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Demolition of modernist Raleigh home draws fire from preservationists

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A crew works on demolishing the Paschal House Friday March 1, 2013.

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RALEIGH — A 1950 modernist home that once drew praise from architect Frank Lloyd Wright was demolished Friday, following an eight-year effort to save it.

The Paschal House, located on a nearly three-acre lot off Glenwood Avenue, was on the National Register of Historic Places but has been vacant since 2007. The children of the original owner plan to divide the lot for five new homes – a move that has angered preservation groups that say the house still had a chance at restoration.

“It’s really sad, because it really should not have been torn down,” said Myrick Howard, president of Preservation North Carolina. “It was an act of vandalism.”

Howard said his group wasn’t told about the demolition; it had just met Friday morning with architects from Triangle Modernist Houses on a new plan for the property. The group hoped to seek a Raleigh Historic Landmark designation, which would have stalled the wrecking ball.

“We really were trying to make it work where you could have built additional houses and left the historic house intact,” he said, adding that the owners recently refused to show the house to potential buyers.

Robert Paschal, the son of the late original owner Dr. George W. Paschal Jr., said the family was left with no choice. They had advertised the property in national publications and wrote to architecture school deans to get

the word out.

“It’s been eight years and we’ve gotten no offers to restore the house,” Paschal said. “I think we tried to take every approach to the restoration we could.”

Paschal suspects the house’s bathrooms, bedrooms and closets were too small by today’s standards. After a renovation, he said, “the finished product would not be what people would expect for the kind of money involved.”

Architect Frank Harmon, who has taken students to visit the house, said there was plenty of interest – just not at the \$3.3 million asking price.

“They overvalued the land,” he said.

Harmon said the demolition is a huge loss for the architecture community, pointing to its sustainable building features decades ahead of their time.

“It’s a tragedy,” he said. “We’ve lost the greatest example of residential design in the last 60 years.”

The one-story hillside house is one of several remaining in the area designed by modernist architect James Fitzgibbon. The house, built with granite, wood and glass, features an atrium on each end as well as a long, flat roof. Instead of air conditioning, it had expansive windows to ventilate the house, heated floors and a sunken fireplace to provide warmth in the winter.

The home’s last resident was Beth Paschal, Robert Paschal’s mother, who died in 2009. Asked in 2007 about the idea of razing her longtime home, she said, “I try not to think of that.”

After sitting empty for six years, Robert Paschal said the new plan for the site respects the property owners next door.

“We hope that the houses on each lot will fit in nicely with the neighborhood there,” he said.

Howard, however, has a different perspective. “What will be built there will be cookie cutter McMansions,” he said.

The sudden demolition shows the importance of getting protective covenants for historic properties before it’s too late, he said.

“This says loud and clear, if you have a house that’s historic ... you need to put some sort of protection on it,” he said.

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