

## Ranches in Redsville

### *Garrett Park's Mid-Century Modern Richterville*



Garrett Park's diverse architectural styles have arrived in waves — first the turn-of-the-century Victorians, then the small 1920s “Chevy” houses (so-named because, as an incentive, the sellers offered a loan for a Chevrolet as part of the mortgage). The third wave came right after World War II, when a Howard University architecture professor named Alexander Richter bought 15 acres on the southeastern edge of town to fulfill his vision of a new kind of home design.

The 26 houses he would build were called ranches or ramblers at the time. Now they're known as mid-century modern. The neighborhood, on Weymouth and parts of Keswick, Oxford, Shelley Court and Clermont Avenue, would be affectionately dubbed Richterville — and sometimes 'Redsville,' after the politics of its original inhabitants. Despite the inevitable renovations, the majority of the houses are still intact after seven decades with no major reconstruction having been done to them. The streetscape of Weymouth, in particular, has remained true to Richter's original intent.

Richter's modernist designs were influenced by the International style that originated in the Bauhaus school in Germany, where architects such as Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe introduced the concept of the pared-down “box” as the starting point of design. A lack of ornamentation was a guiding principle. When followers of this style emigrated to the U.S., they often transformed the box into a more rectilinear shape. Richter also drew on the organic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, whose interest in creating a modern American house is evident in his Chicago area “Prairie” style houses from the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in his mid-1930s “Usonian” houses, which were small and affordable, functional, spatially varied, and made of local materials. Wright believed that a horizontal orientation was suited to the New World's wide-open spaces.

Thus Richter was part of the movement to develop a North American style distinct from both classical and modernist European architecture. These architects were striving to democratize residential housing aesthetically — by offering open floor plans, efficient use of space and an intimate connection to the outdoors — as well as economically, by

making it reasonably priced for the booming postwar middle class.

Other contemporary but better-known neighborhoods that embodied the same vision in the Washington area were Hammond Wood, Hammond Hill and Rock Creek Woods in Maryland and Hollin Hills in northern Virginia, all by the architect Charles Goodman, who also designed the original National Airport terminal.

### From Brooklyn to Mexico



Originally from Brooklyn, Richter studied at Cooper Union and the Beaux Arts Institute of Design in New York in the 1920s (where he met fellow architect and future Garrett Park neighbor, Donal McLaughlin). He worked on New Deal projects, including helping to design “greenbelt” communities in Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and Greenbelt, Maryland, which were innovative planned towns surrounded by open space.

He spent time traveling in Europe in the 1930s, which opened his eyes to the threat of fascism, particularly in Spain. When the Spanish Civil War broke out, in 1936, he offered his services as an architect to the Republicans fighting against Franco’s dictatorship.

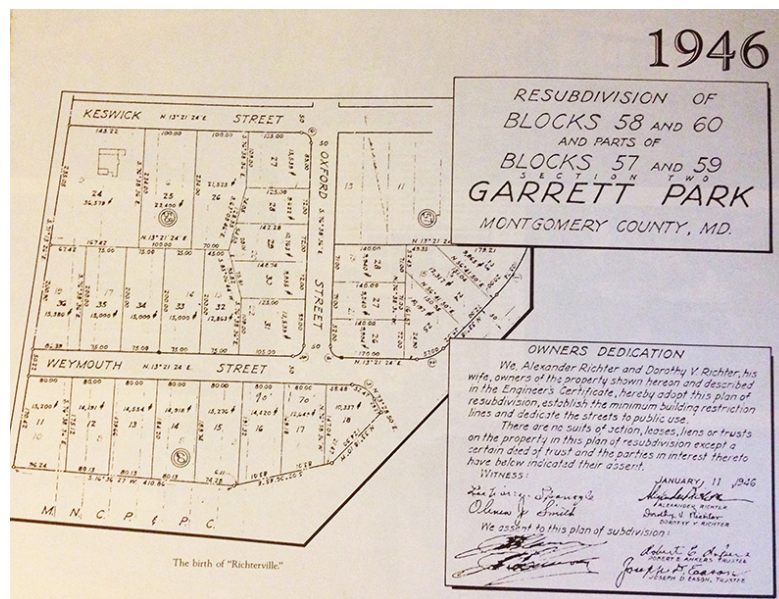
Richter moved to D.C. in 1939 and worked at the War Production Board during WWII. According to McLaughlin, his work impressed a Mexican businessman who, after the war, hired him to design the houses and buildings around his paper mill in Atenquique, Mexico, a mountainous area south of Guadalajara. His fee for that project apparently bankrolled his purchase of the Garrett Park land.

### Building on ‘Rabbit Hill’

After the war, Richter started teaching at Howard University and began looking for an area big enough to create a neighborhood and close enough to downtown D.C. to appeal to the postwar population. When he bought the 15-acre property in 1946 from the estate of Owen and Emma Truitt, who had lived in a large 1894 house at the end of Keswick Street, it had been on the market for around three years because several other builders had rejected the raw, hilly terrain with streams gushing through it as too difficult and unprofitable to build on. Richter embraced the challenge. Compared to his Mexican mountain town, the terrain seemed inviting. “Hills? These aren’t hills,” he told his son.

The steep slopes and brooks that ran down to Rock Creek were covered with oak, maple, dogwoods and tulip trees. A Washington Post reporter who interviewed him in 1954 described a future house lot as resembling a feeder gorge to Great Falls on the Potomac. Richter was passionate about preserving the forest and would site his houses side by side with old-growth trees. Locals called the top of the rise on Weymouth (where McLaughlin and Richter would one day build their own houses) “rabbit hill,” for its good hunting.

The land, which had been withdrawn from Garrett Park in 1916 for tax reasons, was restored to the town when Richter bought it and replatted it in 1946. He re-subdivided the lots and created his own company, Solar Construction, to build the homes, sometimes making use of his architecture students at Howard.



The property extended roughly from the west side of Rock Creek, currently Weymouth Street, to the east side of Clermont Avenue, and included parts of Oxford and Keswick streets, several lots on Knowles Avenue, and all of Shelley Court. To the south was a large tract of woods, fields and the Berry Farm, which would become the site of the Parkside Apartment complex in another decade.

### House-Hopping Family

As construction began on Keswick with four homes in 1946 and 1947, the Richter family — his wife Virginia and their three sons — started to move from house to house. They temporarily occupied the Truitt house until the one Richter built at 4405 Oxford was ready around the corner. After living there for a short time, Virginia decided she didn't like it, so he built another one across the street, at 4400 Oxford. She rejected that one as well. With his third attempt, at 10709 Weymouth in 1951, he finally got it right. They



would live there for the rest of their lives.

Richter held strong ideas that sometimes clashed with those of town officials. Getting the roads laid out and paved required countless meetings. He proposed that Weymouth Street be no wider than the older streets in town (20 feet) for aesthetic reasons, despite a new county code requiring them to be 26 feet wide. The town council meeting, where he presented his plan, was held at a house on one of the older, narrower streets. There was a knock on the door. A neighbor complained that he couldn't get his car past all the parked vehicles including the architect's. Richter "kind of looked sheepish," recalled town clerk Stanley Woodwell. "The council didn't have to say anything. He knew his request was turned down."

### Walls of Glass

Richter sited the low-slung, two-level homes so that they blend with the landscape. The hip-style or flat roofs have over-hanging eaves, which allow the sun to shine through in the winter and keep it out in the summer.



Depending on the layout of the lot, the main entrance to the house can be on the long side or in the gable end. If the slope permits, the lower floor is often built only partially below grade, allowing large windows and a walk-out basement. The houses have the long, low silhouette of a one-story house but with the advantages of a second level. Richter created half a dozen models, some smaller and more ordinary, others roomier and fancier.



In contrast to the Victorian and Chevy front porches that extended outward, many of the homes have small, inset porches that beckon inward. The large windows allow one to look through the house from front to back. Building materials are primarily brick and wood frame. Ornamentation is minimal.



With the open floor plan, the living and dining areas flow into each other. Floor-to-ceiling stone or brick fireplaces typically anchor the main living area. Paneling of cedar or pine and walls of glass facing south connect the interior space with the outdoors. Many houses had small screened-in back porches, some overlooking Rock Creek, although most have been replaced by additional rooms.



Richter believed in economizing on space. None of his houses would have been called large at the time, and by today's standards, they're considered small. One criticism by homeowners concerned the kitchens — they were tiny and “plopped down in the middle of the house” with too many doorways, according to Donn and Millie Mader, who bought





the house at 10704 Keswick. When a buyer complained, Richter would offer to buy back the house for the amount the owner had paid. No one ever took him up on it, according to McLaughlin. Although stubbornly proud of his designs, Richter did agree to some customizations requested by prospective buyers.

### Richter's House



Richter's family house at 10709 Weymouth was more ambitious than his other models while still managing to incorporate all of his modernist tenets. No substantial changes have been made to it over the years so it has retained its original features and flair.

The three-level home has flat, angled roofs and bands of horizontal windows. The cantilevered carport in front blends unobtrusively with the rest of the house. Each of the three levels is built on a concrete slab with radiant heating embedded in the floor. The green marble floor of the foyer gives way to Vermont slate in the redwood-paneled living and dining rooms. Richter's son Tom recalled how his father hired the teenager who lived down the street on Oxford to lay down the stone floor during his summer break. That teenager was Richard Maury, who would become a well-known realist painter based in Florence, Italy.

The high open-beamed ceiling throughout the main level creates a sense of wide open space. The large fireplace functions as a partial wall separating the living and dining

areas. Windows wrap around the open floor plan providing a view of the wooded backyard sloping down towards the creek. The small kitchen, which has been partially updated, contains efficient and clever storage areas, a drop-down ironing board in the wall, and an original skylight. Off the kitchen in the back is a screened-in porch.

Richter's use of natural light, which was common in all of his houses, comes to play in a subtle but significant way in the front hall stairway. He placed two small triangular yellow-tinted windows high up on each side of the stairway, one facing east, the other west. As the sun hits them from either side, the stairway gets lit up.

### **'Outlandish Design'**

Other Richter projects include the Kensington Cooperative Nursery School on Decatur Avenue. He designed the second-floor addition to 11018 Montrose, an International style house built in 1935 by Modern Houses, Inc. which has an unadorned boxy shape, smooth white walls and a rooftop sundeck. Richter, and his friend McLaughlin, also offered architectural advice on town projects such as the Garrett Park Community Center and the town swimming pool.



Richter considered his design of the Dittman house at 10709 Clermont to be one of his best. Banks, however, were often reluctant to offer loans for what they called "outlandish" contemporary designs, as his clients Allen and Laura Dittman learned after being rejected several times. They finally got a loan in 1957 and moved into the house despite the fact that the dirt road was mud-locked and wouldn't be paved for six months. Various renovations over the years haven't changed the basic concept of the redwood-sided house. It features indoor-outdoor living with an arched arbor that connects the house to the carport, with a flagstone patio and inset fish pond in between. The large kitchen and dining area look out onto the patio and are semi-open to the living room, all of which have floor-to-ceiling casement windows and vaulted ceilings with exposed post-and-beam construction.

After about a decade of building, Richter decided to slow down and sold off his unbuilt lots. The Abramovich family bought the one at 10708 Shelley Court and commissioned him to design their house in 1960. Robert Kirsch, a builder, bought the rest on Shelley, although Richter maintained aesthetic approval for each design and site plan.

## Redsville and Blacklists

Not only the design but the politics of Richterville stood out in the 1940s and 1950s. The McCarthy era and the Cold War anti-communist hysteria were at their height. There seemed to be some connection between progressive home design and progressive ideology. For many of the residents moving in, one of the main things they shared, apart from wanting a good place to raise their children, was left-leaning politics.

As members of the Democratic or Progressive parties, some supported Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential bid and campaigned against Maryland's "Ober Law" which required public employees to take a loyalty oath. Some were blacklisted. In 1948 Richter was among signers of a full-page ad in the Washington Post condemning a bill (co-sponsored by a congressman named Richard Nixon) that aimed to give the government the power to abolish the civil liberties of anyone it labeled as part of a communist front organization, which the ad called a step towards American fascism.

On a local level, the Richterville neighbors mounted opposition slates in town elections. When Ed Friedman, a lawyer who lived at 10702 Weymouth, ran for town council and lost, he overheard one of the more conservative politicians in town warn, "Stay away from that guy Friedman. He lives in Richterville. They call that Redsville." Friedman would later serve three terms as mayor.

## 'Fragile Resources'

It seems appropriate to conclude with a warning from the architectural historian, Clare Lise Kelly, who established the Montgomery Modern initiative of the Montgomery County Planning Department:

"Underappreciated and threatened with redevelopment, mid-century buildings are fragile resources as they are being demolished or renovated beyond recognition throughout the county. Too often buildings from this era have been considered outdated and obsolete, rather than recognized for their historic significance and architectural distinction. As awareness of mid-century modernism grows, it is our hope that more owners and residents will understand the value of these resources to understanding our past."

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Nancy Walz, Historic Preservation Committee, April 2018

### List of Houses

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| 10700 KESWICK - 1948   | 10700 WEYMOUTH ST - 1952                                |
| 10702 KESWICK - 1947   | 10701 WEYMOUTH ST - 1951                                |
| 10704 KESWICK - 1948   | 10702 WEYMOUTH ST - 1952                                |
| 10706 KESWICK - 1947   | 10703 WEYMOUTH ST - 1950                                |
| 4400 OXFORD ST - 1948  | 10704 WEYMOUTH ST - 1951                                |
| 4401 OXFORD ST - 1949  | 10705 WEYMOUTH ST - 1951                                |
| 4402 OXFORD ST - 1947  | 10706 WEYMOUTH ST - 1951 - designed by Donal McLaughlin |
| 4403 OXFORD ST - 1948  | 10707 WEYMOUTH ST - 1952                                |
| 4404 OXFORD ST - 1950  | 10708 WEYMOUTH ST - 1952                                |
| 4405 OXFORD ST - 1948  | 10709 WEYMOUTH ST - 1951                                |
| 4406 OXFORD ST. - 1948 | 10711 WEYMOUTH ST - 1951                                |
| 4408 OXFORD ST. - 1948 | 10713 WEYMOUTH ST - 1953                                |
|                        | 10804 WEYMOUTH ST - 1952                                |
|                        | 10709 CLERMONT AVE - 1957                               |
|                        | 10708 SHELLEY COURT - 1960                              |



**Sources** - Special thanks to Nancy Schwartz for research assistance

Town Archives: Oral histories; House files/Lot & Block; Resident files; Town meeting records; House tours.

*Garrett Park History of the Town up to 1970; Garrett Park Scrapbook 1898 - 1998*

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