

Special Section: Houses for the Next Millennium

house beautiful

What's Ahead

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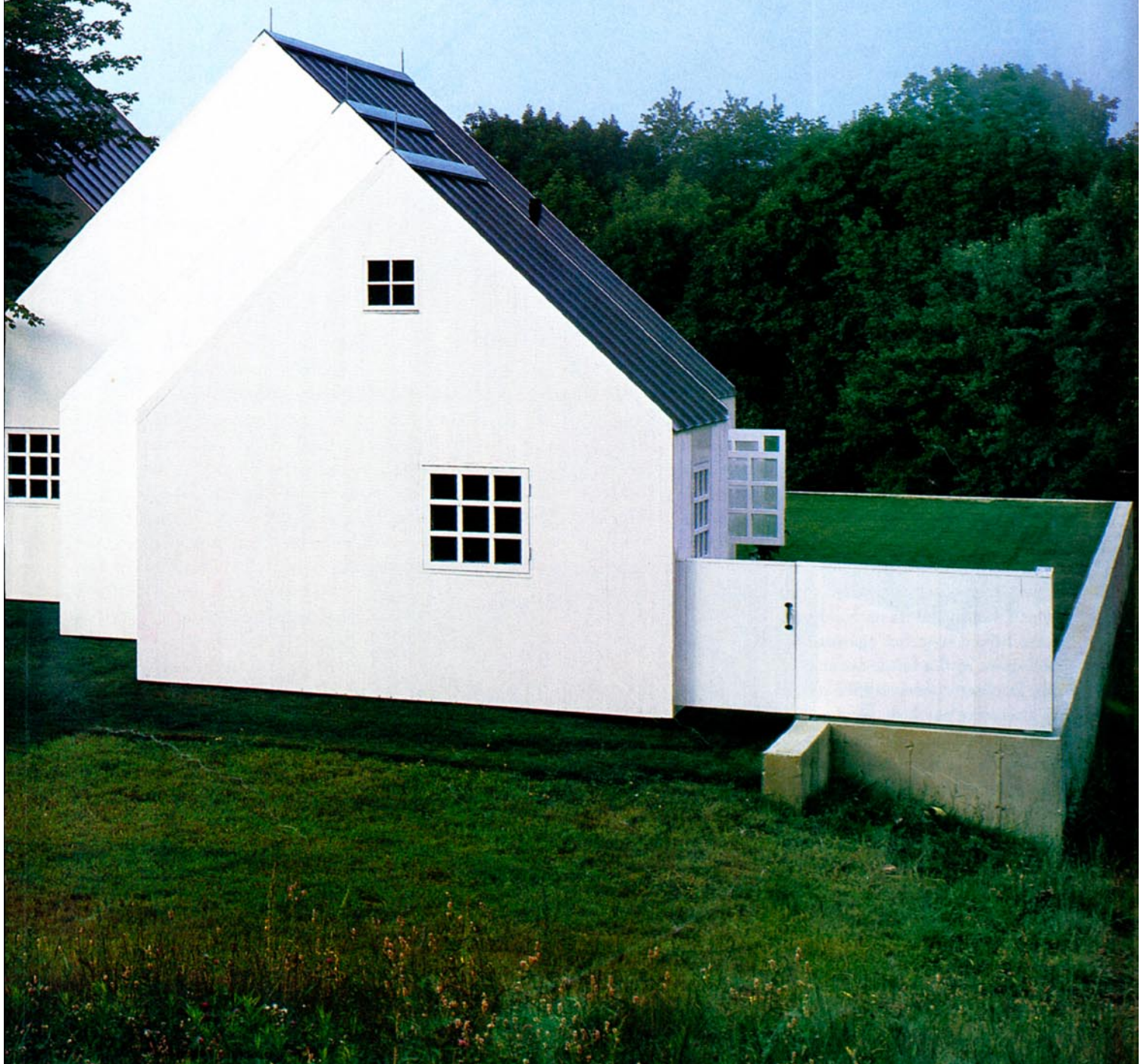


"I think of a window as a punch in a wall, and here I've put the glass almost on the same plane as the cedar siding," says architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen, who banishes any frame or sill that might interrupt the line. When the outer front door is closed, it is flush with the house. Opened, it folds back to reveal its red-painted interior, announcing that the owner is at home.

REFINING THE RUSTIC

*Architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen,
who has been abstracting the vernacular
down to its simplest form for
decades, takes on the New England
farmhouse with crisp and clean results*

BY CHRISTINE PITTEL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT LAUTMAN



"Everyone said, 'At your age?' and I said, 'Why not?'" explains Evelyn Nef, an 84-year-old Washington, D.C., resident. "I'm in good shape for my years. I can dance all night and still do 350 sit-ups the next day with my trainer. I already owned the land in the Berkshires, right next to my best friends. Suddenly I thought, I'll give myself a present and build a house where I can escape the summer heat."

So she called her neighbor in Georgetown, architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen, who had renovated an office for her when she embarked on her third career, as a psychotherapist. Previously Evelyn Nef made marionettes with her first husband, puppeteer Bil Baird, then traipsed round the world with her second husband, Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson, writing books and giving speeches. Third husband John Nef, an economic historian and art collector, died in 1988, leaving her an 18th-century Georgetown house with a dazzling Chagall mosaic in the garden.

"I told Hugh I didn't have as much time as most clients, and ten days later he handed me the plan and a model," says Nef. "I was instantly enchanted. You can't tell an artist how to paint a picture, and I knew I'd be better off if I didn't tell Hugh much more than 'Build me something marvelous!'"

Jacobsen believes that every house deserves a ceremonial entrance. Here the drumbeat of anticipation starts as a guest turns up the driveway and spots a scattering of buildings. "At first you're not sure whether it's a house or a small village," says the architect, who tapped into the local New England farmhouse tradition for his forms. A century or two ago, the typical house and its outbuildings were linked together against ice and snow. In this latter-day example, Jacobsen conceives each room as a separate pavilion, asymmetrically aligned into a "Swiss-army-knife plan," as he puts it, that does not overwhelm the landscape. Then he strips away extraneous

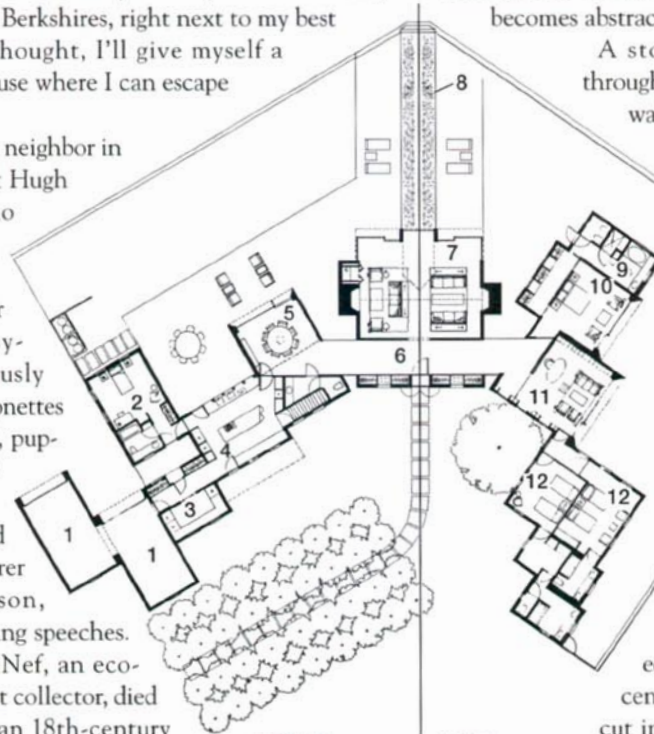
detail like overhangs, shutters, window casings, and cornerboards. "I took off all the shadows," he explains. Jacobsen reduces each shape down to the basic Monopoly set house that he has been playing with for years. The familiar becomes abstract, and unexpectedly intriguing.

A stone path from the driveway leads through an allée of pear trees, then swerves toward the front door. "Now you're on the major axis, although you don't know it until you open the door," says the architect. "You step through the gallery into the living room, where the ceiling soars 28 feet and you look straight through an 18-by-7-foot window into the pool." If it were not for the plate glass, a guest could dive right in, because the water comes all the way up to the window and then stretches out in back to vanish in an "infinity lip" with no visible edge. "The pool aims straight down the center of an allée 700 yards long, which we cut into the woods to reveal the mountains beyond," says Jacobsen.

This master of manipulation loves to toy with scale, which is one reason why a house that appears to be two stories high on the outside turns out to be only one story high inside. The upper windows are actually perched at clerestory levels, and the space feels enormous since the ceilings are generally 14 feet high. The main rooms rise all the way up to their ridge poles, reiterating the Monopoly form inside.

"When I was an art student in the 1920s, I saw the first exhibitions of modern furniture and thought, this is the way to live—clean, clear, and uncluttered," says Nef. "But somehow that had never been possible before. First I was book-poor and

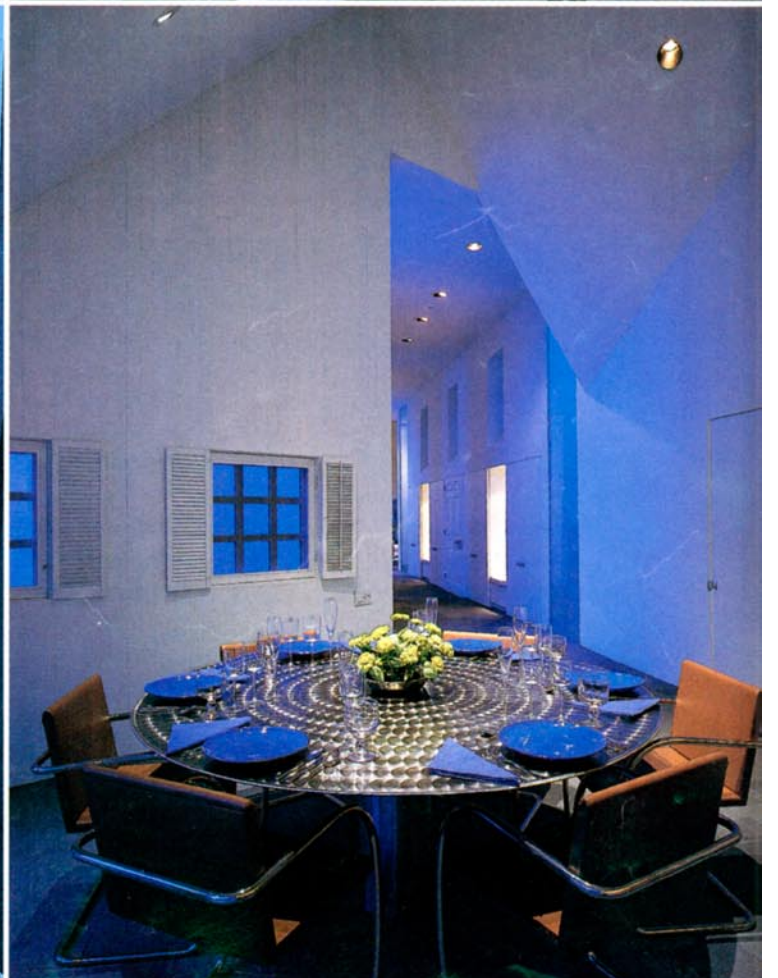
living with hand-me-downs, then later I was surrounded by beautiful antiques." Now her new house has given Nef the rare opportunity to start from scratch. In the library, when she looks up from the autobiography she is writing for Knopf, she can appreciate the three-dimensional pleasures of space, light, and air—the look she admired seventy years ago.



- 1. Garage
- 2. Maid's room
- 3. Laundry
- 4. Kitchen
- 5. Dining
- 6. Entry
- 7. Living room
- 8. Pool
- 9. Master bath
- 10. Master bedroom
- 11. Library
- 12. Guest bedroom



A wide gallery shown in plan (top) connects the two main wings of the house and runs from the dining room to the library (seen at left, above). Opposite, clockwise, from top left: Two planes of glass abut in a favorite Hugh Jacobsen ploy, dissolving the corner in the living room. Twin fireplaces face each other, bathed in light from the 18-foot-high window bordering the pool. Jacobsen cleverly inverts the house, creating an interior streetscape with shutters on the windows facing the stainless-steel dining room table burnished in concentric circles. All the paintings in the house are by Elaine Kurtz, including the specially commissioned pieces on either side of the door leading to the living room.



The profile of the great room's dormer suggests the hayloft of a barn, only this one is sheathed in glass. The standing seam aluminum roof echoes the color and proportion of the gray stone bordering the black pool. The nine-paned window at the far left, located right over the master bathroom tub, turns opaque at the push of a button.

FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE READER INFORMATION



Playing footloose with tradition, Jacobsen takes the dormer



window and inflates it, dropping it straight to the ground