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HOUSE & GARDEN
REPRINTED FROM APRIL 1988 ISSUE



VILLAGE OF ONE'S OWN

*Architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen takes
a new look at an endearing American style*

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BUILDER: CHEROKEE CONSTRUCTION



Viewed from the woods, the house resembles a mansion on the order of Mount Vernon, with a collection of

It's a driveway with a secret. You angle the car off a winding suburban road, drive down a hillside lined with firs, pass the back of what appears to be a barn, and then loop around for a strafing view of a house that doesn't look like a house: a long village like cluster of small buildings on the left faces a long car barn on the right, with a graveled country road in between. The setting, though on the outskirts of Philadelphia, seems more Williamsburg than Williamsburg itself: cleaner, crisper, whiter, more restored, and densely historic. Each section has a different roof shape; each is surfaced in a different material.

The designer of this house, Washington architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen, trained at Yale when Yale was Modernist; in the 1950's he worked in Philip Johnson's office when Johnson was Modernist. But the basic forms Jacobsen chose for the house he recently completed for Stephen and Susan Jacobs – he is an insurance executive; she, the chairman of the annual Philadelphia Craft Show – are in the local vernacular. The first is an almost-Federal brick building with six dormers; the second, an almost-Shaker early eighteenth century structure planked in one-by-tens; then, a white-painted brick library with a pyramidal roof; a board-and-batten gable-ended Pennsylvania farmhouse; and finally a plan old clapboard. Tall sequoia-like chimneys shoot through the roofs. The entire ensemble is well mannered, maybe even mannerist.

The scene inevitably provokes a smile even before the key is removed from the ignition. Jacobsen, a man of wit and charm, is also an architect of wit and charm, one of the few contemporary architects bred to the parlor who is able to design one. He specializes in creating houses that are the most civilized of precincts.

“We spent most of our married life in a central-hall Colonial house, and we wanted a change,” explains Stephen Jacobs, sitting in a living room with a tall cathedral ceiling dramatically cut by six high-peaked dormers. Light, open, voluminous, and hardly what you expect from the outside, the space is the second of the architect's surprises: what you see is not what you get. A third: shutters, normally on the outside, here are hung inside. Jacobs, at the edge of the sofa with enthusiasm, cannot sit for long. He leads the way, a businessman selling a house not at all for sale. The first space he points out is the powder room, not so much because it is sixteen feet

high and has an exquisitely veined marble vanity, but because the architect, an artist manqué, has painted a ceiling depicting client and architect as adult putti, floating in a blue sky, toasting their enterprise with champagne – a distant, artistically wishful reference to God reaching to Adam’s finger in the Sistine Chapel. Client and architect apparently hit it off.

During their long search for an architect, the Jacobs's kept encountering Jacobsen’s work in publications, and they finally decided to call him, though he practices in Washington. “I like people who present themselves well,” says Jacobs. “After charming us for a few minutes, Hugh showed us his work and seemed enthusiastic about what must have been, for him, just another house. It was an exciting introduction.”

The tour continues. The entry pavilion, next to the living room, leads to the library and dining room, all of which horseshoe around a back raised terrace, which serves as a courtyard, paved with large blocks of bluestones. Glass pocket doors open onto this terrace. The doors and matching windows transform each structure, no matter how down-home, into an urbane pavilion, and from one pavilion you can see all the others – it is the rare interior from which you can see the exterior. The three-sided terrace offers a view of woods in which the architect has cut two long allées in forced perspective. There is a touch of Versailles in this Colonial village.



With elegantly proportioned windows and doors and lofty ceilings, the house seems effortless – a succession of graceful open spaces that unfold one after another, without the visual chatter of doorjambs, bucks, knobs, surrounds, and all the other details that make a traditional house traditional. Could it, at heart, be modern?

Wit has been defined as the unexpected copulation of idea. In the Jacobsen house, the wit arises from an inversion of expectations; the house is a village; a traditional exterior masks a Modernist interior; the shutters are inside. The inversions continue in the library where a staircase (steel) spirals down, not up; the bedrooms are not in the dormers, as you would expect from the outside, but downstairs, in a ten-foot-high row of rooms notched into the hill.

Downstairs, tall windows and doors, flush with the ground, make each room feel like a separate pavilion, as upstairs. A stroll through one of the doors reveals that Jacobsen could secrete this floor out of sight from the driveway because of the sloping hill. The rooms – four bedrooms, the library, a study – are lined up in a row and serve as a podium for the pavilions above. At a distance, from the ends of the allées, the ensemble – wide, regular, asymmetrical but still balanced – is grand, part Mount Vernon, part villa. The house is really two houses: a village from the drive, a mansion from the woods.



A recent monograph of Jacobsen’s work documents his career in architecture, and the Jacobs house is a summary. He has designed other houses as clustered villages, he has used the idea of pavilions, and for more than a decade he has taken inspiration from vernacular and historic architecture. There is, however, an almost Modernism in Jacobsen’s designs. If he takes traditional forms, he abstracts and rarefies them. The Jacobs living room has not one molding or baseboard and only the suggestion of a full mantel. The overall shapes are Colonial, not the details.

Perhaps the clearest indication of Jacobsen’s Modernist sensibility is a neat square of bluestone, about twelve by twelve feet, fitted to the grass outside the bedrooms – a simple, pure, absolutely minimal geometric presence at the top of the hill that commands the view and the grounds.

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