

First of Its Kind

Karol and Brad Ehmen's Depression Moderne house at 2235 Madison has a unique story

By Ruth Hultz

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When Karol Ehmen, director of Quincy's Historic Business District, bought the Depression Moderne house at 2235 Madison, her friends were shocked.

But the flat-roofed, block house is a Moderne historic home. Built circa 1939, it was among the first of its kind in Quincy.

Ehmen had already owned an Italianate house and a Greek Revival house.

"I was looking for something historic that was different," said Ehmen. "I looked at everything in town and fell in love with this. It was unique when it was built and it is unique now, and I knew it would embrace my mid-century Moderne furniture."

Ehmen also was looking for something low maintenance.

The house's block exterior, steel windows, tubular ship's railings on the porches and absence of exterior trim fit the bill. The house felt safe and secure to Ehmen, "like a little bomb shelter."

Ehmen also loves other special features of the home, such as the arched nooks in the dining room and kitchen, the three level, or tray ceilings, and the plaster picture moldings. She was especially taken by the terrazzo window sills throughout the house.

The home's sleek lines, recessed lighting, 9-foot ceilings and large windows make the two-bedroom house feel larger than it is. The kitchen counter and cabinets are very shallow, giving the room more floor space.

Ehmen and her husband, Brad, have put in long hours restoring their home.

They painted the walls the original colors, which they discovered by scraping through layers and layers of old paint. Taking up layers of vinyl and paint to expose the colored, patterned concrete floors also took a lot of patience.

They removed carpeting in the living room to expose the oak parquet floors and plan to do the same in the rest of the house.

The house was built by William Arp, owner of William Arp Plastering Co. Arp and his craftsmen did the plasterwork in the Quincy Junior High School auditorium in 1929. William K. Arp, Arp's

grandson, said that Arp built the house to keep his crew working during the slow years of the Depression. Arp said it was not surprising that his grandfather built a Moderne house because he was known to be ahead of his time.

Arp said the floor joists are poured concrete and the concrete blocks for the house's exterior and for its interior basement walls were made by the crew at his grandfather's shop at 15th and Ohio.

Anthony Rubano, architect for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, said that the Depression Moderne style is one of the four or five Moderne styles that were popular in the 1920s and 1930s.

He said the Moderne styles were "intriguingly sexy" at the time and their look was based on the then-new streamlined designs of cars, boats, airplanes.

"The designs were intended to give people an optimistic outlook that, with reliance on technology, we could pull out of the Depression," Rubano explained.

