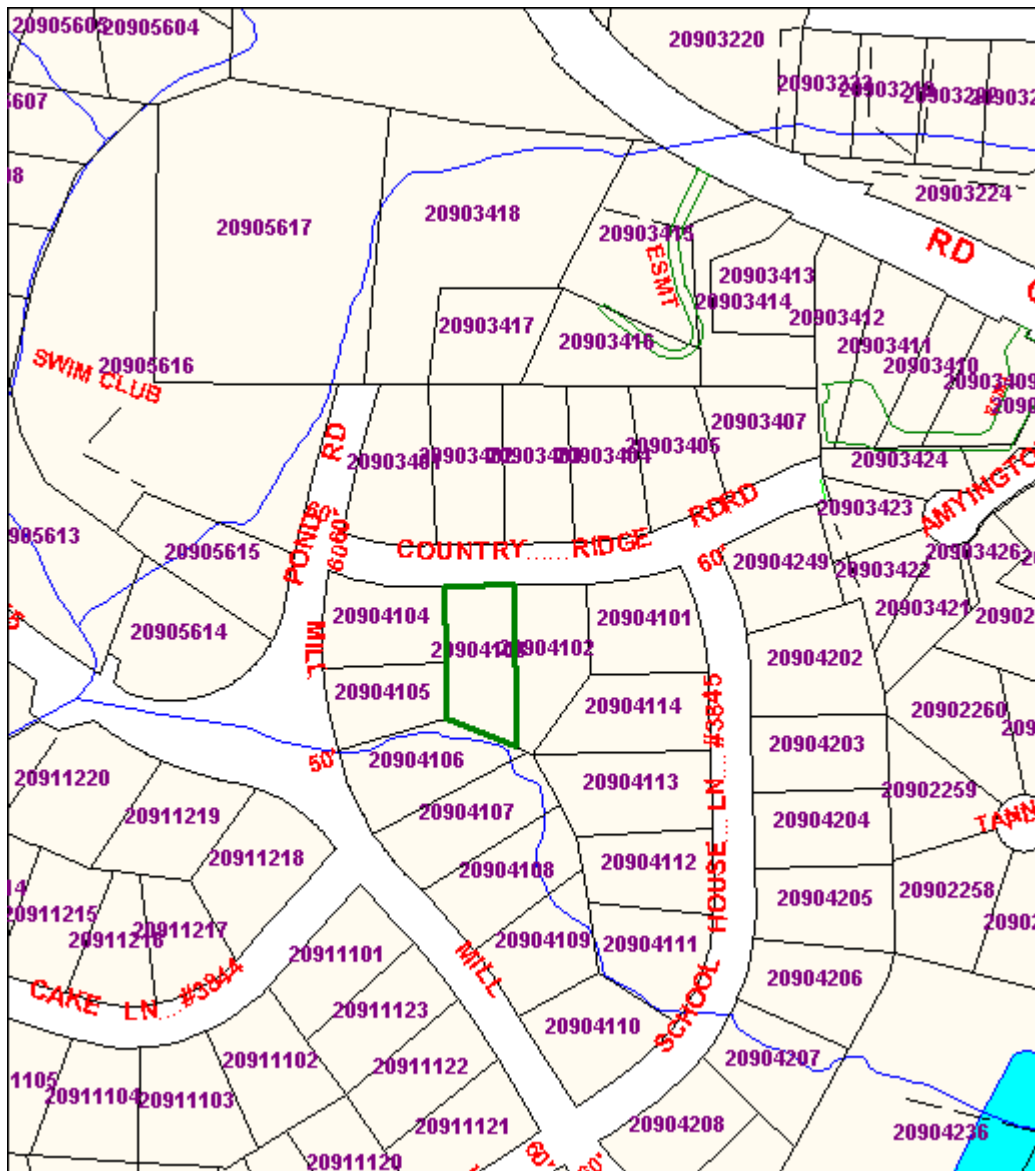
3714 Country Ridge Road

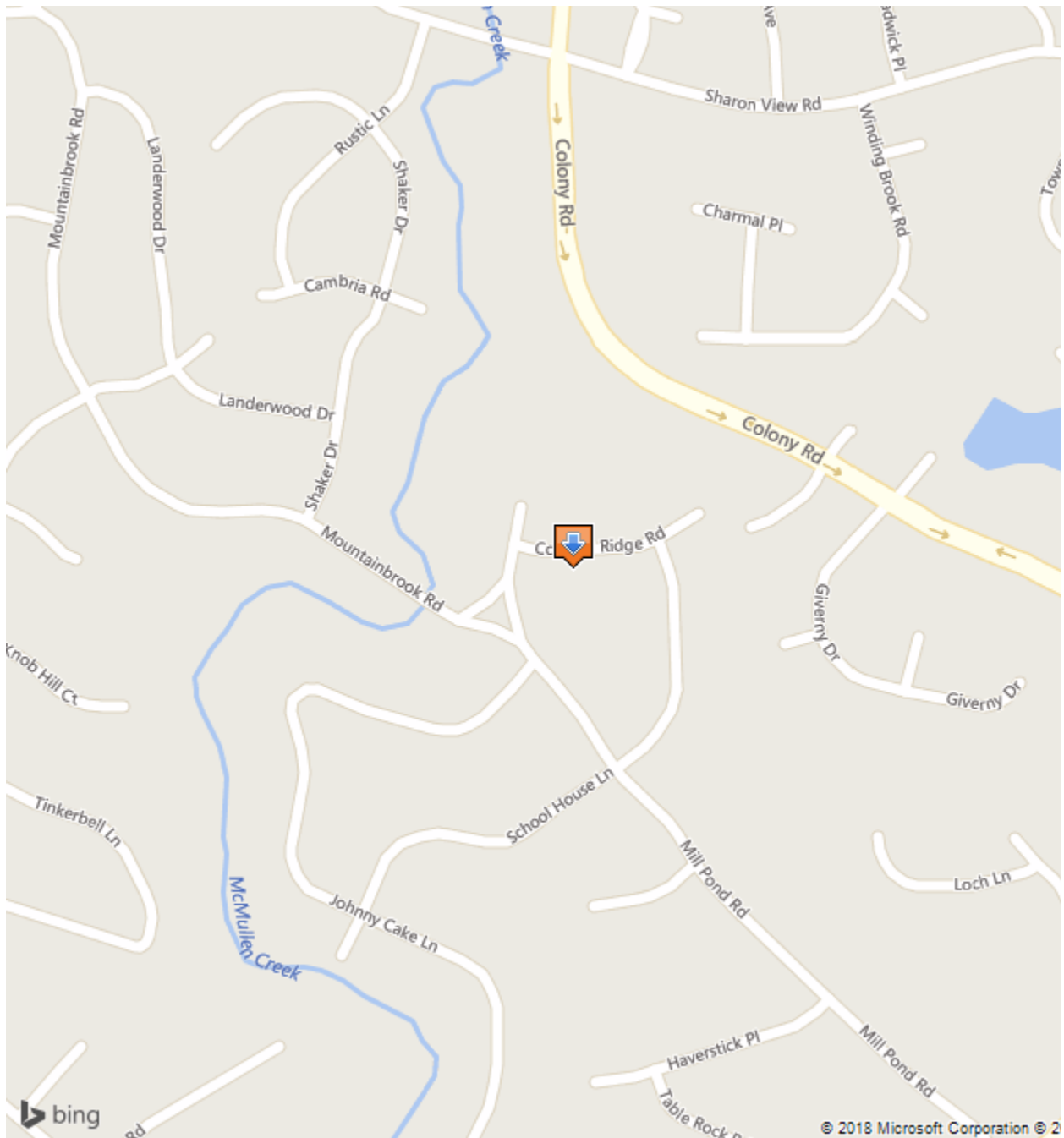
Charlotte, NC 28226

704-552-1737

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

4. A map depicting the location of the property: The Universal Transverse Mercator coordinates for this property are 17 516425E 3887875N. The following map depicts the location of the property:





5. Current deed book reference to the property: The current deed book reference for this property is Book 04750, Page 805. The tax parcel identification number is 209-041-03.

6. A brief historical description of the property: This report includes a brief historical description of the property.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report includes a brief architectural description of the property.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for historic landmark designation, as set forth in North Carolina General Statute 160 A-400.5

a. Special significance in terms of history, architecture and cultural importance:

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission judges that the P. Connor Lee House possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.

1. The Praise Connor Lee House, built in 1963, is an excellent example of the Modernist Style of architecture that gained a larger acceptance in Charlotte during the years following World War II.
2. The P. Connor Lee House, designed in the Contemporary Style popular among Modernist architects in the 1950s and 1960s, is a rare example of Modernist residential architecture in Charlotte. The house is also representative of the ways in which architects used the features unique to post war suburban neighborhoods to create progressive houses that existed in harmony with their surroundings.
3. The house was designed by Praise Connor Lee, a North Carolina architect and graduate of the prestigious School of Design at North Carolina State College. Lee was an enthusiastic proponent of Modernist architecture, and designed numerous Modernist buildings during his short career.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and association:

The Commission judges that the architectural description by Lara and Emily Ramsey demonstrates that the Praise Connor Lee House meets these criteria.

9. 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 is designated "historic landmark." This property, including a single-family dwelling and 0.498 acres of land, is currently appraised at \$163,020. The property is zoned R3.

Date of submission of this report:

March 1, 2002

Prepared by:

Emily and Lara Ramsey

2436 North Albany Ave., #1

Chicago, IL 60647

773-645-5062

sparqq@earthlink.net

lararamsey@hotmail.com

SUMMARY

The Praise Connor and Harriet Lee House, at 3714 Country Ridge Road, possesses local significance as an excellent example of the Modernist style of architecture that emerged in Charlotte and throughout North Carolina in the years following World War II. With its roots in the International Style espoused by architects like Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius, as well as the Prairie School of Frank Lloyd Wright, Modernist architecture did not fully come into its own in America until after World War II. After years of building restrictions and rationing of building materials, Charlotte, like the rest of the country, experienced a building boom at the end of the war. This dramatic increase in construction, coupled with a general emphasis on progress and the influence of educational institutions like the School of Design at North Carolina State College (now North Carolina State University), led to the proliferation of Modernist architecture in Charlotte.

The Lee House is also significant as a rare example of Modernist residences built in postwar Charlotte. While more progressive architectural styles were widely used for institutional and commercial buildings, Modernist residences were relatively unusual. In the city's growing number of suburban developments, the handful of Modernist houses was far outnumbered by more traditional styles, which were generally easier and cheaper to build and appealed to a wider number of potential homeowners. Those Modernist houses that were built in postwar suburbs were designed to take advantage of the naturalistic layout of these developments, using building materials that would harmonize with the landscape, incorporating large expanses of glass in the rear of the house to maximize views and natural light, and integrating the topography of the site into the design by designing two or three stories at the rear of the house.¹ The Lee House is a fine illustration of these design principles used in Modernist residential architecture.

Because many individual clients and developers in post war Charlotte were wary of building Modernist homes, a good deal of Modernist residential architecture can be found in the homes that architects built for themselves. Such is the case with Praise Connor Lee, who designed his house at 3714 Country Ridge Road in 1963, a few years after his graduation from the School of Design. P. Connor Lee was an enthusiastic supporter of Modernist architecture, and incorporated it into many of his designs for commercial and institutional buildings throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. The Lee House is one of two Modernist houses that Lee designed for his family in Charlotte.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Residential Development in Post War Charlotte

In the years that followed World War II in North Carolina, as in the rest of the country, a population surge caused by the return of soldiers from Europe and the Pacific and the resulting "baby boom," coupled with a newly revived economy just emerging from years of depression and wartime restrictions, resulted in a building boom that would continue through the 1950s and 1960s. The demand for housing was the primary impetus for the building boom in Charlotte, as well as in other cities throughout the state— building permits for housing charted in an *Analysis of Charlotte, North Carolina Housing Market as of April 1, 1965*, published by the Federal Housing Administration, showed that over 50 percent of existing housing in Mecklenburg County had been built between 1950 and 1965.² Institutional and governmental building also showed a marked increase in the years following the war, mainly in the form of schools needed for the growing number of schoolchildren born just after the end of the war.³

The slow shift in North Carolina from a rural to an urban population also meant that the majority of post war building occurred in or around metropolitan centers. Traditionally, most residents of North Carolina lived in rural communities, with a smaller number located in towns or small cities. However, this had begun to change by the early twentieth century. The 1930 census showed for the first time a larger gain in urban populations than those in rural areas. By 1950, over a third of the state's population was living in urban areas.⁴

This new urban population was not moving into the older centers of North Carolina's cities, but was settling into the ever-growing number of post war suburbs. These suburbs offered homeowners the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of cities without having to endure the crowding, noise, pollution, or crime associated with them. Charlotte was no exception to this trend of suburban expansion; suburban neighborhoods sprang up around the entire periphery of the center city, with the majority of these developments located to the south and east, where the availability of water and waste facilities and the lack of industrial and commercial development made these areas ideal for new residential growth. *The Next Twenty Years: A General Plan for the Development of the Charlotte Metropolitan Area*, written in 1960 to address the city's rapid expansion, encouraged low density levels in residential areas to allow for "yards, open spaces, a quiet, restful atmosphere and family privacy."⁵ The citizens of Charlotte embraced this new suburban way of life. In an article entitled "Suburbs? They're 'Wonderful'" in the September 12, 1959 edition of the *Charlotte Observer*, Wayne Moore says of his new home in a Charlotte suburb: "It's wonderful, wonderful, wonderful . . .The tranquility I mean. To sum it up in a single word, tranquility."⁶

Modernist Architecture in Charlotte

With North Carolina and the rest of the United States in a period of growth and economic prosperity, there was a general feeling of optimism and excitement about the future, as well as an overwhelming faith in new technologies to solve many of life's problems, big and small. This new progressive outlook was evident in the growth of the Modernist movement in America. With its roots in the International Style of Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe and the Prairie

School of Frank Lloyd Wright, Modernism found its way into North Carolina through the influence of the School of Design at North Carolina State College. The school's reputation as one of the most prestigious design programs in the South was largely due to the work of its first dean, Henry Leveke Kamphoefner.



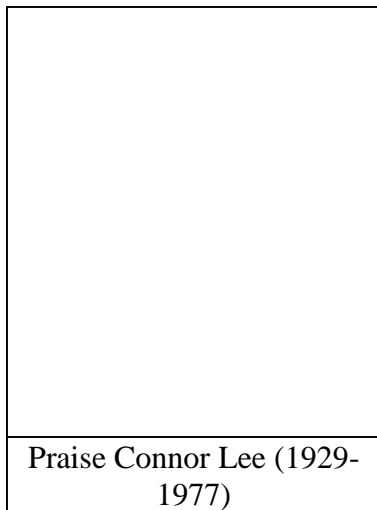
Henry L. Kamphoefner

Kamphoefner came to the School of Design from the University of Oklahoma in 1948. Kamphoefner was drawn to the state because of its progressive reputation in art and politics, and was especially interested in the experimental Black Mountain College. In a letter to Josef Albers, a Bauhaus painter working at Black Mountain, Kamphoefner admitted, "When my colleagues and I decided to come to North Carolina, being near Black Mountain College was considered by all of us to be one of the advantages."⁷ Under Kamphoefner, the School of Design became the leading proponent of Modernist design in the state. "Architects, through both the school and the new buildings they designed, strongly promoted modernism as the 'correct' style. In the state's new prosperity, they saw the opportunity for a new beginning."⁸

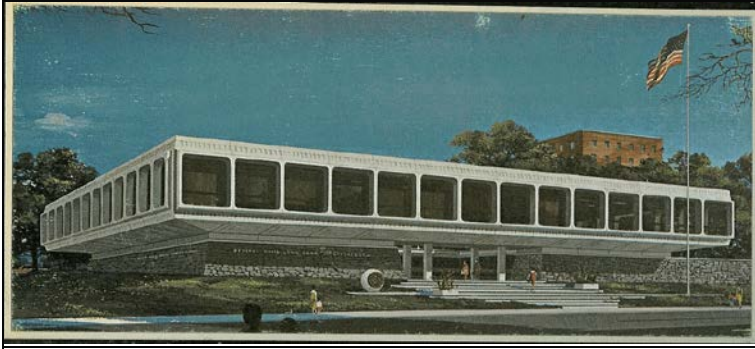
Many of these architects settled in Charlotte, bringing the Modernist design principles espoused by the School of Design. Large firms like A.G. Odell and J.N. Pease Associates led the way for Modernism in the city, with a number of smaller firms also producing commercial and institutional structures that stressed functionality and simple expression of materials. What was acceptable for the office buildings and schools, however, was not acceptable for the home; residential architecture in Charlotte and throughout the state remained staunchly traditional through the postwar decades.⁹ Even new types of housing, such as the ranch house, were dressed up with traditional ornamentation. This lack of interest in Modernist residential architecture was probably due to developers wanting to appeal to the greatest number of potential homeowners at the lowest cost. Traditional architecture was easier and cheaper to construct on a large scale and was familiar to homebuyers.¹⁰ The relatively small numbers of Modernist residences built in Charlotte were built in the new subdivisions; these houses were usually architect-designed, taking advantage of the naturalistic landscaping of the developments with simple forms and natural materials. An excellent example of the typical Modernist residence built in the 1950s and 1960s in Charlotte is the house that Praise Connor Lee built for his family at 3714 Country Ridge Road.

The Praise Connor Lee House

Praise Connor Lee was born in Grimesland, North Carolina in 1929. Upon his graduation from Atlantic Christian Academy (now known as Barton College) in 1951, Lee joined the United States Air Force and served in Korea and Japan until October 1955. According to Lee's wife Harriet, P. Connor planned to settle down near his hometown to farm.¹¹ When farming proved too expensive for the young couple, Lee decided to go back to school, and entered the engineering program at North Carolina State College. Lee, who had a talent for drawing, quickly discovered that his interests were in architecture and transferred to the School of Design. Through the influence of the School, Lee became an enthusiastic student of Modernist design. Under the study of George Matsumoto, a well-known professor at the School of Design, Lee was awarded first place in the 1959 Edison Electric *Light for Living Home Design Competition* for his design.¹²



Lee graduated from the School of Design in 1960; like many graduates from the program, Lee decided to stay in North Carolina, moving to Charlotte and joining J. N. Pease Associates, a firm known for its Modernist designs. Lee worked for the firm for four years, and received several awards during his time there, including an A.I.A. Merit Award for his design of a branch bank for First Citizens Bank & Trust. After leaving J.N. Pease, Lee worked in Charlotte as a partner with Brackett, Sadri & Lee before moving to Raleigh to establish a branch office for Lyles, Bissett, Carlisle & Wolfe. Lee and his family returned to Charlotte in 1966, and Lee joined Cameron, Little & Associates; Lee became partner in the firm after Mr. Cameron's death in 1967.¹³ During his time with the firm, Lee designed a new headquarters for the Federal Home Loan Bank in Greensboro. Harriet Lee recalls that this was one of her husband's favorite projects—he was given an unlimited budget and was responsible for designing the building, interior and landscaping.¹⁴ The design for the Federal Home Loan Bank is an excellent example of Lee's innovative commercial work. Lee left Little, Lee & Associates to establish his own firm in 1971, and continued to work until his death in 1977.



Federal Home Loan Bank, Greensboro, N.C.

P. Connor Lee designed the house at 3714 Country Ridge Road in the neighborhood of Mountainbrook in 1963. Like other suburbs in the area, Mountainbrook's curving streets held traditional housing—the Lee House was one of a handful of Modernist designs in the neighborhood. The design of the house was heavily influenced by the residential work of George Matsumoto, one of Lee's professors at the School of Design. Like many of Charlotte's Modernist residences, the Lee House was designed to take full advantage of the large wooded lot sloping down toward a creek; the rear of the house included two full stories, with a bank of second-story sliding glass doors opening out to an open porch. Lee kept the landscaping to a minimum, preserving the natural look of the lot. Lee and his wife helped to build the house, and tried to involve the family in the process—each of their three children were allowed to choose the color of the carpets in their bedrooms, and Lee used a leftover bucket of plaster to create a hand-drawn picture of the family standing before their new home.¹⁵



George Matsumoto

P. Connor Lee and his family lived in the house until 1965, when a move to Raleigh forced them to sell it. The house has since had six owners since the Lee family moved; with the exception of some minor alterations to the house and the landscaping, the house remains remarkably intact.¹⁶ This is due mainly to the respect that the current owners, Leslie and Dorothy Fleck, have shown to the original design of the house. This kind of integrity is rare in Charlotte's Modernist residences, many of which have undergone extensive interior and exterior alterations. The house is an excellently preserved example of Modernist residential architecture in Charlotte,

as well as a reflection of the ways in which Modernist houses fit into the new suburban developments surrounding the city in the 1950s and 1960s.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND DESCRIPTION



The Praise Connor Lee House is located at 3714 Country Ridge Road in the Mountainbrook neighborhood in the southeastern section of Charlotte, North Carolina. Mountainbrook was one of a number of suburban developments that were built around the city in the 1950s and 1960s; with its curvilinear streets, limited access, and naturalistic setting, Mountainbrook is a typical suburban neighborhood. The Lee House is located on the north end of a .498-acre lot, which is heavily wooded behind the house and slopes down toward a small creek. The house sits relatively close to the street, allowing for a large back yard. A series of natural brick steps leads from a terrace opening from the basement level of the house down to the rear of the property. The landscaping of the property is minimal, and takes advantage of the natural look of the lot.

The Lee House is an example of the flat-roof subtype of the Contemporary Style, a residential design described by Virginia and Lee McAlester in *A Field Guide to American Houses* as "a favorite for architect-designed houses built during the period from about 1950 to 1970."¹⁷ The Contemporary Style is considered a descendent of the International Style, but differs in the use of natural materials for exteriors and in the importance placed upon integrating the house into the landscape. Sherry Joines-Wyatt and Sarah Woodard expanded upon the definition of the Contemporary Style in their *Survey of Post War Architectural Resources in Charlotte*. In the survey, the Lee House is cited as an example of a contemporary sub-type called the shoebox, which, as the name suggests, is essentially a rectangular box. "The type may be small, or it may only appear small, while in fact is two or more stories in height, with the other levels concealed in the landscape. The shoebox is generally clad in wood siding, which is often vertical, and has

Asian influences. The shoebox has either a flat roof or a non-traditional roof . . . Usually, the rear and/or sides of the type will have large expanses of glass."18



The Lee House fits the description of a shoebox Contemporary exactly. The simple, one story facade, with its recessed entrance containing a double door flanked by two sets of sliding glass doors, is unassuming from the street; however, the side and rear reveal a basement level that completely changes the appearance of the house and takes advantage of the sloping lot. Along both levels of the rear elevation is a series of sliding glass doors—five on the main level and two at the basement level—that maximize views of the property and natural light. On the second story, a screened cedar porch running the length of the rear elevation extends over the basement level.

The east and west elevations of the house reveal both the main and basement levels of the house. Both elevations feature a single, two-light, steel casement window; the windows are accentuated by plywood sheets above and below the openings, creating a textural contrast with the rest of the exterior. On the east elevation is a two-car garage at the basement level; a driveway extends from the garage to the front of the property along the east edge of the property line. The house has a flat tar roof with a slight overhang at the eaves. The exterior of the house is covered in vertical wood siding painted a pale gray-green, with a darker gray-green on the main entry.

There have been several minor alterations made to the exterior of the Lee House. The small ramp that originally led to the narrow front stoop has been removed and replaced by a series of four stacked wood platforms that serve as steps leading to the entrance. The carport on the east elevation has been enclosed to create the existing garage. On the west side of the house is an exterior fireplace of natural brick that was added in the mid-1970s. The rear terrace that opens out from the basement was probably built around the same time; the bricks used in the edging of the terrace, the steps leading to the back yard, and in the short wall running from the west elevation of the house to the edge of the property match those used in the fireplace. The exterior

of the house has also been repainted—according to Harriet Lee, the house was originally stained a soft gray, with the door and some trim painted black.¹⁹



The interior of the Lee House illustrates the innovative use of space indicative in Modernist residential design. The main level of the house consists of the central living area flanked by two matching suites, each with two bedrooms connected by a shared bathroom. A central core that contains the stairwell, two storage closets, and the main wall of the kitchen separates the space in the main living area. The open stairwell is centered between these two closets, and faces the main entrance. The kitchen wall is on the opposite side of the stairwell in this center core, and faces the main living area and the enclosed porch beyond. This wall contains the refrigerator, range, a double oven, dishwasher, and upper and lower cabinets. The kitchen is separated from the living/dining area by a low countertop island that houses the sink, a small eat-in bar, and cabinets on both sides of the island. With the exception of the refrigerator and the dishwasher, all the appliances and materials in the kitchen are original.²⁰



This photograph demonstrates Lee's sensitivity to the house's setting, a cardinal principle of Modernism. The house appears

to be suspended on a cliff even though it is in a Charlotte suburb.



This was Connor and Harriet Lee's second and larger home in Charlotte. It too takes advantage of the terrain. It shares many features with the other house, sliding glass doors, built-in cabinets, and spiral metal stairway.

The kitchen opens directly out onto the living and dining area, which faces the bank of sliding glass doors and the porch beyond. This area is essentially a large, open space, with a wood-burning stove located at its east wall. White wooden beams running from the kitchen wall, continuing through the living room and the screened porch, punctuate the ceiling of the main living area. These beams are supported by wooden posts, and are meant to resemble steel beams—artificial "rivets" enhance the effect.

The bedroom suites connect to the living area by way of small hallways that open onto both bedrooms. The south bedrooms open out onto the porch through sliding glass doors; the north bedrooms each have a single casement window. Some interesting features in the bedroom suites include the storage units along the walls separating the living area from the suites. These units are also in the main living area. Each unit extends out from the wall, and spaces are left above and below the units, giving the impression that they are floating.

The basement level of the Lee House is reached by a narrow, metal, spiral staircase located just across from the main entrance. At the landing of the stairs are a small bathroom and the door to the garage. To the right of the stairwell, a large living area opens out. The room has the same ceiling beams that are on the main level; the walls are covered in wood paneling. On the west wall of the room is the large brick fireplace that was added in the 1970s. The room opens out onto the rear terrace by way of two sliding glass doors. The east end of the basement contains what was originally P. Connor Lee's darkroom, and is now the laundry room.²¹

The interior of the Lee House remains essentially as it was when the Lee family lived in the house. Some minor alterations include the installation of parquet wood flooring on the main level, and the painting of the wooden beams, which were originally black. The small bathroom in

the basement level of the house was originally the laundry area; however, P. Connor Lee's working drawings of the house (which were given to the Flecks by Harriet Lee) indicate that the room was intended to be a bathroom.

The P. Connor Lee House, despite minor changes to the exterior and interior, retains its architectural integrity. This retention of the most of the original fabric of the house is an exception to the usual treatment of Modernist houses, whose owners wish to build anew or change them completely. The rarity of Modernist residences like the Lee House remaining in Charlotte is compounded by the fact that many of these houses have been demolished or have undergone extensive interior and exterior restoration. Modernist architecture, although used regularly in commercial and industrial sectors, was never truly considered an accepted style, especially for housing. The Lee House, a unique residence when built in 1963, is now among a handful of Modernist residences left in the city, many of which are quickly disappearing from Charlotte's landscape.

¹ Sherry Joines Wyatt and Sarah Woodard. *Final Report: Post World War Two Survey* (Available through the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission Website at www.cmhpf.org/hlc/postww2survey.htm), 39.

² *Final Report: Post World War Two Survey*, 4.

³ Catherine W. Bishir, Charlotte V. Brown, Carl R. Lounsbury, and Ernest H. Wood, III. *Architects and Builders in North Carolina: A History of the Practice of Building* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Publishers, 1990), 355.

⁴ *Ibid*, 354.

⁵ *Final Report: Post World War Two Survey*, 8, 14.

⁶ *Ibid*,

⁷ *Architects and Builders in North Carolina*, 359.

⁸ *Ibid*, 358.

⁹ Sarah W. Baker. *Survey and Research Report for the P. Connor Lee House* (written for Historic Preservation Course and UNCC), 2.

¹⁰ *Final Report: Post World War Two Survey*, 28.

¹¹ Harriet J. Lee. Interview conducted by Emily and Lara Ramsey, January 14, 2002.

¹² *Survey and Research Report for the P. Connor Lee House*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ Harriet J. Lee Interview.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Survey and Research Report for the P. Connor Lee House*, 4.

¹⁷ Virginia and Lee McAlester. *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 482.

¹⁸ *Final Report: Post World War Two Survey*, 43.

¹⁹ Harriet J. Lee Interview; Dorothy and Leslie Fleck. Interview conducted by Emily and Lara Ramsey, January 10, 2002.

²⁰ Dorothy and Leslie Fleck Interview.

²¹ Harriet J. Lee Interview.