As capable as Daphne Bugbee Jones was, a female architect on a jobsite in Montana was a rare thing. The first woman to study at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design in the postwar period, Bugbee Jones designed a number of homes in western Montana that are fine examples of modern architecture in the mid-twentieth century, buildings that reflected greater international trends. She successfully nativized the modernist elements of design for a residential, semirural setting in the West.

Courtesy of the Daphne Bugbee Jones Family
In the decade after World War II, modern architecture captured the imaginations of architects and builders across the nation. Even in the most remote parts of the country, American architects embraced the style for both its utilitarian qualities and its associations with modernity and social progress. Montana architect Daphne Bugbee Jones was no exception. She was neither the first nor the most prolific female modernist architect in Montana, but her trajectory was unique. The first woman to study at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design in the postwar period, Bugbee Jones designed a number of homes in western Montana that are fine examples of mid-twentieth-century modern architecture—buildings that reflected greater international trends. While she mastered the modernist elements of design at Harvard, Bugbee Jones successfully nativized them for a residential, semirural setting in the West.

As a woman working in a “man’s world,” Daphne Bugbee Jones also faced resistance and discrimination. She distinguished herself as a modernist and a professional architect in spite of the formidable challenges, persistent skepticism, and pervasive chauvinism of the field as well as the constant demands of domesticity of a wife and mother. Her life was characterized by audacious personal achievement, but it was also representative of the struggles professional women faced in postwar America, particularly in the Inland Northwest. Had she remained in an eastern urban center and found herself working for an established architectural firm, her access to opportunity and the subsequent arc of her career would have no doubt been different.

Nevertheless, Bugbee Jones lived the life of a grande dame in the West. She is remembered for her impeccable dress and large abstract jewelry, her lively eyes and bright red lipstick, as well as her clear diction and a gracious nature that spoke of elegance, inquisitiveness, and chutzpah. She was a committed bon vivant who left her mark on her adopted home. She also left a formidable record as a public servant. Bugbee Jones had been a naval officer in World War II—a member of the “greatest generation”—and her exploits as a communications officer in the U.S. Navy’s WAVES program during the war received public acclaim, particularly at the time of her death in 2012. She was a state legislator and a delegate to Montana’s Constitutional Convention. While her political and social activities as a legislator, lobbyist, environmentalist, and community organizer were widely recognized, knowledge of her career as a trained modernist architect is generally restricted to other architects and the few who have visited or lived in her houses.

Bugbee Jones’s aesthetic development began while growing up a “military brat” in San Francisco. She was born Daphne Eaches in 1921 to a career navy family. Her unpublished memoirs reveal a child deeply sensitive to her surroundings. For instance, she described the miserable experience of pushing her doll carriage in a dust storm up to the “railroad flat” across from Golden Gate Park where her family lived, and the awareness of the inadequate shelter offered by the narrow apartment buildings with their garages and stoops right along the sidewalk and all of the windows facing the street or back alleys.
Likewise, Bugbee Jones remembered finding refuge from a cold and windy day at Chartres Cathedral in France, writing, “I was stunned by the enormity and beauty of this great vertical interior.” She noted that at the far end of the central aisle a funeral mass was being said for a baby: “The tiny white casket, when contrasted with the magnitude of the cathedral, held an eloquence that was too sad and too beautiful. I was numb and had to leave.” These childhood impressions of how architecture both provides shelter and creates aesthetic experiences ultimately led her to attend graduate school in design and dedicate her life to composing spaces that advanced modernist principles.7

Bugbee Jones spent the war years near San Francisco as an enlisted officer, decoding secret and confidential messages. After decommissioning, she returned to college and in 1951 applied to Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design, where Walter Gropius, the exiled founder of the German Bauhaus, was teaching architecture and directing the program. The Bauhaus movement had been arguably the most revolutionary school of art and design in the early twentieth century, and Gropius, its erstwhile director, was the leading proponent of modernist architecture in America. After taking the admissions examination, Bugbee Jones’s excitement was palpable: “I sailed out of the test in absolute heaven. I knew I’d done well—and knew I’d cracked the pearly gates.”8

According to Bugbee Jones’s memoirs, the Harvard classroom was packed with returning GIs:

- tough and circus-like, but also exhilarating
- make no mistake; architecture at Harvard was tough! We listened, we studied, we worked into the nights. Evaluation of our projects was extensive and critical at every level. Our designs were to produce what worked, what was appropriate, and what was beautiful. Discussions were exhilarating and often philosophical. We were to be stewards of man’s environment. No small order.9

The conversations about modern architecture were both heady and practical. Edward L. Barnes, I. M. Pei, and Paul Rudolph were among the most notable graduates of the program in that period.10 As a young coed, Bugbee Jones found herself literally training to build up America and give form to a new world.

At Harvard, Frank Lloyd Wright’s arts and crafts sensibilities, European Cubist–inspired designs filtered through the pedagogy of the Bauhaus, and Le Corbusier’s rationalist urban plans all merged in the curriculum. Looming largest in Bugbee Jones’s education, however, were Gropius’s modernist architecture and minimal aesthetics, seen first in America in his 1922 entry for the Chicago Tribune Tower competition.11

In 1937, just before the Nazis forced the closure of the Berlin school, Walter Gropius fled Germany. He, along with colleagues Marcel Breuer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and other members of the faculty, brought the utopian ideals and pared-down aesthetics of the Bauhaus to the United States. His influential architectural designs were well received in America, where modern styles such as Art Moderne, Art Deco, and the International Style had already begun to make inroads in the previous two decades.12 Working primarily on the eastern seaboard, Gropius reinforced the lessons of Wright, the leading proponent
At Harvard, Bugbee Jones mastered the formal attributes of modern architecture under the tutelage of Walter Gropius (above), who directed Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. Forced out of Germany by the Nazis in 1937, Gropius brought the utopian ideals and pared-down aesthetics of the Bauhaus school of architecture to the United States.

Bugbee Jones drew this design for a towering high-rise apartment building most likely during her years at Harvard, when the utopian ideals of Gropius and LeCorbusier were at their peak.
of modernism in the United States, and of the California architects Rudolf Schindler, Richard Neutra, and Charles Eames, who had begun applying modernist designs to residential architecture in the early 1920s.13

Gropius’s designs reaffirmed progressive ideals and values for modern architecture in America, and there was a ready audience, both private and governmental, for these principles. Americans quickly understood that certain design elements, such as asymmetrical compositions or massing of boxlike structures, projecting balconies, flat roofs with boxed or closed eaves flush with the ends of the walls, casement windows made of metal or wood and set flush with the wall, smooth or uniform wall surfaces, and large expanses of windows, were emblematic of modernity itself. Young architects reveled in the possibilities of discarding historicist and revival styles in favor of new materials and applications, as well as in the industrial aesthetic of modern architecture.

Along with mastering the formal attributes of modern architecture, Bugbee Jones also embraced Gropius’s utopian social vision and respected his moral courage and personal leadership. “I was especially impressed by his wide concern to meet the needs of all levels of society—even the poor and needy. His empathy was palpable,” she wrote in her memoirs.14

The architecture student demonstrated her own empathy for the dispossessed and the marginalized in her thesis project at Harvard. “A morning paper announced that the State of Massachusetts was allocating 1.5 million dollars to build low-income houses. Enraptured with the news, I went to see Dr. Gropius. I remember saying, ‘I have never hit a nail or held a hammer in my hand. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the students could build one of these houses?’ Long silence. I realized tears were coming down his cheeks. ‘Harvard would never let us do it,’ he mumbled.”15

In 1951–1952, Bugbee Jones succeeded in designing a Home for Delinquent Girls, among other socially minded buildings, as her thesis project with Gropius’s full support.16 The thesis included a campus nestled in rolling, wooded hills with low, one-story, boxlike buildings configured in simple intersecting relationships and characterized by clean lines, a lack of ornament, open floor plans, and courtyards and curtain walls allowing for ventilation, light, and access to nature. In many ways, these elements and their clean Bauhausian style reflected Gropius’s...
Harkness Commons and the Graduate Center, which he had designed in 1950 for Harvard University. Her thesis demonstrated Bugbee Jones’s mastery of the core principles of Gropius’s style.

More importantly, she remained true to Gropius’s social teachings and the idea that the practice of architecture was more than just designing clever or trendy buildings. In 1976, in her unsuccessful application for the position of director of Architectural Programs at the National Endowment for the Arts, Bugbee Jones wrote:

I was most fortunate when I chose to study architecture at Harvard under the extraordinary leadership of Walter Gropius. My commitment to design, like that of Dr. Gropius, has always been undergirded with ‘social concern.’ This sounds pompous, but it is the simple truth. This is what propelled me into politics and government. Harvard not only gave me the ability to design, but also sensitivity to, and a sense of responsibility for, the totality of our physical environment. It is my Harvard experience that has left me appalled by what America has let happen to its physical environment—the splintering of our communities, the aesthetic abandonment of our inner cities, and the crushing ugliness we permit to surround the disadvantaged. We let physical ugliness become the American way of life.¹⁷

Bugbee Jones loved the irony of being seven months pregnant at her thesis defense. Gropius was duly proud of his first female American student, but her gender was no insignificant detail at the time. The German Bauhaus had been established on socially progressive principles of coeducation, but this was
conservative and patriarchal Harvard, and this particular Harvard architecture student and Radcliffe coed was definitely in the minority. Like millions of other American women bound to relinquish the important wartime responsibilities and jobs they had taken on during the war, in the 1950s Bugbee Jones was subjected to narrow-minded, gender-based discrimination and expected to yield her position to one of the thousands of returning and “more deserving” male GIs. Years later, she would describe the indignities of being mistaken for the housewife while visiting job sites, and the incomprehension and even condescension of contractors, who were unfamiliar with working with a trained female architect. Still, she took her circumstances with a certain sense of bemusement.

While at Harvard, she courted and married philosophy professor Henry G. Bugbee Jr. In 1957, Henry accepted a job as chairman of the Philosophy Department at the University of Montana, and he, Daphne, and their two small children moved to Missoula in fall of the following year. Daphne adapted well to the role of mother and faculty spouse while Henry distinguished himself as a national figure in environmental philosophy. Their marriage did not survive, but the rich conversations about ethics, nature, and modern society that took place in the home she designed for them in the upper Rattlesnake Valley area no doubt affected both of their professional journeys.

Protecting wilderness in western Montana became a priority for the couple—not an academic exercise or hobby, but a way of life. The Bugbees acquired land on the northern edge of Missoula, and Daphne designed modernist houses for this forested, semirural setting. She created scores of designs, though most of her architectural projects were never executed. As one of the founders and early vice presidents of the environmental group Five Valley River Park Association (later renamed Five Valleys Land Trust), she became an influential voice for living alongside wilderness areas. The Bugbees were leaders in protecting stream corridors, wildlife habitat, and the scenic beauty of the Missoula area, and they quickly became involved in the promotion of conservation easements and the protection of thousands of acres, including often delicate negotiations between private landowners and government agencies.

Meanwhile, modern architecture had been making inroads in Montana in the decade before Bugbee...
Jones settled in Missoula. By the early 1950s, all of the state’s major firms were active in designing commercial and government buildings in a variety of modern styles.22 While the Montana Chapter of the American Institute of Architects was established in 1921 and the architecture program at the Montana State College in Bozeman in 1925, modern architecture was not widely applied to the residential market until after the visit of Richard Neutra to the Bozeman campus in 1949.23 Neutra’s transformative lectures catalyzed interest in a generation of architects who trained in Bozeman—and their clients. Neutra’s reputation soon reached Missoula, where Arthur and Jane Mosby commissioned a home from him. Built in Missoula’s south hills with spectacular views of the valley floor, this house was Neutra’s most complete design for a modernist residence in Montana.

In addition to the home she shared with Henry in Missoula’s Upper Rattlesnake area, Bugbee Jones built seven homes for “poor professors” at the university and designed a handful of others that were never built.24 What is striking about these houses, beyond the obvious confident display of modernist formal features, is that they were all located in the urban-wilderness interphase area surrounding the city. They were intended to embrace their wilderness setting through the interplay of mass with space—the congruence of natural materials with light and

In 1957, Bugbee Jones’s husband Henry accepted a job as chairman of the Philosophy Department at the University of Montana, and he, Bugbee Jones, and their two small children moved to Missoula in fall of the following year. She designed this home for their family in the upper Rattlesnake Valley area. The view across the living room took in the Rattlesnake Wilderness through a wall of glass.
air. She preferred to use wood and brick instead of poured concrete for walls, and this was as much a question of aesthetics as cost. Some modernist elements worked perfectly in western Montana, others less so. Although Gropius had used sloped roofs, for example, they were not hallmarks of the International Style. Rather than flat-roofed boxes, Bugbee Jones preferred often steep, raking rooflines, cantilevers, and overhanging porches. Along with floor-to-ceiling windows, these were her attempts to connect the interiors with the out-of-doors. She never forced modernist elements on the landscape, but rather accommodated them to the mountainous terrain and celebrated big sky of western Montana.

In her memoirs, Daphne Bugbee Jones discussed the importance of space in architectural design and her understanding of its role in western architecture:

Space holds its own internal mystery, from the cathedrals of enormous wild places to a small, cozy, and deeply satisfying room. The beauty of space evolves only by being defined and enclosed. . . . This enduring fascination of mine, attempting to understand space, comes from two sources: architecture school and forty years of Montana. . . . In mountainous, western Montana, huge valleys are vividly defined by their surrounding mountains and most amazing is how even the sky is defined by [the] mountains. The “Big Sky” is a perfect name. The sky seems “big” only because it is brilliantly delineated by the mountains. A sky that “leaks” into the horizon just cannot compare to a sky that is defined at its edges.

Bugbee Jones’s evolving Bauhausian-style training was readily visible in her early houses, although she quickly began adapting the modernist forms of her graduate school days to the western context,
Bugbee Jones designed modernist houses for forested, semirural settings. What is striking about these houses, beyond the obvious confident display of modernist formal features, is their embrace of the wilderness setting through the interplay of mass with space—the congruence of natural materials with light and air. Above, the two wings of the main house and garage of the Field residence intersect at their lowest points to form a saddle that mirrors the contours of the Rattlesnake Mountains that surround the house.

Daphne Bugbee Jones’s
Missoula Houses

- Bugbee Residence, 1959–1960
  535 Evan Kelly Road
- Braun Residence, 1960
  6310 Woods Road
- Hoffman Residence, 1960
  6322 Woods Road
- Demonstration House, circa 1960
  106 W. Artemos Drive
- Bessac Residence, 1966–1967
  1826 Traynor Drive
- Field Residence, 1967–1968
  5335 Elk Ridge Road
- Kimble Residence, 1974–1976
  532 Evan Kelly Road
- Jones Residence, 1981
  524 Evan Kelly Road
The designs of Bugbee Jones’s early houses had nearly flat roofs, while later houses exhibited more steeply pitched rooflines, soaring ceiling heights, and exposed wood beams—extending beyond the indoor living spaces to create outdoor spaces. The decision to relinquish the flat, box-like aesthetics of her design school days may also have reflected the practical acknowledgment that snow loads were of great concern in western Montana. The house envisioned in the plan at left was never built.

Courtesy of the Daphne Bugbee Jones Family

Preliminary North Elevation
For Deidre & Bob LaCasse
Jan 23, 1992 - By Daphne Jones
increasingly assimilating Wrightian ideas—related to the incorporation of local materials, space, and nature—in her designs.

The house she designed for her growing Bugbee family on Evan Kelly Road, for example, exhibits her synthesis of these directions. At the time, this part of the Upper Rattlesnake area to the north of Missoula was primarily wild and forested. She located the house on a broad plain near Rattlesnake Creek that she and Henry had acquired. The celebrated house is composed of two intersecting blocks with an indoor/outdoor fireplace at the core. It features built-in cabinetry throughout, large closets, extensive use of floor-to-ceiling windows, and decks to bridge the connection to its natural setting. The house also has a low, gabled roof clad with shakes, vertical wood siding, exposed timbers, and a fireplace covered in native pebbles, which she and the children collected on their many excursions to Flathead Lake.

The almost-contemporary house she designed for physician Harold Braun and his family has a dramatic entrance through a partially covered courtyard that opens to the wilderness on two sides. A light well allows for plantings in the center of that court. The Hoffman residence, built for a university professor, is a long, two-story block with floor-to-ceiling windows that maximize exposure to the out-of-doors. In all cases, Bugbee Jones preferred natural materials: wood construction, vertical board and batten siding, and stone in lieu of brick chimneys when affordable, but she did not shy away from using commercially available products, such as ceramic tiles, either. Integrity of design was her lodestar.

The designs of her early houses had nearly flat roofs, while later houses exhibited more steeply pitched rooflines, soaring ceiling heights, and exposed wood beams—extending beyond the indoor living spaces to create outdoor spaces. These were Bugbee Jones’s attempts to harmonize indoor and outdoor living in the urban/wilderness setting. The decision to relinquish the flat, box-like aesthetics of her design school days may also have reflected the practical acknowledgment that snow loads were of great concern in western Montana. When speaking about a demonstration house she designed in 1960 that featured a steeply angled roof, Bugbee Jones described it as an attempt to build a “small, affordable house that was not just a box.”

This shift also allowed her to design more creative and expressive profiles. At times, the roofline took on symbolic importance. In her design for the Field residence, two wings of the main house and garage intersect at their lowest points to form a saddle that mirrors the contours of the Rattlesnake Mountains that surround it. In the house she designed for Gary Kimble, not far from the Bugbee’s own house on Evan Kelly Road, she took the beam ends all the way to the ground and anchored them in large, exposed concrete thrust blocks. These elements were reportedly intended to evoke tipi poles at the request of the homeowner.

Bugbee Jones’s houses were structurally simple and efficient. The Kimble residence and the house she designed with her second husband, Wendell Jones, were perhaps the most complex from an engineering standpoint. The house she and Jones built features a high vaulted ceiling, climaxing in a square skylight over the living areas and kitchen. She sought out former classmate and friend Bill Trogden, who had a successful practice in Spokane, Washington, to help resolve the complexities of the steel joints and wood beams that compose that dramatic space.

Interiors and the flow of space between rooms were no less revelatory of the evolution of Bugbee Jones’s style. In a nod to Frank Lloyd Wright, her houses always had secluded entries, open floor plans—especially between living and dining rooms—
As Bugbee Jones’s designs for houses continued to evolve, so did her political involvement. She is pictured here as a delegate to Montana’s 1972 Constitutional Convention. Today, Bugbee Jones’s designs still stand in Missoula neighborhoods, blending the beauty of nature and the built environment.

segregated areas for the bedrooms, large-scale glass windows especially in, but not restricted to, the living areas, built-in cabinetry, and large closets to fit the needs of growing postwar families.

These ideas evolved over the course of her career. For example, initially her kitchens tended to be small and compact, because Bugbee Jones believed that the modern woman would not need to spend much time cooking: “The kitchen should be smallish.” Later, however, she wrote, “Most kitchens, to me, seem strangulated, with an air of dull utility. I have never understood why kitchens couldn’t be rather smashing places. Isn’t it the center of where we live?”

Her later houses revealed open floor plans with considerably larger kitchens, often located adjacent to the main living spaces.

Up until a year or two before her death, Bugbee Jones was still solving architectural problems in her drawings and writings, ranging from the lofty questions posed by the realities of living in multiunit properties to the simple, and often intractable, relationship of the kitchen to the garage and front door of the typical American home. She described the latter conundrum with characteristic frustration and humor: “We live in a fantasy land about how our guests come into our houses. In Montana, guests troop through the garage into the kitchen; open garage doors, their welcome mats (they know the fancy front door is locked and stays locked). This insane American dilemma seems to have no answer—the only real answer is closing the damn garage door!”

In those later years, Bugbee Jones was increasingly concerned with designing for mature and infirm adults as well as individuals in reduced circumstances. Simplicity was an even greater value in the last passages of her memoirs: “The places we live should be smallish, but adequate for the lives of two people, with all our necessary rooms on the main floor, the amount of space that surrounds us, just enough, not too much. Walking long distances through a house is ridiculous. We don’t need it.”

Today America’s neighborhoods, particularly in suburbia, abound with homes and tract housing built in the second half of the twentieth century, and these houses incorporate some basic elements of modernist design. That is certainly true of Missoula’s neighborhoods, where one can even find copies of Bugbee Jones’s plans. Daphne is gone. The trees and shrubs have grown, and deer graze the immaculate lawns of the houses she designed. Yet somehow, her spirit persists in the distinctive places she helped create. As the beauty of nature and the built environment commingle, the unique vision of Daphne Bugbee Jones, dedicated architect and notable thinker, continues to inspire.

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Notes
1. My gratitude goes to Bruce and Nancy Bugbee for introducing me to Daphne Bugbee Jones, and to Olivia Bucks for sharing her grandmother’s archives.
5. Ibid. Daphne Bugbee Jones was born in Pensacola, Florida, to Barbara and Lieutenant Robert Eaches. Her earliest years were spent in France before the family relocated to San Francisco.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Barnes graduated in 1942, Pei in 1946, and Rudolph in 1947. There is no evidence that Bugbee Jones ever met them. She stayed in touch with other Harvard and Radcliffe classmates.
12. The American movement known as the International Style was formally closest to the style promoted by Gropius. It took its name from the exhibition commissioned by the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1931, under the direction of Alfred H. Barr Jr., from architectural historian and critic Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Harvard philosopher and later self-taught architect Philip Johnson. The name was used for both the museum exhibition catalog and a popular book that followed. See Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, The International Style (New York, 1997).