

THE ARCHITOURIST

Website aims to alert architecture aficionados of ‘icons at risk’



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The Casa Sperimentale, designed by Giuseppe Perugini and Uga De Plaisant, along with their son, Raynaldo Perugini.

ICONICHOUSES.ORG

It looks like something aliens left for us.

A grid-like, concrete cage, tough and imposing, allows for delicate walls of red-framed glass, arranged in cascading cubes, which illuminate open-span rooms. The bathroom, curiously, hangs off the side of the building in a flattened orb, with a slit window around its perimeter; another orb, on the ground, contains a bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. A portion of the house sits suspended over what would have been a spa/pool.

Today, however, the whole composition sits abandoned and graffiti-covered a 30-minute drive from Rome ... as if humankind decided to reject the otherworldly gift. In reality, Casa Sperimentale was designed and built by architect couple Giuseppe Perugini and Ugo De Plaisant along with their son, Raynaldo Perugini, between 1968 and 1975 as an experimental villa for weekend jaunts. Mr. Perugini, in fact, was one of the first architects to explore the relationship between computer programming and design.



Casa Sperimentale is currently abandoned and graffiti-strewn.

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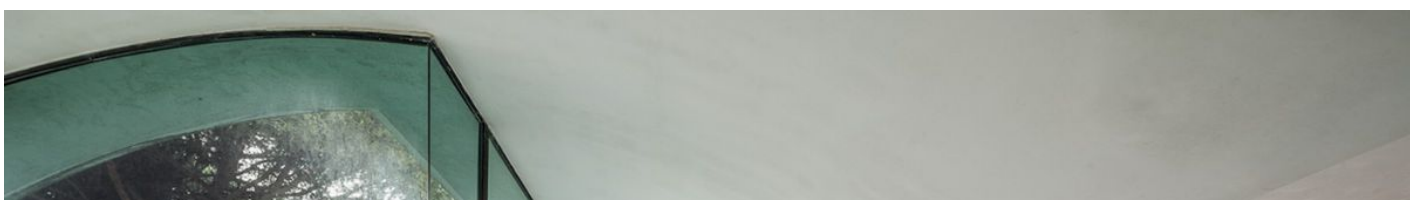
“Casa Sperimentale is such an extraordinary house, as if it comes from a different planet,” Netherlands-based architectural historian Natascha Drabbe says. “It would be such a shame if that would collapse.”

Ms. Drabbe knows of what she speaks. Plugged into a network of architectural thinkers, museum curators, historians and owners of significant properties via her fantastic Iconichouses.org – an online map of 20th-century house museums – Ms. Drabbe has now included a special section, “Icons at Risk.” And while Casa Sperimentale is one of her top concerns (parts of the structure are failing and trespassers have not been kind), there are other properties on her shortlist.

Spain’s La Ricarda (1949-63), with its floating, undulating roof and separate “pavilions” for parents and children (by architect Antonio Bonet Castellana), is also on her mind. Still in the hands of the children of the original clients, Ricardo Gomis and Ines Bertrand, Ms. Drabbe thinks they may not “want to devote their whole lives to try to preserve the house, so it’s really tricky what will happen.” While the house was isolated when first built, Barcelona airport has expanded to the point where it is now dangerously close.



ASIER RUA/ASIER RUA





Spain's La Ricarda, by architect Antonio Bonet Castellana, features separate pavilions for parents and children.

ADRIA GOULA/ADRIA GOULA

Similarly, the potent combination of land value versus maintenance costs threatens Tokyo's futuristic Nakagin Capsule Tower – a multiunit apartment house of replaceable capsules – since many of the units have been abandoned due to “leaks and mildew.”

Of the 30 properties currently featured, 16 are colour-coded orange, which means there is still time to act (the six that are green, such as the Pearlroth or “Double Diamond” house on New York's Long Island, have been saved, and the six labelled red have been demolished, such as Robin Hood Gardens in London by Brutalist pioneers Alison and Peter Smithson) and, hopefully, transform them into house museums such as those found on [Iconichouses.org](https://www.iconichouses.org).





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Many of the removable capsule apartments in Tokyo's Nakagin Capsule Tower have been abandoned due to mildew.

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One museum at [Iconichouses.org](https://www.iconichouses.org) is Ms. Drabbe's own ... but that wasn't always the case. Van Schijndel house in Utrecht, Netherlands, was designed and built in 1992-93 by her husband,

architect Mart van Schijndel, and became Ms. Drabbe's responsibility after his untimely death in 1999. When Ms. Drabbe decided to open the home to once-a-month visitors some years later (while still residing there), she was faced with some decisions: "Do you allow visitors to bring in their backpacks ... are they allowed to use your restroom, do you serve them coffee, how do they pay you?" she remembers thinking.

However, when she looked to borrow ideas from other establishments, her online search provided her only with an association of house museums from different centuries, some castle-like, and others simple places where a famous musician or politician lived, "and those houses don't have the issues as the architect's houses have with maintenance, or the restoration of experimental materials.

"Although I liked the person, I didn't feel a real connection with, for instance, the director of Sanssouci in Berlin ... they have very different issues." This disconnect motivated Ms. Drabbe to continue her research, which led to the creation of Iconichouses.org, which launched in late 2012 thanks to some "seed money" from the Alvar Aalto Foundation. Today, the site features 150 modern house museums and counts the directors of Fallingwater, Villa Tugendhat, and Sunnylands Center & Gardens as members of the advisory board.

The Icons At Risk initiative was born during a 2018 conference Ms. Drabbe organized in New Canaan, Conn. – a Modernist house mecca that includes Philip Johnson's Glass House – while on a bus with attendees. "We noticed that houses especially from the second part of the 20th century are vulnerable because the original clients, who still live in those houses, are, by now, at an age where they have to move out ... or they pass away and their children either sell the house or try to find a new purpose for the house."

Interestingly, I've encountered this in my 17 years at Globe Real Estate: Lela Wilson's wish for the little, butterfly-roofed, 1955 art-studio/home she shared with painter/muralist Ronald York Wilson (41 Alcina Ave.) was that it be turned into a house museum upon her death. That didn't happen. And, I watched in horror as the very first "Trend House," a 1952 stunner in Thorncrest Village built originally as an exhibition home to showcase British Columbia wood products, came down shortly after its original owner passed.

And speaking of British Columbia, Ms. Drabbe is currently watching, with interest, as the West Coast Modern League fights to preserve the 1962 Forrest Baker house by Ron Thom (with Dick Mann) in West Vancouver.

It's organizations such as these, Ms. Drabbe finishes, that architecture aficionados need to support: "They, usually, are the ones to alert the politicians and to organize campaigns.

"Look to the people who are locally committed to try to save these structures."

Currently, the only Canadian house museum on Iconichouses.org is the Strutt House in Gatineau, Que., [which was featured here in 2017](#). There should be more. The Forrest Baker house will be listed soon in the website's Icons At Risk section.

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