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After nearly four decades of historic preservation, Clevelanders are used to the architectural miracles that can happen when 19th- or early-20th-century buildings are lovingly restored or renovated.

From the revitalization of the city's Warehouse District to the renewal of the theaters of PlayhouseSquare, Severance Hall and hundreds of other old buildings, the city has made itself a national example of preservation in action.

But now, Northeast Ohio — broadly speaking — can lay claim to a leading role in the next wave of historical reclamation: the rediscovery of mid-20th-century modern buildings nearing the half-century mark.

Exhibit A is the stunning renewal of the headquarters of ASM International in Russell Township, designed by the late Cleveland architect John Terence Kelly and built in 1959, when it was one of only a handful of modern-style buildings in the region.

Set amid 44 acres of rolling lawns and pine trees along Ohio 87, just east of West Woods park in Geauga County, the complex consists of a low, glassy, crescent-shaped office pavilion designed by Kelly, surmounted by a cloudlike geodesic dome designed by R. Buckminster Fuller's Synergetics Inc. of Raleigh, N.C.

Though structurally separate, the major parts of the ASM complex meld beautifully as a unified work by two designers who put their egos in check in service of a larger vision — something rare in the annals of modern architecture.

The recently completed \$7 million renovation and restoration, led by the Chesler Group of Cleveland with Dimit Architects of Lakewood, is a nationally significant example of what can happen when loving attention is lavished on an all-but-forgotten modernist masterpiece — along with critical financial aid in the form of state and federal historic preservation tax credits.

The complex has long been one of the region's overlooked gems. It sparked a flurry of articles when originally built, but Kelly, who died in 2007 at age 85, was militantly local in his ambitions, and rarely, if ever, sought attention outside the area. And ASM's obscure rural location has made it hard even for locals to find. Nevertheless, all it takes is one fleeting glimpse from a car window to be completely smitten.

The complex is both an icon of the region's industrial heritage and an example of enlightened local patronage of architecture.

Founded in Cleveland in 1913 as the Steel Treathers' Club and later known as the American Society of Metals, ASM International grew to become a global clearinghouse for the advanced technical research on materials from metals and plastics to ceramics. Today it is one of the largest scientific societies of its kind in the world, with 36,000 members.

In the late 1950s, the organization's founder and director, William Hunt Eisenman, donated 100 acres of farmland in Russell Township for its headquarters, and chose Kelly as his architect after he reportedly rejected a proposal by Gordon Bunshaft of the powerhouse Chicago firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

According to an oral-history interview given by Kelly in 1987, the architect, who was in his mid-30s at the time of the commission, came up with his design for ASM after waking up from a restorative nap while on a drive from Cleveland to Oberlin for an appointment; his office manager was at the wheel.

"I have it," Kelly said he declared upon waking. "Give me a piece of paper."

A New Challenge: Renovating modern buildings



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT PEASE | PEASE PHOTOGRAPHY

Modern revival: A \$7 million renovation and restoration has brought fresh life to the headquarters of ASM International in rural Russell Township.

INFORMATION

ASM International, located at 9639 Kinsman Road (Ohio 87) in Russell Township, is not open to the public, but visits can be prearranged by calling 440-338-5151, ext. 5500.

Kelly said he quickly sketched the crescent, the dome and a circular central garden. After developing the initial idea, he recruited Fuller to design the geodesic dome, which would become an integral part of the overall composition and an instantly recognizable signature for ASM itself.

A 100-foot-diameter garden in the center of the complex, redesigned by the Cleveland landscape architecture firm of Knight and Stolar in 1999, combines rich plantings with paved areas embedded with labeled samples of more than 50 types of rock, from which metals are derived.

Clearly dated on the inside

The problem is that in recent years, the closer you got, the less wonderful the ASM building looked. The dome, whose cables and joints have been retuned like an instrument every few years, has been kept in fine shape.

But by the middle 2000s, Kelly's 50,000-square-foot building had been carved up by alterations that muffled the architect's vision of transparency and spatial flow. Window frames and large aluminum sunscreens were corroding. Ventilation was poor. Glassy facades intended to frame views of fields and forests were obscured by interior partitions



The glassy interior of ASM International, restored by the Chesler Group of Cleveland and Dimit Architects of Lakewood, reveals the transparency and spatial flow originally intended by architect John Terence Kelly.

and ad hoc renovations. Concrete walls and terraces were crumbling and leaking.

"I knew we had to do something," said Stan Theobald, ASM's managing director. "You could bring visitors in and everyone was enamored of the view, the setting, the dome. Inside, it was clearly dated. If we hadn't done something, in five or 10 years, the building would have been beyond repair."

Quietly, Theobald informed Russell Township that ASM was thinking of moving to downtown Cleveland, the close-in suburb of Independence or even Chicago.

Losing ASM's 85 employees would have been a pinprick to the regional economy. In a larger

sense, it would have meant bidding adieu to a part of Northeast Ohio's industrial soul — and turning the complex into mere real estate.

Providentially, Cleveland entrepreneur and historic-property developer Michael Chesler approached Theobald in 2009 with a way forward.

After having renovated a half-dozen 19th- and early-20th-century buildings in Cleveland and Akron over the previous decade, Chesler wanted to expand his repertoire beyond traditional masonry and wood construction to include mid-20th-century steel, glass and concrete buildings. And he wanted to start with ASM, a structure he

had loved since childhood, when he thought it was a spaceship and begged his father to turn into the driveway to let him have a good look.

Chesler convinced Theobald and the members of the ASM finance committee that the building — which had just attained the critical age of 50 years in 2009 — was thereby eligible for \$1.3 million in Ohio state tax credits and an additional \$1.2 million in federal tax credits if it could be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. He delivered on all counts.

Thoroughly overseen by the National Park Service and the Ohio Historic Preservation Office, which play an integral role

in awarding tax credits, the restoration and renovation carried out under Chesler and Dimit has turned the ASM complex into a remarkable flashback to the '50s.

A perfect whole after renovation

A skeptic could pick apart Kelly's newly refreshed design as a pastiche of ideas borrowed from the idols he worshipped while earning twin master's degrees in architecture and landscape architecture at Harvard University in 1951 and 1952, respectively. The exposed tubular concrete columns and floor slabs of the ASM building look as if they sprang from the notebooks of Le Corbusier, the Franco-Swiss architect and planner who gave the world the idea that a house was a "machine for living."

The building's glass facades could have been cribbed from Bunshaft, or from Walter Gropius, one of Kelly's Harvard professors. The molded concrete arches on the lower level of the ASM complex — one story below the entrance drive — are almost a direct lift from the space-age facades Frank Lloyd Wright designed for his Marin County Civic Center in California.

Nevertheless, it's the totality that counts. The embracing curve of Kelly's office building creates a gentle sense of enclosure, echoed by the encompassing orb of the geodesic dome.

The interplay between these pure geometric forms, and the undulating waves of the landscape sculpted by Kelly around the building, is sublime. So is the building's luminous interior. Office cubicles, lobbies and conference areas are bathed in natural light and awash in views of fields and trees.

Another benefit of the project was the rediscovery and conservation of seven murals illustrating the history of metalworking made on brushed aluminum panels by Greek artist Nikos Bel-Jon. Forgotten in storage for decades, they're now proudly displayed throughout Kelly's building.

Impressively, Chesler preserved the building's original, single-pane glass facades — a requirement of the federal tax credits — while installing high-performance air-conditioning equipment that has radically cut the cost of summer cooling. The July air conditioning bill this year was \$8,500, roughly a third of what it cost two years ago.

By renovating its complex and staying put, ASM has done itself — and Northeast Ohio — a tremendous service. It has also set a shining example for other cities and regions across the country where other midcentury modern buildings face uncertain futures. On top of all that, the ASM complex has a fresh shot at a fame it richly deserves.

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