

**KARMIC REWARDS**  
Modernphoenix.net founders  
Alison and Matthew King outside  
their newly prized Haver home.





# KINGS OF MODERNISM

Meet Alison and Matthew King: designers, educators, collaborators ...  
And now, **community leaders.**

BY PETER J. WOLF PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRENDAN MOORE

“YOU REALLY DESIGN YOUR OWN LIFE. I DON’T THINK people realize they have the power to design their lives ... to be the architect of their future,” says Alison King, founding editor and visionary of the Modern Phoenix Neighborhood Network, otherwise known as Modernphoenix.net. For King, design is more than a look, a style, or a movement. As her husband Matthew says, “our whole life is a design process.”

It all began in 2003, when the Kings were scouting Phoenix, AZ neighborhoods for interesting mid-century Modern architecture. They spent weekends driving up and down the streets and evenings building a web site to document their discoveries. The simple site was strictly a means of communication for the two of them but before long, their little project was attracting the attention of others on the web. So, frustrated by the dearth of information about the neighborhoods they found so charming, Alison developed the concept for Modernphoenix.net, a place for other enthusiasts to learn and discover. Matthew says it was “through the transformative power of communities online, this thing emerged ... it was very organic and evolutionary.”

At the core of this virtual community are its message boards, where members chat about topics ranging from affordable housing to xeriscaping. Not surprisingly, one of the hottest topics is historic preservation. Although they say, “Modernism with a capital M is really about looking forward, and not looking to the past.” The Kings are quick to point out the importance of preserving historical architecture, especially in Phoenix where so much has already been lost. But Alison maintains they didn’t set out to be preservationists: “We ended up getting involved in the preservation end of things because we personally invested in a very important property.” Their modest 1946 ranch in the Canal North neighborhood is the third home ever built by legendary Phoenix architect and builder, Ralph Haver.

According to the Kings, their red brick “box” is the first home in which Haver began to experiment with some of what would become his signature design elements. The large windows and open floor plan give the home a feeling of space beyond its modest 880 square feet. It was originally built on spec, and bought by Dr. Doris and Edward Hopkins, a Chicago couple who owned it for nearly 50 years.

The subsequent owners didn’t know what they had until they began sorting through the many documents and photographs that were left by Dr. Hopkins. Once they realized they were renovating a highly-prized Haver, research on the web led them to Modernphoenix.net ... and the Kings. When the owners were ready to sell they called the Kings first, asking if they knew of an appropriate steward. It was Alison and Matthew’s turn to collect on the good karma their web site had banked and they

pursued the invitation. As part of the deal, the Kings made a pledge to keep the home intact and be respectful of its storied past. The sellers didn’t take this lightly and sold the property at a very fair value during a time when it was typical for competing bids to escalate thousands beyond the initial offering.

The Kings have big plans for the property. The home will remain much as it is today, but the rear of the property will see major changes, beginning with a studio for Alison. She refers to the backyard as “the laboratory, where we can do pretty much whatever we want, and try to have an easy match between the old and the new that’s respectful ... We always say ‘design is about constraints,’ and this is our constraint: to respect what we’ve got and to work around it.”

It’s this same thoughtful, open-minded tone that one finds among the Modernphoenix community in general. Like the Kings, most members don’t live in museums. Alison says, “There’s this struggle between preserving and restoring what you have, and pushing it and taking it further in the name of Modernism and modern-contemporary.”

These two Parsons-trained designers — who spent 10 years in Brooklyn and the East Village — moved back to Phoenix in 1999 and have since become instructors at The Art Institute of Phoenix. “You can find anything here that you’ve got in New York City, even a great design school,” says Alison. “You just have to look harder, and you have to drive. We can’t change that all at once, but we can change that slowly, which people are doing.”

The Modernphoenix.net community is much more than a web site—it’s real people meeting other real people in the real world. Alison says, “When we moved here, we didn’t know anybody except our families and people that we hung out with in high school ... But after building Modernphoenix, we have found our tribe.” (Matthew jumps in: “We can throw a good party now!”) The Kings are hosting a home tour in April and it promises to attract “Phoenicians who are active and eager to build Phoenix up,” says Alison. “We’ve got the best people on board and that’s what excites me; we meet new and interesting people every day.” Thanks to their site, hundreds of Modern enthusiasts have “found their tribe” and now, designing their own lives just got a little bit easier. **More: [www.modernphoenix.net](http://www.modernphoenix.net)**

**\* To receive details on the Modernphoenix Home Tour in April and receive a printable driving map of the King’s favorite neighborhoods in Phoenix, sign up for *Desert Living’s* free, weekly e-newsletter, *SCOOP*, at [www.desertlivingmag.com](http://www.desertlivingmag.com).**