

# A 'Tiny House' That Predates the Current Craze

Paul Rudolph's Walker Guest House offers the security of a cave with the joy of a pavilion.

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Designed to minimize the distinction between inside and outside, the house has flaps that can cover the windows to provide privacy. Photo @ Anton Grassl, Esto

Most Americans are more than happy to live in houses all but indistinguishable from the ones occupied by their next-door neighbors. You can drive for miles on Florida's Sanibel Island, a resort-and-retirement spot on the Gulf of Mexico, without seeing a home that stands out from the bungalows, ranch houses and Spanish Colonial mini-mansions that line the roads. But **Paul Rudolph's Walker Guest House**, built there in 1952-53 and still owned by one of its original occupants, is a spectacular exception to the rule of comfortable conformity that dominates American domestic architecture.

A 576-square-foot "tiny house" that predates by more than a half-century the current craze for scaled-down dwellings, it's a glass-and-wood beach cottage designed in the severely elegant style of Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House and Philip Johnson's Glass House. Sixty-five years after it was built, the Walker Guest House remains startlingly contemporary. Rudolph himself said that it "crouches like a spider in the sand." Yet the uncluttered interior is bright, airy and paradoxically spacious-looking, and you needn't be addicted to midcentury modernism to find it not just beautiful but lovable.

To see [the Replica] is to realize what American homeowners have missed by their reluctance to embrace the spare beauties of modernism.

Frugally constructed out of inexpensive ready-made materials that could be shipped by ferry to Sanibel Island from the nearest lumberyard, the Walker Guest House consists of a 24-foot-wide living-and-dining area, a simple galley kitchen, a cozy bedroom and a shower-only bathroom, all of them suspended 18 inches off the house's seaside bed of crushed oyster shells. **Walt Walker**, a Minneapolis doctor who was recovering from tuberculosis and found it hard to cope with Minnesota's lethal snowstorms, commissioned it as a warm-weather retreat for himself and his wife. Accordingly, the house was deliberately designed to minimize the distinction between inside and outside. But unlike the Mies and Johnson houses, whose floor-to-ceiling glass walls deprive their occupants of privacy, the air-cooled interior is protected from the eyes of strangers by eight huge top-hinged plywood flaps, each one counterbalanced by a cannonball-like 77-pound iron weight, that can be raised and lowered by hand from inside the building. (That's why the residents of Sanibel call it "the **cannonball house**.") "With all the panels lowered the house is a snug cottage, but when the panels are raised it becomes a large screened pavilion," Rudolph explained. "If you desire to retire from the world you have a cave, but when you feel good there is the joy of an open pavilion."

Today Rudolph, who died in 1997, is best remembered for his public buildings in the now-unfashionable "brutalist" style, many of which have either been torn down or are earmarked for demolition. But it was his Florida vacation homes that put him on the map, so much so that the Walker Guest House was the subject of an enthusiastic 1954 two-page spread in *McCall's* ("This small summer house... is as nearly sky, sand dunes and sunshine as a house can be").

Their continuing fame is well deserved. Like Frank Lloyd Wright's 880-square-foot Seth Peterson Cottage, another miniature masterpiece and the smallest of the "Usonian" houses that Wright designed for middle-class homeowners, the Walker Guest House is so compact and logically organized that to step inside feels almost as though you're putting on a piece of clothing. At the same time, though, the window-walls eliminate any unwanted feeling of claustrophobia, and within a matter of moments you're in close harmony with the house's natural surroundings.

Rudolph's Florida houses are now so widely admired that in 2015 the **Sarasota Architectural Foundation (SAF)** built a near-exact replica of the Walker House on the grounds of **The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art**, a bit more than a hundred miles away. While the actual house is fairly easy to spot from the road, it's partly concealed from view by thick, scrubby foliage. Not so the replica, which was sited in a clearing and is open to the public. You can go in, spend all the time you want looking around—the furnishings were copied from surviving photographs of the house's original interior—and imagine what it would be like to spend your life inside a work of art.

The **Walker Guest House Replica** was specifically designed to be portable, and the SAF is looking for a new place to move the house after it closes next month in Sarasota. "We're actively exploring a few options," says Janet Minker, chairwoman of the SAF board. I've no idea why some other museum hasn't snapped it up. To see it is to realize what American homeowners have missed by their reluctance to embrace the spare beauties of modernism.

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