



House Keeper



WRITTEN BY: [JANE SZITA](#) NOVEMBER 5, 2012

Today the [Iconic Houses website](#), a new resource for travelers and fans of 20th-century houses, goes live. With its handy map interface, the site identifies dozens of iconic Modernist houses around the world, most of them open to visitors and some even accommodating overnight guests. An app for the iPhone and iPad is also in the works.



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Inside Fallingwater on [iconichouses.org](#)

Iconic Houses is the brainchild of Natascha Drabbe, an architectural historian and herself the owner and curator of a house museum in the Netherlands. Dwell talked to her about her new venture, which she hopes will help preserve the heritage of last century's often beleaguered modern homes.

What gave you the idea for [iconichouses.org](#)?

It all started when my husband, the architect Mart van Schijndel, died, leaving me to decide the future of the famous [house he built in Utrecht](#). In 2008, I set up a foundation to open the house up for people to experience it, and in the visitors' book a certain comment mentioned several more iconic houses by other architects, some of which I'd never even heard of. So that set me off searching, and it was hard to find the information I wanted. I quickly realized that there was a need for a resource that brought together all the important houses of the 20th century.

Before our website, there was no place you could go to quickly locate these unique houses and plan a visit.



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Now, if you're staying in Paris, for example, our site allows you to see that you're close to the only house Alvar Aalto built outside Finland. And there are houses where you can even stay overnight—for example Vann Molyvann's hidden gem in Cambodia. So it seemed a good idea to combine travel and these iconic homes.



The Aalto House on iconichouses.org

How many houses are currently on the site?

We are starting out with a hundred, but we expect to have lots of new submissions after our launch. We've developed stringent selection criteria, to ensure that we feature only the best—places like Frank Lloyd Wright's [Fallingwater](#) and [Mies van der Rohe's Villa Tugendhat](#), but also lesser known places in Asia and South America.

As well as houses on the site there is lots of background on their creators and history, and news about projects, events and developments. For example, the plan to construct Adolf Loos' unbuilt house for Josephine Baker in China.

Have you visited all of them yourself?

I'm trying, and so far I'm up to 40. For the past few years I've organized every single break I've taken to view houses, and stay in them wherever possible. It's important to experience the architecture, and staying overnight is the best experience possible. I've had wonderful times staying at Haus Schminke and the Bauhaus apartments in Dessau, for example.

You must have uncovered some great stories in the process of your research.

Often quite sad ones. Many times the houses are like orphans when they lose their original owners. Take Eileen Gray's house—its last owner was murdered in the house and it was left empty for years, its windows smashed. Now it's being restored and will hopefully eventually be open to the public, but it's a long process and a huge endeavor to rescue these houses from neglect and oblivion.



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Along the way to creating the site, you also founded the Iconic Houses Network.

Yes, because as a curator of a house museum, you have quite a difficult and lonely job. I wanted to see how other curators managed, and many of those I contacted had the same idea. So we created the Iconic Houses Network in order to share knowledge and expertise, to jointly promote ourselves, and to try to keep more important houses alive. These are difficult times—we have to contend with scarce funding, understaffing and sometimes even the prospect of demolition. So it's important to work together. On our organizing committee are Iveta Cerna of Villa Tugendhat in the Czech Republic; Kimberli Meyer of the Schindler House in West Hollywood; Lynda Waggoner of Fallingwater in Mill Run; Susanna Pettersson of the Alvar Aalto Foundation; and myself. So it's a very international initiative.

Are there big differences in the house museum situation in different countries?

I'm very inspired by the commercial approach of some of the houses in the USA—some are amazingly successful, and it seems everyone's childhood includes a family visit to Fallingwater. There, a new tour starts every 12 minutes! Fallingwater's Linda Waggoner says Americans are "house museum happy." That's something we in Europe can only envy. Modern houses aren't so prominent in the European public consciousness, probably because there's a far bigger range of other heritage sites that they have to compete with.



Mies's Villa Tugendhat on iconichouses.org Photo by David Židlický.

As you say yourself, running a 20th-century house museum is fraught with difficulty. Are you optimistic?

I hear from museum curators all the time now that visitors are currently mostly interested in how people lived—so that's a great opportunity for museum houses. These days, it's hard to find funding in cold cash, so you have to look for other forms of support. I've been fortunate in finding companies to sponsor the Van Schijndel House in maintenance services—that's a huge expense for any house museum.

I think we have to be more creative about getting repeat visits—organize more events, music or talks, or dinners, the way they do more in the States, and also be more creative about finding sponsorship and other initiatives. I think the Iconic Houses website is part of that. We hope it will encourage more people to visit more houses, and so help keep these unique places alive.

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