

Hugh Newell Jacobsen

By J. Michael Welton

A CONVERSATION WITH THE 82-YEAR-OLD WASHINGTON, D.C., MASTER WHO'S BEEN PERFECTING HIS LEAN AND ELEGANT BRAND OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE FOR FIVE DECADES NOW



How do you define yourself as an architect?

I'm a minimalist. I believe that form follows function, and expresses the structure. It's important not to bury things. I believe that lighting is theater, that lighting is order – that a building must not be schizophrenic just because the sun went down.

Architecture is a peculiar profession, where people come to you with all this money and ask what they should do with it. And then they do it. Louis Kahn used to say that an architect doesn't give the client what they want, but what they need.

How long did you know Kahn? What did you learn from him?

I met him when I was a student and he was a visiting critic at Yale. Then he was assigned as a full-time critic.

Later we became very close friends. We'd talk two or three times a month, just gossiping. I'd go to Philadelphia or he'd come here. He even had lunch with my father—he'd been lecturing at the Smithsonian, and said "Let's go to the Occidental." So I had lunch there with my two great mentors.

I was on the cover of *Architectural Record* once, basically peeing in my pants over it, and my

secretary said: "Mr. Kahn is on the phone." I picked up the phone and he said: "Hugh, we all have to do a house like that sometimes – I just hope to hell you got it out of your system."

He said that there are no solutions in architecture, just the things that work at the time. And that if you repeat yourself, you're dead as a smelt.

What I learned? My God! Well first of all, it isn't like Hillary channeling Eleanor. I pick up a pencil and an empty page, then I look at it, and make a mark – and I'm terrified.

Lou would say that you should never shout at the neighbors with vulgarity, and that show-off architecture always gets torn down after a few years.

But he was always Lou Kahn. I remember meeting Mies, and thinking "How could a god have a head cold?" And I knocked on the door of Le Corbusier's little studio in Paris, and there he was. "Who's your teacher?" he asked me. "Lou Kahn," I said. "Who's he?" he asked.

What did Kahn mean when he said: "Isn't it a shame we have to have clients?"

A client is a pain in the ass. You have to teach

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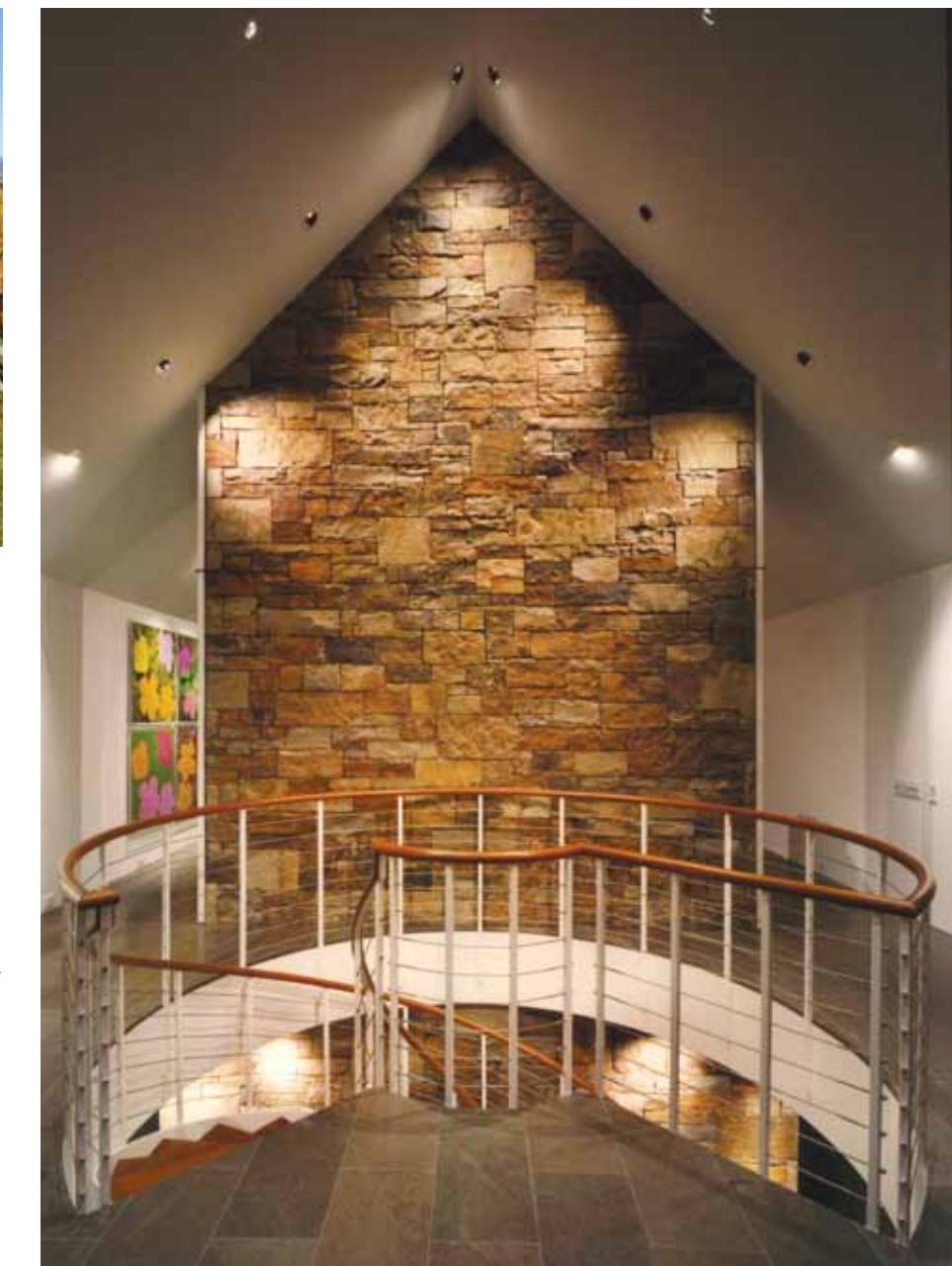
them. They haven't read art history beginning with the caves in Spain, and all the rest. As soon as they start opening their mouths, you'll be amazed at what they don't know. They're not architects. Lou said that you have no business losing an argument with anyone except another architect.

Have there been other modernists who've influenced your work?

The Bauhaus was hammered into me in architecture school.

Josef Albers's course on color at Yale too. He'd bring in a stack of construction paper in all colors, and ask me to select my favorite color. I'd pick blue, and he'd say: "Oh, Jacobsen, you like blue!" And then he'd drag it across brown, and say: "What do you think now? You see, color is only color in relation to another color."

I'm dyslexic – I never passed a math course. In high school they changed nine F's to D's just to get rid of me. In 1947 I started night school in the basement of Chevy Chase High School. There were all these old veterans, and me. I got a 3.5 average and transferred to the University of Maryland College Park campus.



Left: Lounge chair and ottoman designed by Hendrik Van Keppel and Taylor Green c. 1939, c. 1959.

Above: Woman's swimsuit and jacket by Margit Fellegrnc. 1950.



When I was finally graduating, I told my dad that I wanted to become a painter. I might as well have told him I'd be wearing a dress. He knew a guy at Yale and arranged for me to be interviewed by Dean Carroll Meeks. Meeks said to me: "Face it - you're a painter but not an award-winning painter. You've got no real design talent. You're rather average. You'd take glory away from Yale. We want to bring glory to Yale."

Then I got a letter accepting me. And after I'd been there two weeks, I felt like I'd found God. There were Meeks and Kahn and George Howe. I just thought it was marvelous that I could do it.

What's your favorite building in Washington? Why?

The White House. It's a copy of the Leinster House in Dublin. The proportions are absolutely glorious. You get to look out at all the radiating spokes of L'Enfant's plan from floor to ceiling windows. Or you can stand outside and read it from the gate. It's sitting on a mound seven feet high above Pennsylvania Avenue, but you'd never know it.

Top: Garden sculpture by La Gardo Tackett for Architectural Pottery, c. 1955.

Bottom: Table designed by Jock Peters for Bullock's department store, Los Angeles, c. 1929.

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