

# FORM B – BUILDING

Assessor's Number USGS Quad Area(s) Form Number

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION  
MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING  
220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

58-10	Boston North	AU	BLM.822
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**Town/City:** Belmont

**Place:** (*neighborhood or village*):  
Snake Hill Road

**Address:** 50 Snake Hill Road

**Historic Name:** Karl & Marion Zerbe House

**Uses:** Present: single family dwelling

Original: single family dwelling/studio

**Date of Construction:** 1941

**Source:** building permit

**Style/Form:** International Style

**Architect/Builder:** Carl Koch, Huson Jackson & Robert Kennedy, arch.; Joseph Richardson, builder

**Exterior Material:**

Foundation: concrete block

Wall/Trim: wood

Roof: rubber

**Outbuildings/Secondary Structures:**  
none

**Major Alterations** (*with dates*):

2012 – addition, new windows and remodeling

**Condition:** good

**Moved:** no  yes  **Date:**

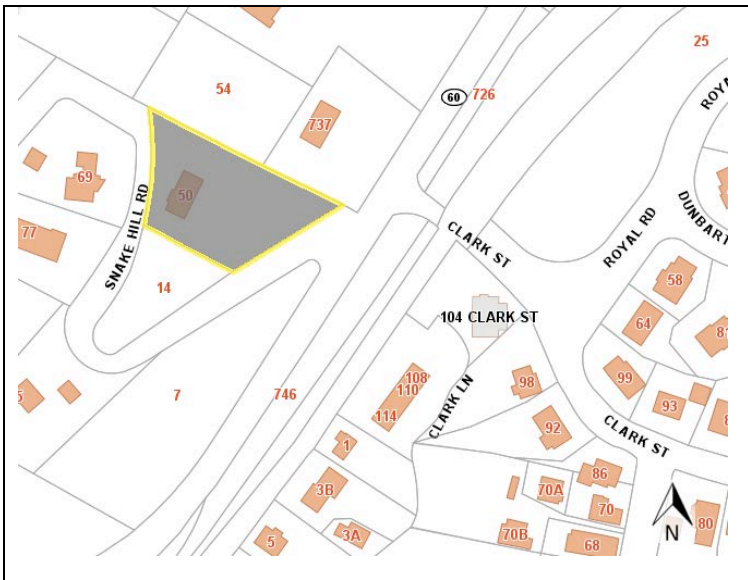
**Acreage:** 27,541 SF

**Setting:** steep hillside in area of other significant, similar International style dwellings.

## Photograph



## Locus Map



**Recorded by:** Lisa Mausolf

**Organization:** Belmont Historic District Commission

**Date** (*month / year*): April 2016

# INVENTORY FORM B CONTINUATION SHEET

BELMONT

50 SNAKE HILL ROAD

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Recommended for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

*If checked, you must attach a completed National Register Criteria Statement form.*

## ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

*Describe architectural features. Evaluate the characteristics of this building in terms of other buildings within the community.*

Built on a steep slope with a commanding view of Boston to the southeast, 50 Snake Hill Road is a three-level contemporary dwelling which was originally constructed in 1941 but was remodeled to its present appearance in 2012. From Snake Hill Road, the house has the appearance of a single-story dwelling, capped by a low gable roof with large brick chimney. From the east, the multiple levels and large window areas are visible. The present windows date to 2012 and differ from the original gridded arrangement of hoppers and large plate glass windows. The section to the northeast, topped by a deck was added in 2012. The homes were intended to blend into the trees and the rocky hillside. In recent years, the landscaping around the homes has been opened up in comparison to the original design.

Constructed beginning in 1940, Snake Hill was one of the best known and most significant groups of contemporary houses in the country, if not the world.

## HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

*Discuss the history of the building. Explain its associations with local (or state) history. Include uses of the building, and the role(s) the owners/occupants played within the community.*

In March 1940 Edward Hartshorne and Carl Koch petitioned for approval of a ten lot subdivision and a winding road to be laid out off Pleasant Street through a seven-acre parcel of land that they had purchased from Ernest J. Corrigan. Corrigan had bought the land in 1928 from George V. Fletcher. As reported in the *Belmont Citizen* on May 31, 1940, the planned community was the joint venture of five individuals – two Harvard instructors and three graduates. They were Carl Koch, architect and designer of the community; Dr. Edward Hartshorne and Dr. A. Lincoln Gordon, instructors at Harvard; lawyer Gardner Cushman and Harry B. Wissmann. The street was originally to be called “Witsend Road”. It was renamed Snake Hill Road in October 1940.

The initial Snake Hill houses constructed in 1940 and designed by Carl Koch (#68, 69, 77, 83 & 89) were quickly recognized as one of the most significant groups of contemporary houses in the world – notable for their planning and architecture and their success in creating a strong sense of community (Fixler). The development also incorporated new technology. Originally the abutters owned and maintained their own boiler house and kept the street clear of ice and snow with a system of underground pipes (Betts 2012: 249-250). (The boiler house was located to the west of this parcel.) Carl Koch (1912-1998) received his Master of Architecture degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 1937 and after traveling to Sweden developed the Snake Hill community housing project as a way to design an inexpensive house for he and his family. The significance of the Snake Hill Development was appreciated soon after construction. In 1945 *Progressive Architecture* called the five original 1940 Snake Hill houses “one of the best known and most significant groups of contemporary houses in the world”.

The house at 50 Snake Hill Road was part of the second phase of construction. These three houses - #50, 60 & 64 were designed by Carl Koch working with Huson Jackson and Robert Kennedy. The builder was Joseph Richardson, grandson of H.H. Richardson. These three houses were built at the end of pre-war private residential construction, at a time when it was difficult to find builders to bid on the work and materials were in short supply. With the goal of building houses cheaply and quickly, the houses utilized a new experimental, economical construction featuring new materials and a new structural method. Construction was based on a four-foot module. The framing was expressed on the exterior by 4 x 4” and 4 x 6” redwood posts. The wall curtain consisted of cement-surfaced fiberboard (*Progressive Architecture*). The landscape architect for Snake Hill was Christopher Tunnard (1910-1979).

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The original owners of the house at 50 Snake Hill Road were Karl and Marion Zerbe who purchased the house and lot 10 in 1941 (Book 6545, Page 50). The original cost of the house was \$6,800. Karl Zerbe (1903-1972) was a German-born American painter and member of the so-called Boston Expressionists. He headed the painting department at the Museum of Fine Arts School from 1937 until 1955 and influenced countless students. The Zerbes moved to Tallahassee, Florida in 1955 and Karl served as professor of painting at the State University there until 1971.

The interior of the Zerbe House was described as follows in the October 1946 *Progressive Architecture*:

Arranged on three main floor levels, the house respects the site entirely, the floors becoming progressively larger in area (from basement to upper floor) as the slope recedes. The studio, a story and a half in height, occurs at a floor level of its own. The family living area – living-dining room and kitchen – makes the most of the space available in a combined plan arrangement; in the angled corner, a glazed door opens the room out to the high living porch. (*Progressive Architecture*, October 1946, p. 54).

The two bedrooms were located on the middle level with large windows looking to the southeast. Throughout the house “partitioning is kept as uncomplicated as possible; even closets are left without doors and the carpentry these would involve. In short, the highly important design reference point of economy applies all the way from structural concept to plan detail” (Ibid, p. 58).

The house at 50 Snake Hill Road was purchased by Harold and Marian Wilkins in 1955. It was sold by Harold’s estate in 1990. In 2012 owner Alan Jasanoff made various changes to the house. A basement level addition was constructed with a deck at the first floor. New windows were also installed. The architect for the renovations was Shaughn MacGilvray of Imai Keller Moore architects, Watertown.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY and/or REFERENCES

- Art Matters: School of the Museum of Fine Arts*, Spring 2009 [information on Karl Zerbe]
- Betts, Richard B. *The Streets of Belmont and How they Were Named* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Belmont: Belmont Historical Society, 2012.
- Boston Suburbs Project, MIT, 1987 <http://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/160270>
- Fixler, David *Hipsters in the Woods: The Midcentury-Modern Suburban Development*, Spring 2009. [www.fomalincoln.org](http://www.fomalincoln.org)
- Middlesex County Registry of Deeds, Cambridge, MA
- Robbins, Samuel Dowse, ed. *Who’s Who in Belmont*. Belmont: Belmont Historical Society, 1972.
- “3 New Houses at...Snake Hill, Belmont, Mass.”, *Progressive Architecture*, October 1946.
- Town of Belmont, Building Department Files.
- Williams, Judy. Area form (BLM.AU) for Snake Hill Road, November 1982.

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1987 view of entrance Massachusetts Institute of Technology, photograph by Shakeel Hossain  
Source: Boston Suburbs Project, MIT, 1987



2016 view of entrance

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View of Zerbe's studio



View of original fenestration

*Progressive Architecture*, October 1946.

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**National Register of Historic Places Criteria Statement Form**

Check all that apply:

- Individually eligible       Eligible **only** in a historic district
- Contributing to a potential historic district       Potential historic district

Criteria:     **A**     **B**     **C**     **D**

Criteria Considerations:     **A**     **B**     **C**     **D**     **E**     **F**     **G**

Statement of Significance by     Lisa Mausolf      
*The criteria that are checked in the above sections must be justified here.*

The Zerbe House at 50 Snake Hill Road is eligible for the National Register, under Criterion C, as part of Carl Koch’s Snake Hill Development which is considered one of the best known and most significant groups of contemporary houses in the country – notable in terms of planning and architecture as well as its success in creating a strong sense of community. This house was constructed in 1941 as part of the second phase of construction and was designed for Karl Zerbe, a German-born American painter. The house was featured in an October 1946 article in *Progressive Architecture* on Snake Hill. Despite alterations including new windows and a 2012 addition, the house still contributes to a Snake Hill district.