



2006 Preservation Award Winner

Keck & Keck Designed Fagen/McMahon Mid-century Modern Home on Market, Likely Prospect for Preservation

It's not easy to rehab a neglected building, much less a neglected mid-century modernist building, but the 1950s Fagen/McMahon house designed by the renowned Chicago architectural firm of Keck & Keck is worth the effort.

For sale since June, the house sits nestled atop the crest of a wooded lot at 1711 Devonshire Lane, just off Old Mill Road in southwest Lake Forest, on former Lasker Estate land. Showing to the roadway, the home presents itself as a low wall of naturally colored wood and masonry at the top of the curved driveway. The style is the naturalistic, organic design of Frank Lloyd Wright's late 1930s, Usonian style—with warm, earth-hugging, natural, open-planned spaces transitioning through window walls typically to natural landscapes. The expansive south single-story elevation utilizes passive solar sustainability: floor to ceiling window walls across the house underneath a broad overhang that allows in winter sun but screens the light out in summer. The masonry floors absorb the heat in winter, keeping the house warm during the long evenings.

The Fagen/McMahon house is arguably one of Lake Forest's most architecturally significant examples of mid-century modern design. But, sadly, it has been permitted to deteriorate.

Teardown Unlikely

Keck & Keck first gained national and international attention for their Houses of Tomorrow at Chicago's 1933-34 Century of Progress World's Fair. The firm went on to design modern, award-winning, affordable homes in the Chicagoland area and around the Midwest from 1935-1979. The Fagen/McMahon house was built for mid-century art patron Mrs. Abel Fagen-- who was the subject of a portrait by artist Salvador Dali-- then later owned by the notable arts couple, Franklin and Irene McMahon. Franklin was a nationally known prolific artist-reporter who created line drawings for major magazines and newspapers while covering momentous events in the civil rights struggle, spacecraft launchings, national political conventions, and the Vatican.

Sold by McMahon in 2007 for \$1.16 million, just a year after it received an award from the Lake Forest Preservation Foundation, it is now on the market for \$799,900 and in need of major rehabilitation. As described in the online listing, "This home needs to be completely remodeled or tear down and build your dream!" The former certainly is true; based on the visual condition; it is likely that the expansive roof and perhaps much of its understructure will need reconstruction. Electrical, HVAC, plumbing, insulating, and driveway work may also be necessary. Very likely there will need to be sensitive updating of bath, kitchen, and utility areas, as well as compatible decorating -- all of which is possible. But overall, with its central sunken living room open through windows to the south, the house's rehabilitation will yield a mid-century masterpiece at a time when the modernism revival is in full swing. The large, naturally landscaped grounds with lawn areas north and south should make this a remarkably private preserve.

Despite the home's condition, it is unlikely to be approved as a teardown by the Building Review Board since the house is both architecturally and historically significant. If demolition is denied by the Building Review Board--a likely prospect for an owner seeking to tear it down-- the local ordinance requires a *two-year waiting period* during which the house must be assertively marketed to find an owner willing to preserve it. Most demolition requests are approved by the Building Review Board, but in this case the compelling arguments against demolition, including the economic and construction feasibility of rehabilitation, make approval of demolition highly unlikely.

Furthermore, there are significant property tax incentives that the next owner could seek to make rehabilitation more economically viable. The house will easily qualify for landmark status. Once landmarked, the house would be eligible for an eight-year tax freeze to help fund the rehabilitation, followed by a four-year gradual step-up to the post-rehab level, resulting in twelve years of reduced property taxes. A tax freeze would lock in the current \$15,000 annual tax payment rather than the more likely \$25,000 post-rehab taxes for a \$1.5 million house in the area—about a \$100,000 off the sum required for the work to return the house to 21st century livable conditions.

Artists' Homes as Predictors of Future Value

It is always instructive to note where artists rent and buy houses locally over the years; this offers fascinating insights into the virtues of overlooked places. Everybody knows that artists in cities like Chicago and New York pioneer new neighborhoods. Less known on the North Shore is that artists ferret out isolated undervalued living spaces that later may be highly prized. Earlier in the 20th century, the Milo Winters lived in the 1860 D. R. Holt gardener's cottage on Washington Road south of Deerpath, in the delightful brick gatehouse at 425 N. Sheridan (in the 1990s the office of architect Dan Sutherland), and in the David Adler-designed Birmingham garage on the southwest corner of Mayflower and Spring Lane. The McMahons, who had a large family, started out in an Edward Humrich-designed gem on South Green Bay Road, already restored after demolition was denied some years ago; in the Russell Walcott house on Mayflower; and then at 1711 Devonshire. Present-day garden designer Dorothy Hebert and her late husband Leon lived earlier in one of the Bertha Brown cottages on Washington Road south of College, since then beautifully restored and updated by architect Steve Douglass for his family. Recently Dorothy has lived in a cottage on a Green Bay Road Lake Bluff estate, with a striking A-frame studio.

Concluding

In this case, the educated eye of nationally-known artist Franklin McMahon sought out an undervalued mid-century modern classic—when it was about forty years old or just “old fashioned”—for himself and his wife in their later years. Now this is again undervalued, for sale for not much more than the price of the unimproved land. For a reasonable investment now, a sensitive owner can have a glossy magazine-spread-worthy example of the best of mid-century modern architectural design for a relatively modest cost. As a weekend place for a city family, or a year-around home for a commuter or for somebody working in a nearby corporate headquarters, this is one of the community's best rehab opportunities of recent years.

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