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## Is Modernism Worth Preserving?

Jane Barr, Chair, H.H.F. Preservation Committee

When Margaret J. Vann, editor of the *Historic Huntsville Quarterly*, asked me to write an article on “What makes a building important, which one, and why?” I replied, “No problem.” for several came to mind.

Sitting in the driveway of Monte Sano Elementary School, I watched a lady intently removing bits of stumps that were jutting out of the ground in the play area. She was preparing the soil for grass seed. Two children, 7- and 8-years-old, ran, jumped, and climbed on the playground equipment. A red-haired toddler tried to keep up with them.

As the 7- and 8-year-old children slid their sweaty bodies into my car and fastened their seat buckles, I asked: “Mike, what can you tell me about the building in front of us?” Mike replied “It’s pretty cool with a hall that has glass (all the way across the front of the building). There’s a nice bike stand and a *Drug-Free Campus* sign.” I next asked Matthew what he could tell me about the building. “Mike’s already said everything I was going to say. It has a very nice shiny chimney.” “That’s not a chimney,” Mike, being a year older, retorted. “You are both correct,” I said. “It is a chimney but not for a fireplace; it’s a vent for the cafeteria stove. You boys wait here a minute. I’m going to talk with the lady.”

As I approached the lady she called out: “Hello, Mrs. Barr.” I returned the call: “I want to thank you for your work in the playground. I’ve been sitting in the car writing about the building while the boys played on the equipment.” I went on to explain that I was looking at the building from the standpoint of preservation. An architectural description, when the school was built in 1959, would have been: brick, rectangular, side hall, one story, six classrooms, single pile from a window-lined hall, flat roof (see figure 1).

No Victorian fussiness. No wasted nooks and crannies. No antebellum super-imposing columns of the Greek temples. When the building was completed, there was a feeling of pride for being at the forefront not only of architecture but also history-making events. The linear building of metal, cinder-blocks, bricks, and glass was a Frank Lloyd Wright Usonian-inspired building<sup>1</sup> using 20th century technology.

No earthbound structure of the ancients, this was a spatial building for children of space age pioneers. Fresh air and maximum sunlight were prerequisites.

Having spent several years documenting architectural styles from basic dogtrot to twentieth-century ranch, I've come to appreciate each architectural style for its value in the continuum. As I would document each style, in preparation for filing National Register of Historic Places or Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage forms, I would not only see the building lines and materials, but I also would also become very aware of the people who whispered, shouted, laughed and cried within the buildings.

As I sat outside Monte Sano Elementary School, watching Mrs. C. working in the yard, my mind wandered back to the 1960s when I stood in the same spot watching children performing during May Day Program. Since the Space Program brought people from around the globe, the universal ambiance was reflected in the program. Accompanied by the school band, each class portrayed a different foreign country (see figure 2).

The 6<sup>th</sup> grade, representing the United States, using the theme of Space Age! Since the school was built to accommodate children of the space age we naturally had speakers like Dr. Eberhardt Rees and Dr. Ernst Stuhlinger, who were not only Dr. Wernher von Braun's assistants but also residents of Monte Sano.

I recalled sitting in the cafeteria listening to the guest speaker, Astronaut Alan Bean, during a Monte Sano Civic Association dinner. Speakers from around the globe came to our mountain and our school.

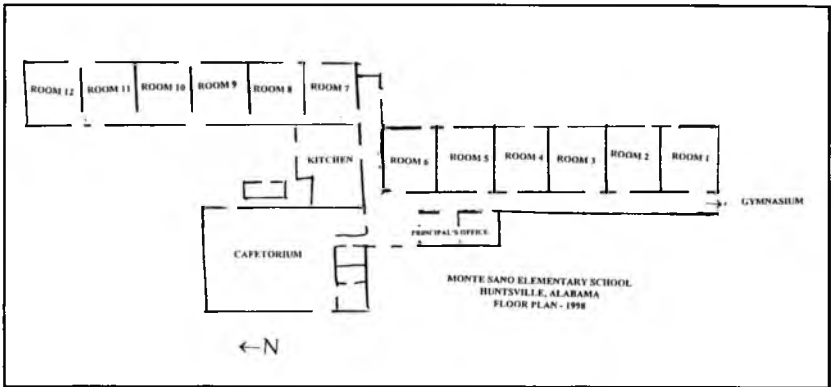


Fig.3 Floor plan of center hall design of Monte Sano Elementary School.  
Courtesy Jane Barr.



Fig.4 View showing pitched roof of Monte Sano Elementary School.  
Courtesy of Jane Barr.

By 1976 there were two additions to the building (see figures 3 & 4). This changed the design to center hall.<sup>2</sup> The flat roof was pitched to gable in 1989; however, the integrity of the contemporary style remained.<sup>3</sup>

Original style materials of the 1950s , sky blue and sunshine yellow ceramic tile, bricks, and cinder blocks, were used for the interior of the recently completed gymnasium..

If there is one building, in any community, I'd place at the top of the list for preservation, it would be any elementary school and for us on the mountain in particular, the Monte Sano Elementary school.

The value of the elementary school lies not in the structure but rather in the significance the building holds in the community.

The Historic Huntsville Foundation Preservation Committee recently met and approved a pilot program starting this fall. Using four schools as a nucleus, the children and their parents will be encouraged to participate in a program that will take them, starting with their classroom and school, into their community learning to appreciate and document buildings worth preserving. This program will focus on the historical value as well as the material and architectural value. The program will go into Monte Sano Elementary School, East Clinton Elementary School, Chapman Elementary School, and Lincoln Elementary School. Preservation will start in the schools.

If we can educate and inspire the children of today's "throw-away society," will they become the impetus for preservation? If we don't inspire the children, more, much more, than stark bricks and glass will be lost.

1 For a good example, visit the Sidney Rosenbaum house, Florence, Alabama, by Frank Lloyd Wright. (See Sergeant, John, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses*, Watson Guptill Publications, New York, 1983.)

2 Thanks to Dr. Cathy McNeal, principal, Monte Sano Elementary School, for the fire drill map used by Jane Barr to draw the floor plans.

3 For a good example, see Mossberg House, South Bend, Indiana, by Frank Lloyd Wright, 1946, in Calloway, Stephen and Cromley, Elizabeth, *The Elements of Style*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1991