



Mobile home (Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, 1970) located in Lago Vista, Texas: A glass, prow-shaped end breaks the box of the traditional mobile home.

Breaking the Box

A mobile home worth preserving



At home at a trade show in the early 1970s.

BY ANNA MOD

In 1970, 11 years after the death of Frank Lloyd Wright, the famous American architect's legacy firm, the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, collaborated with National Homes Corporation of Lafayette, Indiana, on a program called "Modular on Wheels," creating manufactured housing units that would qualify for standard 15- and 30-year bank mortgages, incorporate the efficiencies of mass-produced housing, and provide a quality, permanent housing product. Nicknamed "Mod on Wheels," the project focused on three manufactured housing types: mobile homes, panelized, and modular housing.

Mobile homes, by definition, are wood frame structures built on top of a steel chassis and fabricated in an assembly-line fashion. Wheels are placed under the chassis for the trip from the factory to the site and then removed. In contrast, panelized housing is built on-site on a permanent foundation utilizing preassembled panels, kit house-style. The third type, modular housing, is assembled in a factory and delivered to the site via a flatbed truck and then placed on a foundation. (The latter is often seen along Houston freeways and state highways.)

Lago Vista is a small community on Lake Travis, 20 miles northwest of Austin. In the early 1970s, a developer purchased three of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation-designed mobile homes to

promote and market the resort community. Of the three homes, one retains a significant amount of its architectural integrity, is in excellent condition, and merits preservation as a surviving example of the "Mod on Wheels" collaborative.

The example mobile home is a one-story, wood-frame-on-steel-chassis structure clad with vertically crimped vinyl siding with evenly spaced rivets and hex bolts. Notable design features include the strategically placed window banks along the long walls and the floor-to-ceiling windows in the two prow ends. The flat roof and drip cap, composed of three rows of horizontal metal siding, form the prominent horizontal lines of the structure.

Adjacent to the primary long façade is a wooden deck with trellis that has a linear and horizontal emphasis, mimicking the prow ends of the mobile home. The deck widens toward the full-width, angled front steps. The deck railing has the same crimped vinyl as the mobile home.

The floor plan is typical of this housing type, with rooms arranged to fit the constraints of the narrow 14-foot width. From end to end are the living room, dining room, kitchen, front bedroom, bath, laundry area, and rear bedroom. The placement of a large mirrored wall opposite the floor-to-ceiling window banks in the living room, along with the windowed prow end, gives the Wrightian feeling of

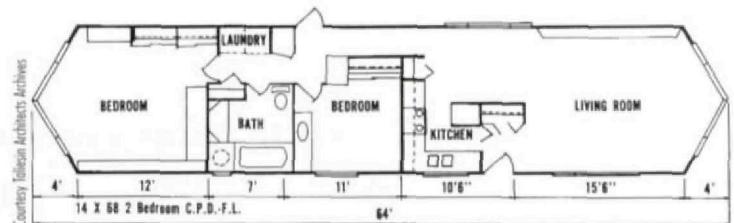


Interior looking through the living room prow end.



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View into living room from dining room and kitchen.



Courtesy Taliesin Architects Archives

“breaking up of the box.” Extant original furniture includes the couch, two armchairs, and small square side tables that double as stools. There are also two end tables that mimic the prow ends. The wood-burning stove is a later addition.

New Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) legislation in the late 1960s allowed for traditional mortgages for manufactured housing; subsequent legislation in the 1970s specified higher construction standards. This legislation set the stage for the collaboration between the National Homes Corporation and the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation to provide quality manufactured housing products to a new and growing market. The “Mod on Wheels” program was in development and production from 1970 to 1973.

The National Homes Corporation had a factory in Temple, Texas, and it is assumed that the three mobile homes at Lago Vista were assembled there. It is unknown how many mobile homes were produced during the “Mod on Wheels” program and where other examples are located.

The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation-designed mobile home at Lago Vista clearly displays design elements pioneered by the firm’s founder, such as the horizontal lines and the large grouping of box-breaking windows. This mobile home was con-

structed in an era when there was a major shift in the acceptance, both legislative and financial, of manufactured housing as an affordable permanent housing option. The “Mod on Wheels” program was a design response to this changing climate and a marketing attempt to reverse the stigma of this maligned and little-studied housing type. ■

Sources

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Courtesy Dr. Jocelyn Renwick



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Interiors from the trade show model (top and above).