

SUMMER 2003  
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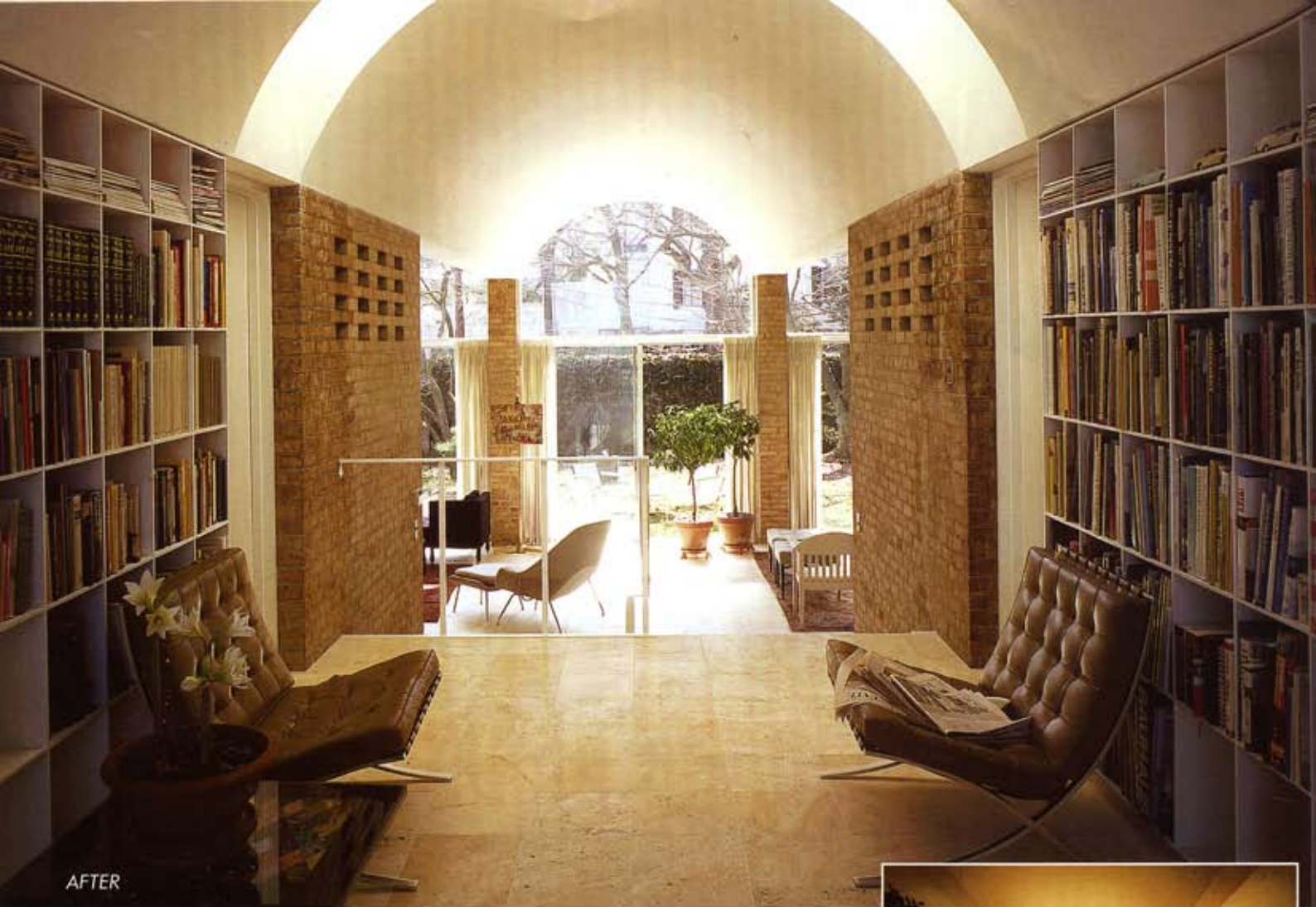
# ARCHITECTUREDC

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AFTER

discovered that on its sloped site, the house becomes two stories of glass in the back.

Snyder called his realtor friend Charlie Gaynor of City Houses. “When I move, this is the house I want,” Snyder said. He hadn’t seen the inside, but he felt he knew it from the plans he had studied. It wasn’t on the market, but they drew up a contract anyway, leaving the price blank. Ready to jump at the first sign of availability, Snyder waited in his house in Kalorama—for three more years.

Snyder was not the first person to be infatuated with the house. For original owner William Slayton and his wife Mary Louise, a.k.a. “Bug,” the project was a labor of love from its inception. Despite their modest budget, William Slayton was determined to bring this unusual house to Washington. Recalls Kellogg Wong, FAIA, then the project architect at I. M. Pei & Associates, “Nothing could dissuade him. It was a masterpiece of a home for him.”

William Slayton documented every step of the design process in intimate detail (see “Vignettes,” page 12). Like family heirlooms, every check paid to Pei & Associates was saved. When the Slaytons died during the summer of 1999, after living

in the house for 40 years, their ashes were entombed in a sundial in the front yard.

Architects, planners, developers, and others of the Slaytons’ circle—the “Slayton Irregulars,” as they called themselves—gathered in the living room to pay tribute. I. M. Pei delivered a eulogy from the top of the stairs. According to attendees, Pei noticed the conspicuous water stains on the brick walls, caused by years of roof leaking. “I’m an architect, not an engineer,” Pei explained to the crowd.

Snyder’s realtor knew another realtor, Connie Maffin of Coldwell Banker/Pardoe, who knew the Slayton family. Maffin let the Slayton’s daughters know that a very interested buyer was waiting in the wings. After some negotiation, but without seeing inside the house, Snyder signed a contract with the daughters. “I had just peeked in the windows,” Snyder admits.

The bold move made sense to Snyder. “I like to renovate houses. I thought it would be great to put all that energy into a house that is worthy of all the attention—because it’s a lot of energy that goes into a renovation.”

Pei would probably understand Snyder’s reasoning. “He expends as much



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energy on a small project as on a large,” reports Wong, asked why Pei doesn’t design more residential projects. Pei is rumored to have designed two or three houses in his long career, but his firm discourages their promotion, and the architect will not discuss them. Wong’s explanation is, “Anyone who does houses knows that you need to work very closely with the client, and it requires a tremendous amount of your time.”

An architect’s investment in a house pays off bit by bit, year after year, in the pleasures it provides its owner. That was the other reason why Snyder wanted this house. “You learn something about a house every day,” he explains. “You can walk through a building, spend an hour there or even a



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Lantern Photography

week, but when you live in a house you learn something all the time.”

Snyder has lived in the house for the past three years, overseeing its substantial renovation. Architectural masterpiece or not, any house gets messy during a renovation, and Snyder has had his share of plaster dust and take-out dinners, as well as some less common disruptions, such as having his floors jack-hammered to mud (so radiant floor heating could be installed where the original under-floor air ducts had collapsed).

Leading the renovation is architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen, FAIA. Jacobsen was a friend of the Slaytons, and he has known the house from its infancy in 1960. “When I heard Pei’s house was being constructed, I dropped by and watched it come out of the ground,” he recalls.

A celebrated modernist in his own right, Jacobsen takes a light hand to his colleague’s work. “All houses have to change somewhat. But when you remodel anyone’s work, you must never erase the original architect.” It may surprise those only familiar with Jacobsen’s distinctive houses that the architect also designed the West

Terraces and Offices of the U.S. Capitol (1988) and the Renwick Gallery Renovation (1972). “It would have been terrible chutzpah if I had overshadowed Renwick,” Jacobsen says.

“Do the right thing,” has become the mandate of this project, guided by the question of what the Slaytons would have done if they had had more resources. William Slayton’s detailed memoirs help provide answers. He describes how Pei wanted to use marble for the living room floor, but they couldn’t afford it. Pei suggested teak, but Mrs. Slayton wanted carpet. “Bug pointed out that the walls were brick and the ceiling concrete. She felt a soft rather than a hard surface for the floor would be preferable,” Slayton recalls.

Mrs. Slayton won out, but when it came time for Snyder to replace the wall-to-wall carpet upstairs and vinyl asbestos tile on the lower level, he and Jacobsen chose white travertine marble. One of Jacobsen’s favorite materials, the travertine is unfilled, so each piece is a study of natural cavities.

The most dramatic change in the house is not one the Slaytons would have made

with more money, but one they might have made with one less daughter. By removing the wall of a bedroom at the top of the stairs, the north-south axis of the central vault is opened to the house at large.

The space is now an airy and light-filled library, lined by Jacobsen’s signature egg-crate bookcases, which actually form the walls between the library and the remaining two bedrooms on either side. Previously, the library had been part of the living room, set off by a free-standing, shoulder-high bookcase. After much debate, Snyder decided to remove that bookcase, but he saved it in the basement in case a later owner wants to reinstall it.

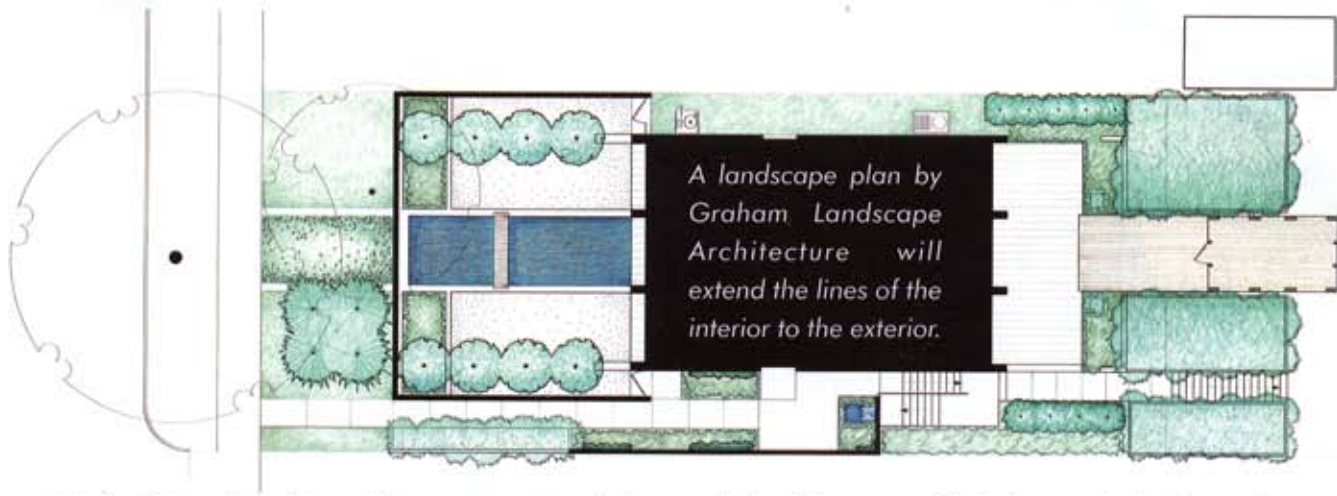
Modern conveniences have been added to the house on the lower level. A travertine-lined guest bathroom with elegant Philippe Stark fixtures is designed to accommodate Snyder’s brother, who uses a wheelchair. In the kitchen, Snyder enjoys a new Thermador stove and Subzero refrigerator and wine cooler. The original birch cabinet doors were saved and refinished; white Formica countertops were replaced with white DuPont Corian. Snyder applauds the



◀ The original plans of the house. ▶

Jacobsen removed the wall at the top of the stairs, opening the north-south axis of the central vault.





original architect for cabinets that are 30 inches deep rather than 24. The extra depth allows for the cook's comfortable clearance of cabinets hanging above.

Jacobsen and Snyder replaced cabinets separating the kitchen from a breakfast nook with a cantilevered DuPont Corian breakfast bar. The kitchen remains small by today's standards—about 180 square feet—but Snyder reports it easily accommodates entertaining. "You can fit three cooks in here comfortably," he claims.

The house looks finished, comfortably outfitted with Snyder's Gene Davis art and '50s-era Dunbar furniture. But Snyder is quick to note what's undone, from the

master bathroom that hasn't been remodeled to the computer cord that should be hidden.

Every few weeks Snyder climbs on the roof to make sure the gutters, which run between the barrel vaults and drain into brick piers at the center of the house, are clear of leaves and debris. Snyder has also replaced the roof, resealed the skylight, and dug trenches around the foundation. Along with his regular trips to the roof, he seems to be keeping the water out. If Pei were to visit now, no apologies would be necessary.

Still ahead is the landscaping around the house. Original project architect Wong remembers, "Bill did not have the money, but someone with more resources would

have asked the architect to integrate landscape design." Taking his cues from the house, Jay Graham, ASLA, of Graham Landscape Architecture is designing front and back yards that will extend the lines of the interior to the exterior.

A pool will stretch into the courtyard, continuing the north-south axis of the opened center bedroom. Also planned are a back terrace with a tree house-like screened porch, a fountain by the front door, and the strategic use of bamboo to screen the oasis. Despite all the changes, the Slaytons' ashes will stay in the courtyard, testament to the bond between a house and its inhabitants.



Lautman Photography



Lautman Photography

## Tour This House

**June 14, 2003**

Dan Snyder will generously open his home to the public as a benefit for the Washington Architectural Foundation on Saturday, June 14th, 2003. Tours of 3411 Ordway Street, NW, will commence every half-hour from 2 to 4 p.m., concluding with a special tour at 5 p.m. that includes a reception (attended by owner Snyder, architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen, FAIA, friends of the Slayton family, and other fans of the house).

Cost is \$20 for the afternoon tours, \$50 for the 5 p.m. tour/reception. Prepaid registration required. Go online to [www.aiadc.com](http://www.aiadc.com). For more information, call 202.667.1798.

Sponsored by DuPont Corian, Charlie Gaynor of City Houses, Graham Landscape Architecture, Connie Maffin of Coldwell Banker/Pardoe, Illuminations, Stone Source, and Dominic Turano of Wells Fargo Home Mortgage.