

# Gores Pavilion for the Arts in Irwin Park, New Canaan

In September 1960 the architect Philip Johnson organized a surprise party to celebrate the opening of a pool house at the Irwin estate in New Canaan, Connecticut. The unsuspecting man of honor was Landis Gores, the architect of the building. The guest list included architectural luminaries of modern architecture Marcel Breuer, Eliot Noyes, Paul Rudolph, Peter Blake, and I.M. Pei. Landis Gores, confined to a wheelchair since contracting polio in 1954, and his wife Pamela arrived a little late, and Gores later wrote, "Had I thus understood the occasion I would have moved Heaven and Earth to be precisely on time."

Gores, a member of the Harvard Five, admired the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, and the building pays homage to Wright through its low-pitched roofs and dramatic overhangs. There are also traces of the Bauhaus influence, with rows of slim columns in front of the two wings. The building is completely symmetrical, which, though not a characteristic usually associated with Wright or the Bauhaus, is often found in mid-century modern architecture in New Canaan. This building is special in its varied influences and in its particularity to this era and locale.

In 2005, almost 50 years after the pool house was built, the 36-acre Irwin estate was purchased by the town of New Canaan, which intended to use the land to create a park. The main house, garage, and the pool house were the only significant remaining structures. The pool house had fallen into disrepair; although the back of it was slightly visible from the road, many actually thought the building had been torn down. Once the purchase was complete, the town filled the swimming pool and planned to demolish the pool house once and for all.

A small group known as the Friends of the Gores Pavilion, coordinated through The New Canaan Historical Society, decided to fight to preserve the building. The group created a program for adaptive reuse, transforming the building into the Gores Pavilion for the Arts in Irwin Park.

The idea was to restore the main room as a "period" piece and create gallery spaces in the wings. With the exception of Philip Johnson's Glass House, the modern homes of New Canaan are



all privately owned and inaccessible to the public. The Friends' goal was to make this building available to the public. It would be owned by the town and leased and operated by The New Canaan Historical Society.

Before all of the funds had been raised, DOCOMOMO, an international group interested in documenting and conserving buildings of the modern movement, wrote an article in its Fall 2005 newsletter about the potential fate of the building and the local efforts to save it. The news spread, and a group of architecture students from the University of Arizona became interested in the building. The students' work brought them to Connecticut, where they presented their theoretical visions for additions and renovations to the building in April 2006.

The Gores Pavilion for the Arts was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2006. Funds for the project were raised through private donations and included a matching grant from Connecticut's Historic Restoration Fund. The project was administered by the Historic Preservation and Museum Division of the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism (now the Department of Economic and Community Development's State Historic Preservation Office.)

The building is now open seasonally. The first exhibition, on display in both wings through May 2013, is "Living Modern in New Canaan," a review of the Harvard Five and the architects who followed them, created by artist Bob Gregson. ➡

William D. Earls A.I.A. is a licensed architect and the architect of record for the renovation of the Gores Pavilion for the Arts in Irwin Park. He is also the author of *The Harvard Five in New Canaan* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2006).

below: The Gores Pavilion for the Arts in Irwin Park today. photo: Robert Gregson DECD



Fireplace and couches today. photo: Robert Gregson DECD



## Explore!

Gallery interior today. photo: Robert Gregson DECD

**The Gores Pavilion for the Arts in Irwin Park**, 848 Weed Street, New Canaan, is operated by the New Canaan Historical Society. It is open from April through October, Friday through Sunday, 11 a.m. – 3 p.m. or for tours by appointment. On view through May 2013 is "Living Modern in New Canaan." For more information visit [nchistory.org](http://nchistory.org) or call 203-966-1776.

### Robert Damora, Photographer

Architect Walter Gropius called Robert Damora "the best photographer of architecture in this country." The Estate of Robert Damora is currently restoring images from his original negatives and color transparencies. Prints and portfolios are available to people who wish to help fund this effort. For more information and to see more Robert Damora photographs visit [robertdamora.com](http://robertdamora.com).

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