

ICONIC HOUSES CELEBRATING RESIDENTIAL JEWELS

BY MICHAEL WEBB



Schminke House, Hans Scharoun



Villa Müller, Adolph Loos



Villa Savoye, Le Corbusier



Natascha Drabbe

NATASCHA DRABBE IS AN IMPASSIONED advocate of modernism, having caught the bug while growing up in the eastern Netherlands. "My parents were constantly moving to a different house, and my mother was an early adopter," she recalls. "We were usually the most modern people in our neighborhood." In 1986 she went to Utrecht to study art history, specializing in the iconography of old master paintings. "I was going to make that my career, but I realized that buildings had a much greater impact on people's lives and decided to become an intermediary between architects and the general public." As an architectural student she began guiding visitors through the 1924 Schröder House, Gerrit Rietveld's masterpiece. Later she would inherit the Van Schijndel house, which was inspired by Rietveld, and go on to establish Iconic Houses, an international support group for the custodians of progressive dwellings.

Early in the 20th century, Dutch architects led the world in progressive ideas for housing and public buildings, and Mart van Schijndel (1943-99) was part of that tradition. He won the 1995 Rietveld Award for the house he built for himself in the historic core of Utrecht. When the house was completed in 1992, Van Schijndel invited Drabbe, who had just graduated, to mind it while he was off on a trip. She stayed on and married him. "Living in such a house with an architect was an extraordinary experience," she says. "After his death, I looked for a similar space in Amsterdam and found only low-ceilinged apartments." She met her present husband, architect Hans van Heeswijk, when he was living in an old apartment in the south of the city. "I started to nag him about how dark it was, and he realized he should design a new house." They now share a luminous steel-framed cube with sweeping views over the watery landscape of East Amsterdam.



Cuadra San Cristobal, Luis Barragan



Mart van Schijndel House



Falling Water, Frank Lloyd Wright



Master's House, Walter Gropius

IN 2008 DRABBE ESTABLISHED THE VAN SCHIJNDEL

Foundation and published an exemplary book, *Van Schijndel House*, which is now available in English through NDCC Publishers in Amsterdam. It brings the home to life in pictures, drawings, text and a flash drive that includes a 1995 walk-through by the architect and comments on his other buildings. On the first Thursday of the month, she admits visitors to the house. "I want to know who is coming, though, so I lead all the tours myself," she explains. Their appreciative comments prompted her to correspond with people in a similar position.

That was the inspiration for Iconic Houses, an organization that Drabbe started in 2012 as a network of influential properties that are open to the public. Its goals, briefly stated, are to promote, protect, and conserve modern house museums. Members share information and ideas on fundraising, interpretation and survival in a fast-changing world. All the great form-givers are represented, including seven houses by Alvar Aalto, nine by Le Corbusier and ten by Frank Lloyd Wright. Most are located in Europe and the United States, though there are outliers in Morocco, Israel and Australia. Also included are a few legends that cannot be visited, such as the Melnikov house in Moscow, the Casa Malaparte on Capri and Hoffmann's Palais Stoclet in Brussels. At least they can be viewed from the outside, though, and a future owner might decide to open them to the public. That has already happened with Luis Barragán's Cuadra San Cristobal in Mexico City, where visitors can finally see the celebrated pink aqueduct.

Browsing the on-line list of Iconic Houses, one is tempted to hop on the next plane and begin a tour of these famous and obscure monuments of modernism. Several offer rooms for rent, and you could explore Berlin while staying in the colorful house that Bruno Taut built for himself in the Horseshoe housing estate, an idealistic development of the 1920s that remains a popular place to live. From there, you could drive out to explore the Bauhaus masters' houses in Dessau or spend a night in Haus Schminke, the masterpiece of Hans Scharoun. That jewel is located in Löbau, a few miles from the perfectly preserved baroque city of Gorlitz on the Polish border. Having gone so far, you might as well travel on to the Czech Republic to visit Adolph Loos's Villa Müller in Prague and the newly restored Villa Tugendhat of Mies van der Rohe in Brno.

Iconic Houses has about 150 members and recently held its third annual conference at Gaudi's La Pedrera in Barcelona. Participants shared ideas and experience on programming, photo shoots and the latest tools to enrich the visitor experience. A few architect-designed apartments have been added, and artists' houses and studios may also be invited to join. Drabbe has her own PR agency in Amsterdam, but the fast-growing Iconic Houses organization remains a labor of love. "Mutual support is vital," she says. "It's often a fight to preserve these modern homes." ■

iconichouses.org