

Hoo Knew?

The Odd Name and Colorful History Behind a Mid-Century's Remodel

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You can't really see it from the road. And even if it weren't sheltered from Bradley Boulevard by a grove of beneficent trees, it wouldn't necessarily command a motorist's attention. The two-level mid-century house, with its blue-gray wood siding and long, street-facing gallery, is striking -- but not assertively so. Amid the stately Colonials and Tudors that represent the architectural currency of Bethesda's Bradley Hills neighborhood, it appears a comfortably self-aware but soft-spoken outlier.

You probably wouldn't guess, for instance, that it once drew onlookers by the tens of thousands. Or that the editors of *Architectural Record* named it one of the 20 most significant American houses of 1961. And you'd never guess how a recent renovation, informed by a 45-year-old brief, has once again made this house something to behold.

On the Saturday after Thanksgiving, 1960, this most curious of residences briefly opened its doors to the public, born of a public relations stunt by the National Lumber Manufacturers Association. It had been designed by the Washington architectural firm of Keyes, Lethbridge and Condon, but its construction was overseen by the fraternal organization of lumbermen, named,

whimsically, the International Concatenated Order of Hoo-Hoo. Thus did the "House of Wood," as it was called in many news accounts at the time, also come to be known as the "Hoo-Hoo House."

Over the next few months more than 20,000 visitors came through its door, drawn by newspaper stories that bandied about words such as "experimental." In truth,

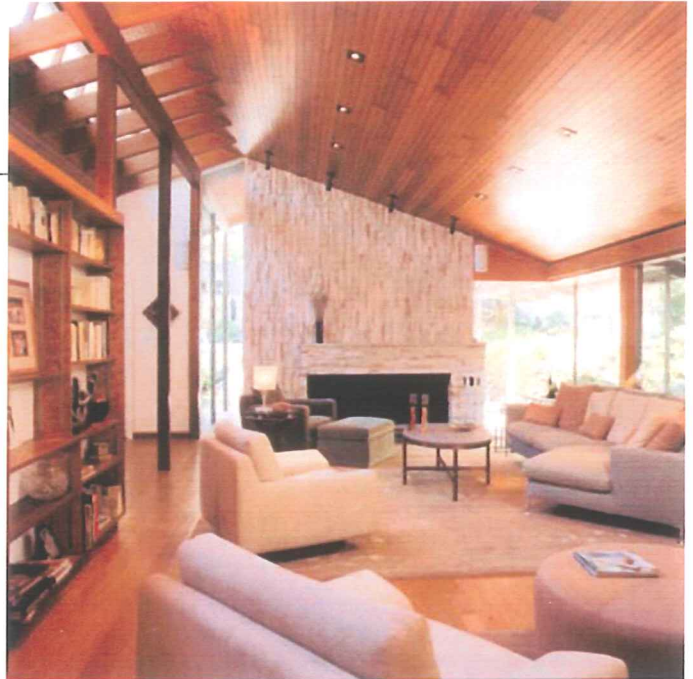


The "Hoo Hoo House" as it appeared in 1960.

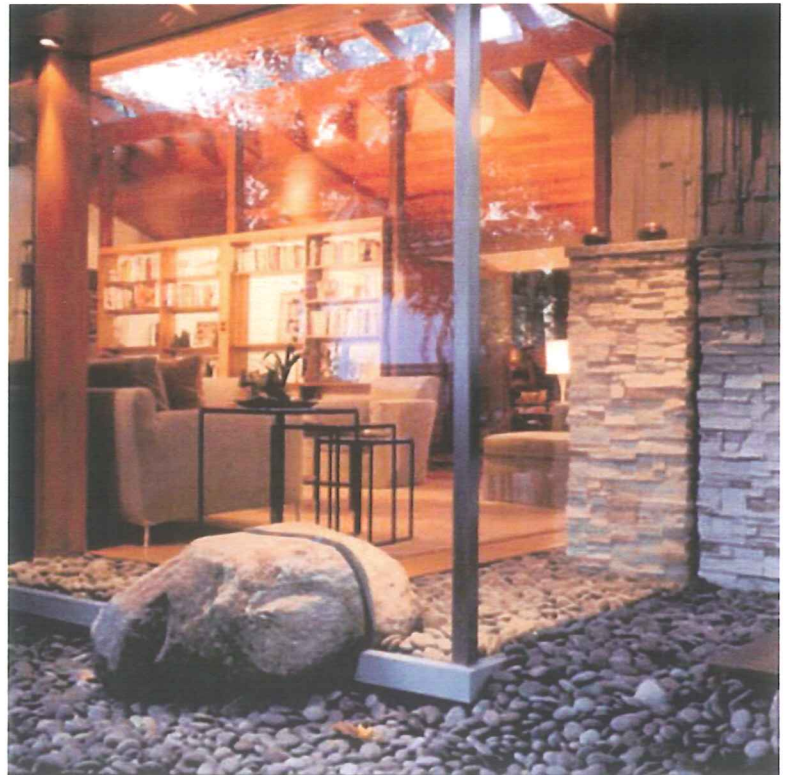
the house wasn't experimental so much as singularly devoted to the celebration of wood -- a brilliant maneuver on behalf of an industry battling the manufacturers of linoleum, Formica, aluminum siding, and wall-to-wall carpet for the affections of mid-century homeowners.

Throngs came out every weekend, eager to see one of the world's most plentiful and unremarkable building materials employed to kaleidoscopic effect in a house conceived as a showcase for various hardwoods. White oak, cedar, birch, redwood, Honduras mahogany, Douglas fir, and pines of Idaho white and Southern yellow were just some of the woods used for the house's floors, ceilings, walls, cabinets, shingles and

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Renewal for a Mid-Century Novelty

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Washington Hoo-Hoo chapter at the time. He hasn't set foot inside the space since John F. Kennedy took office, but he can still hear the symphony of hammered nails, smell the sawdust, witness the small miracle of a house frame standing where only days before nothing stood at all. He recalls with pride how he personally procured the yellow pine for the living room ceiling. "It was really exhilarating to see this thing come out of the ground," says the now-retired Roberts, from his home in Silver Spring.

After making its up-with-lumber point publicly, the Hoo-Hoo House was quietly sold, and went through only two owners in three decades until it was purchased in 1993 by Jorge Goldstein, a Buenos Aires-born patent attorney. Though vaguely aware of his home's 15 minutes of fame, he didn't know the full story until he opened a cabinet drawer during the chaos of unpacking. Inside was a collection of photographs and old news clippings about the house -- and not just from trade publications, but from *The Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and *Architectural Record*.

Goldstein realized that he had an architecturally significant house on his hands. And with that realization came a certain



A transfigured corner in the master bedroom.

responsibility to handle any renovations with extra care.

"I very much liked the open space of the living room, and the sliding glass doors that looked out onto the garden," says Goldstein. "I've always loved Japanese minimalism, that sense of less-is-more, of uncrowded straight lines with an asymmetrical touch somewhere. This house had it."

But it also had four decades' worth of wear and tear. And though the original architecture harmonized nicely with the landscape, Goldstein wanted to obliterate boundaries between interior and exterior: to allow even more natural light into the living room and to open up the garden for viewing from within.

A few years after moving in, Goldstein learned that, coincidentally enough, a fellow Argentinian was living at the end of his cul-de-sac, in a traditional house whose façade had been updated with a subtle but unmistakably modern inflection. When he and his wife, Sandy, finally decided to renovate, they approached their neighbor and asked him who his architect was. My brother, replied the owner.

Two Argentinians living on the same Bethesda cul-de-sac. One in sore need of an architect; the other the brother of an architect who lived just a mile or two down Bradley Boulevard. What were the odds?

Coincidence morphed, as it so often does, into something easily mistaken for destiny.

His neighbor's brother turned out to be Salo Levinas, an architect who practiced in Buenos Aires before settling in the Washington area in 1985. For a decade he headed his own practice, then joined forces with Milton Shinberg to form Shinberg-Levinas, whose commissions to date include the large new addition to Congregation B'nai Tzedek synagogue in Potomac and the renovation of the Maya Angelou Public Charter School above Logan Circle.

For the Goldstein residence, Levinas had to walk a delicate line between preserving elements of the original design that give the house its unique character and bringing it into the new century. Approaching the front door from the street, a visitor today walks down the long entrance gallery and is first struck by a wall of rich cypress slats protruding from the original blue-gray façade. Like some sort of Zen marquee, it blankly announces the motif that provided the house's original *raison d'être*, but its stark tonal contrast to the surrounding wood also connotes transformation within.

In the living room, Levinas replaced walls and sliding doors with floor-to-ceiling windows, which now work in concert with the house's original clerestory to flood the room with natural light. This infusion has awakened the dormant reds, oranges, and yellows in the pine of the cathedral ceiling and the oak of the peg floors; they now appear to be anything but brown. Offsetting the warmth of the wood is the nostalgic coolness of



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Architect Salo Levinas, standing, with Sandy and Jorge Goldstein.

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the cultured limestone from which the new fireplace surround and hearth wall have been crafted. They wouldn't have looked at all out of place during the house's 1960 debut.

The new windows, says Levinas, "bring light and the landscape inside -- but they also do the reverse: They bring the house outside." He has playfully articulated this idea by slicing a boulder in two and placing its halves on either side of the living room's floor-to-ceiling glass, contributing to the illusion of permeability.

An undulating, Levinas-designed "curtain" of mahogany lines the hallway leading to the master bedroom, in which a tall but narrow strip of glass marks one end of the house's central axis. At the other end, on the opposite side of the house, is its axial mate: another full-height window that affords a view of the garden's Japanese-style fountain.

Levinas and the Goldsteins enlisted Zen Associates, a Boston-based landscape architecture firm led by Shinichiro Abe, to design a serene garden with Japanese overtones. The overhanging roof provided shelter for an outdoor seating area, but the soaring volume made the space feel about as cozy as the grand concourse at Union Station. Levinas's solution was to concoct a floating arbor that hangs from the eaves at a height of only about seven feet; the lowered ceiling confers instant intimacy.

"This house has a big soul," says Levinas. "It had everything inside it, and in a way we just



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An undulating, Levinas-designed "curtain" of mahogany.

'discovered' it. But we had to be respectful in the way we approached it."

For the Goldsteins, the renovation accentuates, rather than erases, the house's history. New light has given the original wood fresh life. New wood has been integrated carefully and respectfully. And the replacement of walls with full-height windows has fully connected the interior with the landscape. "It's magic when you're sitting in the living room during a snowstorm, looking out," says Jorge Goldstein. "The garden and stones are all covered with snow -- but you're warm, right next to the fire."

Membership in the Washington chapter of the International Concatenated Order of Hoo-Hoo waned over the years until the group fell below the minimum number required for activation. The chapter now exists informally, as seven old friends who get together whenever they can to swap stories, recall triumphs, maybe talk a little shop.

But Lee Roberts is excited to learn that the house he and his brothers-in-lumber built way back in 1960 is still being appreciated. And he's even more excited to learn that his original yellow pine ceiling not only remains intact, but looks as lustrous and pristine as the day it was put in.

