

With a landscape largely defined by winding country roads, wide open spaces, and historic 19th-century farmstead properties, New Jersey's rural Warren County on the Pennsylvania border does not have much to offer in the way of Modern architecture. Where Modernism does exist, it is well hidden from public view. Such is the case of the Benjamin Gerson Residence in the small hamlet of Johnsonburg, which in addition to being Modern, has the distinction of being the last house

designed by Peter Blake (1920–2006). Blake was a prolific writer, editor, architect, and participant in the design movements of the mid-20th century whose full influence has yet to be chronicled and evaluated.

Completed in 2003, the Gerson Residence was commissioned by a New York journalist and editor to be his weekend retreat. The plans for the house are included in the Peter Blake Architectural

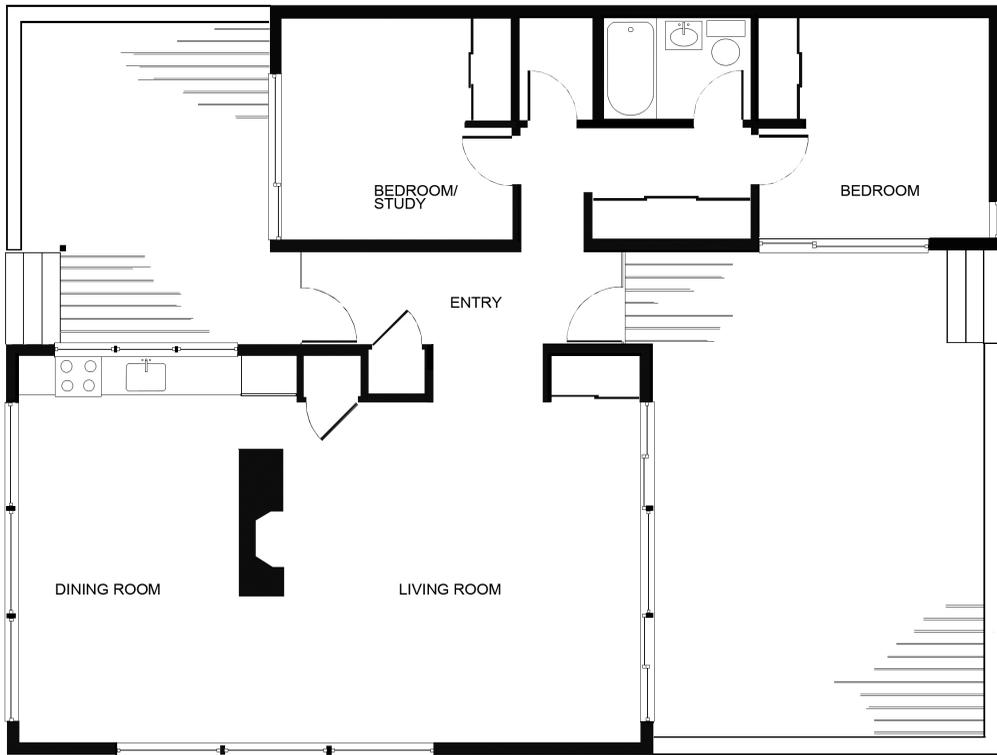
Records and Papers archived at Columbia University's Avery Library, but it has heretofore been unpublished and is largely unknown. When studied within the context of his complete oeuvre, this house offers an interesting finale to Blake's career, demonstrating a rare faithfulness to Modernist principles and an unusual degree of design integrity and continuity.

FIFTY YEARS OF PERSISTENT THOUGHT:

Benjamin Gerson Residence



Benjamin Gerson House, Peter Blake, 2003, Johnsonburg, NJ. Photo: Meredith Arms Bzdak



First floor plan, Benjamin Gerson House, 2003. Main entrance at left. Source: Peter Blake Architectural Records and Papers, Department of Drawings & Archives, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

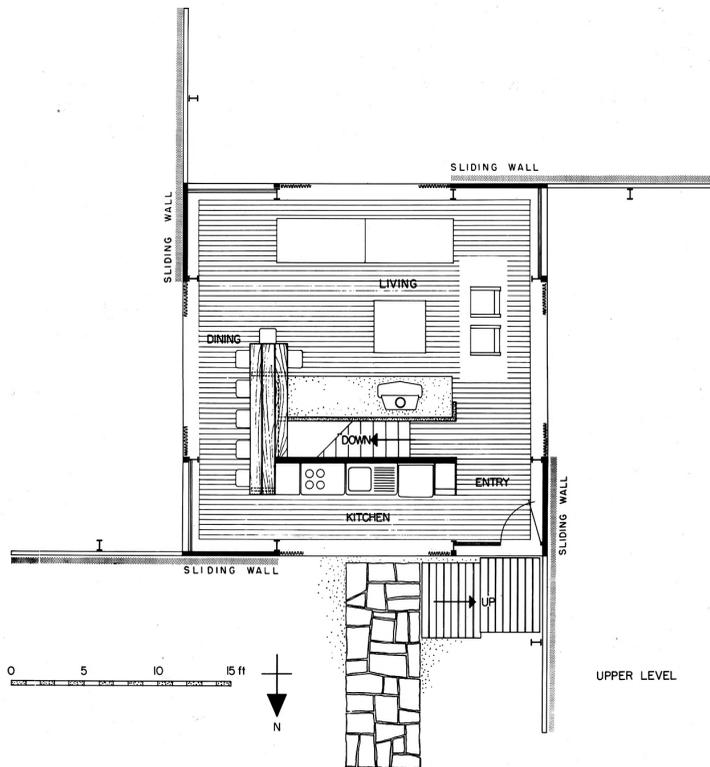
While Blake is principally remembered for his contribution to the world of architectural journalism, his career was far-reaching and encompassed an architectural practice, two years as the design and architecture curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and seven years as the architecture chair at

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Catholic University in Washington, DC. He was an editorial staff member of *Architectural Forum* for fifteen years before serving as chief editor from 1965 to 1972, after which he founded and headed the staff of the short-lived *Architecture Plus*. Blake authored a number of books on Modern architecture and its proponents, including a monograph on Marcel Breuer (1949), *The Master Builders: Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright* (1960), *Form Follows Fiasco: Why*

Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked (1977), and *No Place Like Utopia: Modern Architecture and the Company We Kept* (1993), the last a memoir that details his relationships with contemporary artists and architects. While his earliest writings centered on the legendary figures of the Modern movement whom he revered, his later works reflected his growing dissatisfaction with what the movement had become, particularly its irreverent iterations by contemporary architects and its disconnection from social reform. The output of Blake's architectural practice included over fifty buildings, primarily residential, with the majority of his built works located in the New York metropolitan area. Among the most noted were the Russell House (with Julian Neski, 1956) in Bridgehampton, NY, and the Pin Wheel House in nearby Water Mill, which he designed for himself and completed in 1954.

Although separated by nearly fifty years, the Gerson Residence and the Pin Wheel House are closely related in intent, form, and materials. Both dwellings, raised slightly off the ground, appear



Upper level plan, Pin Wheel House, Peter Blake, 1953, Water Mill, NY. The level rested on a narrow, stone-enclosed base story that accommodated bath, storage and utility spaces. Drawing courtesy Gordon de Vries Studio.

to float within their respective landscapes, taking full advantage of picturesque views—in both cases, wide-open fields with limited development nearby—from a variety of perspectives. While human-scaled, each house features floor-to-ceiling

windows that blur the boundaries of inside and outside, and consequentially make both houses feel more expansive than they really are. Both pivot around a strong central spine that serves as an organizing feature of a carefully controlled geometric floor plan. Clear distinction is made between the public realm (kitchen and living room) and the private realm (bedrooms) by their location along the central spine and more limited degree of openness.



Peter Blake with Pin Wheel House model, c. 1953. Photo courtesy Gordon de Vries Studio.

It is rare to find an architect, past or present, with such a persistent vision. Perhaps this can be attributed to Blake's long tenure as a keen observer of and leading force in the design world, or perhaps he was simply seeking to create, as many architects of the Modern movement were, the ideal single-family dwelling. In any case, the Gerson Residence is a testament not just to the resolve of one architect, but to the tenacity of Modernism, even in the most unlikely of places.

—MEREDITH ARMS BZDAK