

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

A Legacy Preserved

Extending the Life of a Classic Midcentury Modern for the Generations

TEXT BY JOSEPH GIOVANNINI • PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE HALL/HEDRICH BLESSING • Posted January 31, 2009 Magazine



In the dining room, new lighting was installed in the ceiling, and the mechanical components in the paneled wall were reconfigured—part of an overall effort to increase energy efficiency. A Richard Diebenkorn etching hangs on the wall. Holly Hunt table.

Even if you take away all the framed pictures of the kids and grandkids, the house in which Doris and Howard Conant raised their three children seems like a family album. They built the house as a young couple, and Doris Conant can still clearly visualize their children running across the stone floors of the living room from the pool, dripping wet. Maybe you could say the house encouraged the kids to be kids because it fooled them into thinking they were outside when they were inside. The house nurtured the Conants' family life, and for more than a half-century the couple returned the favor, respecting its design, never succumbing to "improvements" that would nibble away its architectural integrity. When built in 1953, the glass, stone and wood structure was radical, a California house in a Chicago suburb, and nearly 60 years after its construction, it has proved a classic, a perfect fusion of Frank Lloyd Wright's palette of natural materials and Mies van der Rohe's steel-and-glass prisms. Long Wrightian wings reach into a large wooded yard in a geometric embrace of nature: The house draws its soul from the landscape.

But after several decades the house needed updating and refreshing. Doris Conant thought it could be lighter and brighter and that there could be more room in the master bedroom and in the galley kitchen. Still, their affection and respect for the building prompted the couple to move ahead carefully.

The Conants called Richard Barancik, who, as a young architect just starting his Chicago practice, had designed the house. He is now retired and living mostly in California. A second architect suggested that it be left alone. The Conants moved through their list to Margaret McCurry, of the Chicago firm Tigerman McCurry Architects. "I knew Margaret, and I'd seen other work she's done," says Doris Conant. "She's very minimal, very low-key, and she liked the house."

"The house had never been neglected, but when Doris asked me what would happen to the house if they didn't do anything," remembers McCurry, "I said it might not survive as a legacy. It could be torn down just because it didn't have amenities that people now expect—a master suite with a generous bath, a connection between the kitchen and family room, a big kitchen."

In many residential projects, McCurry has used the vernacular of the region, but she originally earned her stripes in the Chicago offices of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and at the Conants' she took very intuitively to the flat-roofed Modernism. Still, it was difficult: "You had to put yourself into the head of the original architect and understand what he was thinking at the time," notes McCurry.

In an expanded master suite and the kitchen, which now has a large breakfast room, McCurry matched the existing wood and found the same Tennessee limestone, which was still available from the original quarry. Several strategic interventions were transformative, such as replacing a small door in the hallway to the master suite with a pivoting floor-to-ceiling door that disappears when open, allowing a view straight through the bedroom and bath to the outdoors. The space flows.

The architect also focused on the furnishings. She introduced a sideboard crafted of husky slabs of recycled antique teak, which mates with the limestone and wood paneling, and she customized a dining table so that it works with the high arms of the Conants' Wegner dining chairs.

Landscape architect Maria Smithburg, of Artemisia, reworked the gardens, bringing planting up to the windows and introducing a greater variety of materials, including grasses. The garden now flourishes in what ecologists call a climax state.

"I think what Margaret did is seamless," says Conant. "When we walk people through, we have to tell them where the old stops and the new begins. It's much brighter and lighter, and it flows better. It's really the same house, but more beautiful than it ever was."

The back story, admits Conant, "is that my husband didn't want to do it. He said he liked it just the way it was. Now he loves the house. He gets up, goes to the window and looks out, and exclaims, Wonderful!"

"When we were young, my parents were awed by the house. My mother said, You know, Doris, this house is going to outlive you.' " With the recent renovation and restoration, the Conants made sure it will.