Larry Millett lends his expert eye to this guide through the life and architectural styles of Minnesota at midcentury. Richly illustrated, this book is an exploration of the post-World War II architectural style that swept the nation from 1945 through the mid-1960s. Millet takes us through twelve midcentury Minnesotan homes, and unpacks the evolution of sites as varied in nature as the St. Columbia Catholic Church in St. Paul and the expansive IBM complex in Rochester. Minnesota Modern provides a close-up view of a style that penetrated the social, political, and cultural machinery of the times – one that made lasting changes to the landscape of Minnesota architecture.

1. Proponents of Midcentury Modernism believed this new form of architecture, “liberated from the burdens of tradition, would lead the way to a better world.” In what ways were they right?

2. How was Midcentury Modernism more than just a style? What are the core ideas of this philosophy?

3. World War II had a profound impact on this style of architecture. What were the factors that contributed to its influence?

4. What were some drawbacks to the explosion of modern architecture?

5. Millett states that Midcentury Modernism emerged at a time when Minnesota, and especially the Twin Cities area, “was on the verge of vast and lasting changes in how people lived.” What were some of those changes and do you still see them reflected in Minnesota today?

6. Why did so many of the ‘experimental city’ projects, like that of Spilhaus, fail to come to full fruition?

7. What were some of the benefits and negative consequences of the drive for urban renewal in Minneapolis and St. Paul?

8. What aspects of Midcentury Modernism architecture attract you? Which do you find less appealing?

9. Southdale Mall is called one of 10 buildings that changed America. Do you think it was changed for the better or for the worse?

10. How were the ideals of this period reflected in the houses of worship built during this time, for example, Christ Lutheran in Minneapolis or Saint John’s Abbey in Collegeville?

11. How did the format of Minnesota Modern affect your reading, with the Midcentury Modern Houses sections interspersed with the other chapters? Did it help you get more of a feeling for the period? Why or why not?

Larry Millett, a native of Minneapolis, is a graduate of St. John’s University, Collegeville, Minnesota (BA, English, 1969) and the University of Chicago (MA, English, 1970). He spent much of his career as a writer, reporter, and editor for the Pioneer Press, joining the newspaper in 1972. In 1984, he won a Knight Fellowship to the University of Michigan to study architectural history and theory. When he returned to St. Paul in 1985, Millett became the newspaper’s first architecture critic. He held that post until his retirement from the Pioneer Press in June of 2002. Millett has written articles for many publications, including Architecture, Inland Architect, Architecture Minnesota and Minnesota History magazines. He has written eleven works of non-fiction, including Minnesota’s Own: Preserving Our Grand Homes, Once There Were Castles and the AIA Guide to the Twin Cities, as well as seven mystery novels. Visit www.larrymillett.com.
What inspired you to focus on Midcentury Modernism for this most recent book?

I grew up in the 1950s, and the modern architecture of that era became a big part of my life, so I've always been interested in it. I also thought it was a subject that, in Minnesota at least, hadn't received much scholarly attention. With that in mind, I decided that a big survey of midcentury architecture in the context of the times, which saw the Twin Cities transformed by suburban growth and urban renewal, would make for an intriguing book.

Describe the research you undertook in writing it and any challenges you may have encountered along the way.

My biggest challenge centered on the fact that very little secondary literature deals with midcentury modernism in Minnesota. As a result, I had to do mostly primary research. A big part of my job was developing a list of significant midcentury buildings in Minnesota. I also conducted many interviews as part of my research, which took more than three years.

How did you initially become interested in writing about architecture? Please tell a little about your path to becoming a journalist and published author.

I started drawing building plans when I was ten years old, and I thought for a time that I would become an architect. That didn't happen. Instead, I ended up in college as an English major and then fell into a long career in journalism. Even so, I never lost my deep interest in architecture. In my late thirties, I received a fellowship to study architectural history and theory at the University of Michigan, after which I became the architecture critic for the St. Paul Pioneer Press. That experience led me into writing books about architecture and urban history. My first book to reach a wide audience was Lost Twin Cities, published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press in 1992.

When and how did your interest in writing mystery novels develop? Is it difficult to balance this type of writing with your nonfiction work?

I’ve been reading mystery fiction my whole life, beginning with the Sherlock Holmes stories when I was a kid. I always had an idea in the back of my mind that maybe I could write mystery fiction someday. With my interest in history, I thought I’d be best suited to writing historical mystery fiction, and that’s how I ended up bringing Holmes to Minnesota in my first novel, Sherlock Holmes and the Red Demon, published by Viking Penguin in 1996. Balancing fiction and nonfiction isn't difficult for me because I love writing both types of books. However, I never try to write both at the same time. It's either one or the other.

How does being a Minnesotan and the particular community in which you live inform your writing? Do you imagine you would have had a similar career had you grown up in a state other than Minnesota?

I’m a Minnesota guy through and through, even though I don’t fish or play hockey. I grew up on the North Side of Minneapolis but, being an adventurous soul, moved to St. Paul more than 40 years ago. St. Paul is steeped in a tradition of great writers, and I can’t imagine doing what I do anywhere else. When I was in my twenties, I nearly took a newspaper job in Portland, Oregon. I’ve often wondered how such a move would have affected my career, but there’s really no way of knowing. As it is, I have no regrets about staying close to home.

Could you share a little about your current work or plans for a future project?

I’ve just completed a new mystery novel called Sherlock Holmes and the Eisendorf Enigma, set near Rochester in 1920. It will be out in spring 2017. The novel depicts an old and somewhat fragile Holmes facing off against a monstrous killer from his past. I’m not sure what will come after that – maybe a book about downtown urban renewal in Minneapolis and St. Paul after World War II, or maybe a new Shadwell Rafferty adventure.