

THE GOOD LIFE

YOUR CURATED GUIDE TO DINING, SHOPPING, CULTURE & LOCAL FINDS

# New Canaan Darien + ROWAYTON

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HONORING HISTORY  
AS WE CELEBRATE OUR  
COMMUNITY**

**L'OSTAL & LA CAVE:  
PROVENÇAL CHARM IN  
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# A LIVING LEGACY

INSIDE  
NEW CANAAN'S  
EVOLVING MODERN  
DESIGN SCENE

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# MODERN

From historic homes to present-day design,  
a group of New Canaan creatives carries forward  
the ideals first defined by the Harvard Five.

- BY MALIA MCKINNON FRAME ● PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE NORTON
- ON LOCATION: THE GLASS HOUSE, NATIONAL TRUST HISTORIC SITE

# LOVE



Fred Noyes, Andrea Feick Attkiss,  
Amanda Martocchio and Debbie Propst

# M

odernism is having a big moment in New Canaan. The New Canaan Museum & Historical Society's Modern House Tour and October4Design (a monthlong celebration of architecture, art and design) have been hugely successful. Along with the release of Devon Chivvis's documentary *Harvard 5: A Story of Love, Architecture, and a Design Revolution*, these events are bringing renewed attention to a movement that has been part of the community's fabric for decades.

Since the late 1940s, New Canaan has been known as the home to the Harvard Five architects and a hub for Midcentury Modern design on the East Coast. "These architects came here for different reasons, but they all shared a new, forward-thinking vision of architecture," explains Nancy Geary, Executive Director of the New Canaan Museum & Historical Society. "Together, they had an enormous impact on shaping New Canaan's landscape."

But Modernism in New Canaan was never just about buildings—it reflected a new way of living, explains Kirsten Reoch, Executive Director of The Glass House. "The culture was changing, and everyone was thinking about progress. This was part of events that transformed the American lifestyle, not just architecture," she says. "While there are different styles within the blanket term Modernism, a lot of it harkens back to this idea from the Bauhaus School: 'form follows function' and a paring back of non-essentials."

Architects including Eliot Noyes, John Johansen, Philip Johnson, Landis Gores and Marcel Breuer designed houses with open layouts, natural light and a strong connection to the outdoors. "Overall, there was an idea of timeless simplicity, bringing your home back to the essentials as well as a visible connection with nature," says Reoch.

One of the most well-known examples is Philip Johnson's Glass House, built in 1949. Its open, minimalist design has inspired modern homes and design trends we see all around us today. Originally a weekend home for Johnson and his partner David

Nancy Geary, Executive Director of the New Canaan Museum & Historical Society, and Kirsten Reoch, Executive Director of The Glass House

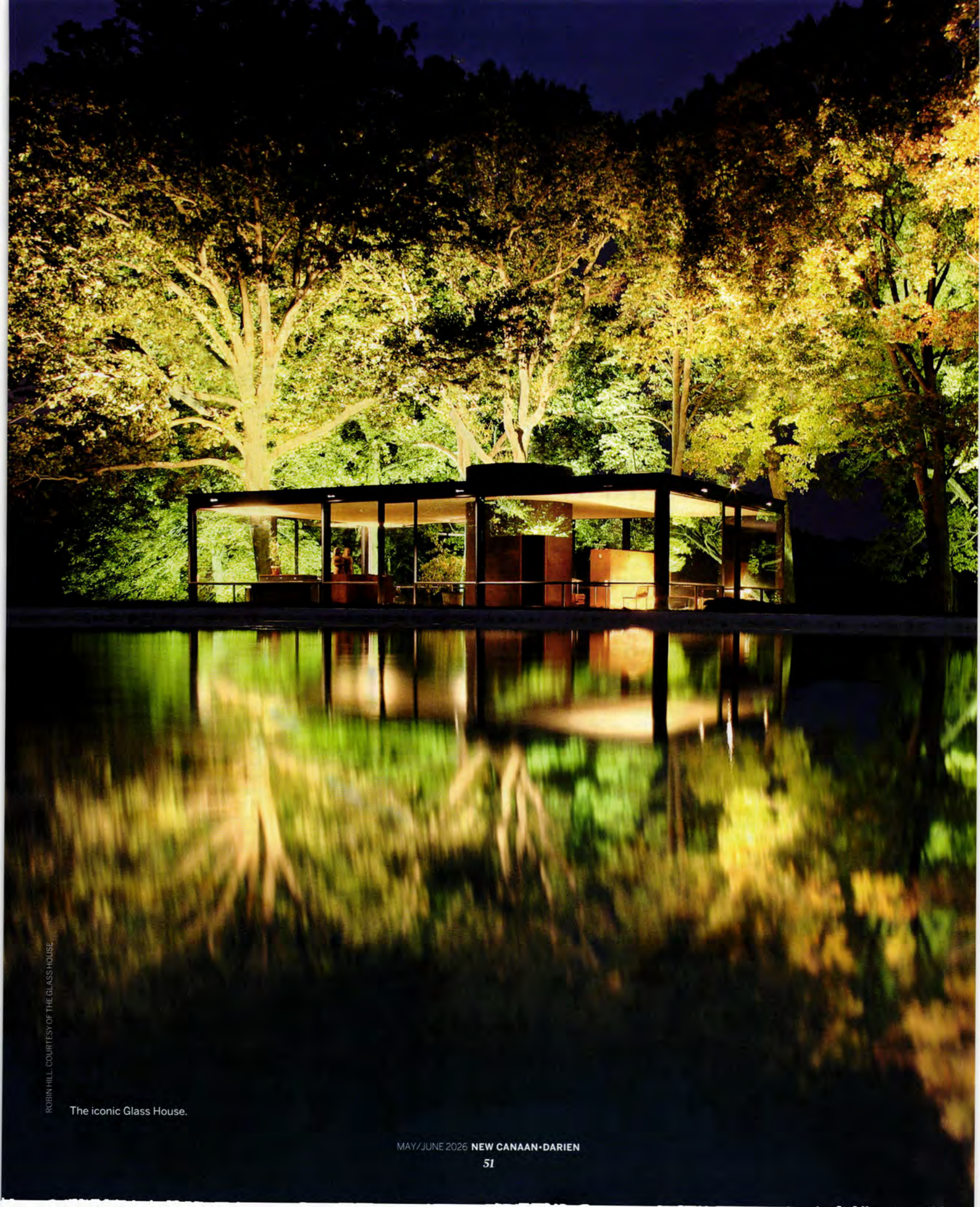


Whitney, The Glass House expanded into a larger campus. More than just a house, it functions as a museum with global influence. "We are always changing exhibitions, adding performances and hosting visiting artists," says Reoch. "The Glass House is still a living, breathing entity that is constantly changing."

You don't need to fully grasp the social and architectural implications of the modernist movement to feel its impact. It's in houses that seem to blend into their surroundings or in open, light-filled spaces that simply feel natural to live in. As Geary emphasizes, "This is all part of something that is uniquely New Canaan, rooted in its design history, that creates a shared sense of place and an excitement about the future."

"A whole world of architecture, furniture design and artists lived here in New Canaan simultaneously," says Reoch. "It was a special time in history when geography, art and people came together, and everyone—especially those of us who live here—should know the history, enjoy it and protect it."

The influence of this era isn't frozen in time—it continues to inspire a new generation of architects and designers in New Canaan. Alongside Reoch and Geary, we highlight some of the individuals who are both safeguarding that legacy and reimagining it for today. Like the Harvard Five before them, they collaborate, support and challenge one another, collectively shaping Modernism in New Canaan as a living, evolving movement.



ROBIN HILL, COURTESY OF THE GLASS HOUSE

The iconic Glass House.

# FRED NOYES

## ▲ THE HEIR:

Legacy carried forward through practice and perspective

### ● AT WORK:

Architect, educator and longtime practitioner shaped by both design and academia

### ● LINEAGE:

Son of Eliot Noyes, carrying forward the legacy of the Harvard Five

### ● PERSPECTIVE:

Modernism is not static—it evolves through those who live and reinterpret it.



## HOW DID YOUR UPBRINGING IN NEW CANAAN—AND YOUR FATHER'S LEGACY—SHAPE YOUR PATH AND WORK TODAY?

New Canaan was more rural in the '50s. I spent much of my time in the woods, which led me to study biology at Harvard then later teach this subject at Miles College in Birmingham, Alabama. But as the son of Eliot Noyes, the draw was so strong that I later switched careers, earning a Masters of Architecture at Harvard. After years of practice and teaching, I was elected a Fellow in the AIA and subsequently awarded an honorary doctorate from the Boston Architectural College. I continue to track biology and practice architecture.

## CAN YOU SUM UP NEW CANAAN'S ROLE IN MIDCENTURY MODERNISM, AND WHY IT WAS SO IMPORTANT AT THAT TIME?

With WWI and WWII, everything changed. Skilled craftsmanship was scarce; class distinction diminished; many of the returning soldiers were unskilled and needed houses and the wars introduced new technologies such as steel beams, concrete, large glass panels and central heating systems. These conditions foisted—almost demanded—revolutionary thinking

on what and how to build. The Harvard Five and other New Canaan architects were some of the best, inventing anew to respond to these circumstances, and they settled in New Canaan because of ripe conditions for new thinking, like inexpensive land, relaxed codes and access to New York.

## WHAT OTHER CONCEPTS DID YOUR FATHER EMPLOY IN YOUR OWN CHILDHOOD HOME?

In the Eliot Noyes II house, where I moved at age nine and which is still in the family, my father challenged two traditional constructs of what a home should be. First, the front façade is an unbroken stone wall so that the house merges with the landscape. Second, in a normal home the downstairs has the public spaces, and a second floor upstairs has the private bedrooms. In this house, he thinks anew about this private/public norm by making two houses on one floor: a private "wing" (with bedrooms), and the public "wing" (with kitchen, living and family room). The two wings are not connected but separated by an outdoor courtyard. It's clear he is integrating this home with nature in that he requires you to go outside from public to private, and vice versa. He's forcing those who live here to be part of this concept, and by doing so reinterprets the whole idea of what defines a house. In the summer, it becomes a big screen porch and there are no thresholds between interior and exterior. In the winter, you have snow floating all around, and you're amidst a snowstorm.



## DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE HOME OR OTHER BUILDING THAT YOUR FATHER BUILT?

Our house in Vermont. It's small but very sophisticated. It's simple, but spatially there are overlapping definitions of volume. Based on four columns, a half-balcony wall, a chimney and a deck; there are multiple readings of what is one single space. Each element is doing multiple duties. I frequently liken this house to a sonnet: with only 14 lines, every word can have multiple meanings. The more times you read a sonnet, the more you feel the richness. That's what's going on in this house, too.

## HOW DID THE NEW CANAAN COMMUNITY RESPOND TO MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE AS IT EMERGED?

It was a real mix. There was a portion of the town that didn't understand or like the new houses. Many people had an image of modern homes as "white shoeboxes." This is how they were described in one *New Canaan*

*Advertiser's Letter to the Editor!* But there was also a part of town that was interested in the new thinking. New Canaan's Modern House Tours were started by my father in 1949, opening some of these homes to the public and allowing everyone to see what these guys were inventing. It was very successful and is still a bi-annual event sponsored by the New Canaan Museum & Historical Society.

## CAN YOU SPEAK TO THE ONGOING CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MIDCENTURY MODERN MOVEMENT?

It's a continuum, not just a reference to the past. Design ideas need to keep moving forward to keep current with other cultural developments. The breadth of Midcentury influence is wide, showing that design applies everywhere. My father took his Harvard architecture training and built great houses. He also used the same architectural principles and moved sideways, applying them to industrial design and then to corporations themselves.



“The breadth of Midcentury influence is wide, showing that design applies everywhere.”



The Noyes family poses in the courtyard.

son of IBM’s founder. With Watson, he looked deeply into what IBM was all about, to understand the very nature of the company. Not unlike comprehending the nature of an individual home, he used the same principles but applied them in a broadly different direction. The result was the idea that, yes, IBM sold computers, but the heart of this was that computers were supposed to make people’s lives easier. This inspired the concept of developing a program where all aspects of IBM would be consistent in support of this mission: corporate policy, architecture, graphics, packaging, industrial design and advertising. That, in turn, led to the moniker that my father was the “Curator of Corporate Character.”

His work made IBM synonymous with clarity, order and innovation, and after that project, Westinghouse, Mobil Oil and Cummins Diesel all came to him. He helped those corporate executives look deeper into their own companies, to define and understand them and, as a result, how this could help sales.

My father developed a cohesive design program for each—far beyond branding and marketing. The idea was widely influential, and we see it today in companies like Apple. This is just one example of how we see the influence of New Canaan Modernism applied in the most worldwide universal sense. Design is a way to improve everyday experience, whether through a chair, house or a corporate campus. My father’s work stands as a reminder that Modernism wasn’t just a style but a social and ethical project.

**WHAT’S NEXT FOR FRED NOYES?**

We recently launched The Eliot Noyes Center. It is a platform to elucidate and advance the dictums that my father used: to help people understand the power of architectural thinking and how it can be applied. Marcel Breuer said, “The solution almost falls out of the nature of the problem,” which remains true today, but first you have to look deeply at the nature of the problem.

Eventually, we’d like the Noyes

**ABOVE:** The Noyes home was designed with two wings around an open courtyard. The social wing houses the living room and the kitchen, where Fred and Eliot Noyes are seen working on a project (top left).

House to be saved in perpetuity, but the first step of the Center will be to develop a fellowship program, inviting people who demonstrate an inventive, collaborative breadth in their work (my father’s hallmark), whether it be in architecture or another field. We will develop further steps for the Center over time, and I’d like to work with various entities such as local schools and startups. I recently brought the Boston Architectural College to town with the intent of developing an ongoing teaching relationship, and we have also spoken with undergraduates at Harvard as well as the Rhode Island School of Design. The crux behind these efforts is that my father’s time was 50 years ago, but we need to define today’s current problems and how design principles can be applied going forward.

FAMILY PHOTO BY SALLY ANDERSON BRUCE; EXTERIORS BY MICHAEL BIONDO

**YOUR FATHER HAS BEEN CREDITED WITH DEFINING THE MODERN CORPORATE AESTHETIC. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?**

Eliot Noyes was first the Director of Industrial Design at MOMA. With his understanding of the universal power of design, he was hired as a consultant by Tom Watson, Jr.,



# AMANDA MARTOCCHIO

▲ **THE GUARDIAN:**  
Shaping Modernism with a human-centered approach

● <b>AT WORK:</b>	● <b>APPROACH:</b>	● <b>IMPACT:</b>
Award-winning architect based in New Canaan, with multiple AIA honors	Designing light-filled, sustainable spaces grounded in modernist principles	A leading voice advancing Modernism for today

## Q&A

### **CAN YOU WALK US THROUGH YOUR PATH INTO ARCHITECTURE AND THE FOUNDING OF YOUR FIRM?**

I began my career in New York City, where I worked in architecture firms doing large commercial and institutional projects. Previously I completed my architectural studies at Cornell (Bachelor of Architecture) and Harvard GSD (Master of Architecture II); studied classical architecture in Greece and taught at Syracuse University's program in Florence, Italy. Later, I left my New York City position as a junior designer at Ennead (formerly Polshek & Partners) after my first child was born with challenging and unexpected medical needs. This life change resulted in relocating to New Canaan, where I was drawn by its legacy of Midcentury Modern architecture, as well as the town's Special Education program. I launched my architecture and design firm in 2004 which has now evolved into a highly regarded residential architecture practice recognized for design innovation and a process of collaboration.

### **HOW DOES MIDCENTURY MODERNISM AND ITS ETHOS AFFECT YOUR LIFE AND WORK?**

Midcentury Modernism is a term used to describe a movement in design and architecture that grew out of the social and cultural post-WWII period. Lives that had been placed on hold during wartime began to flourish, and there was optimism fueled by a promising economic security. Young couples that had refrained from having children during the war sought small homes in suburbia that could house their expanding families. These were modest homes, but newly equipped with household appliances and a more open floor plan. There was experimentation and innovation in the design and fabrication of domestic objects, furniture and fashion. The Bauhausian embrace of industrial materials and mass production had come to the U.S. Home décor magazines celebrated and popularized these modern architectural features along with a contemporary lifestyle. What MCM brought forward was relaxed and

modest: a starter home for young families. At its best, dwellings were efficient in scale, but expansive in their connection to the outdoors through large windows. These 70-year-old design principles are ones that are still relevant for me and other architects who are designing contemporary modern homes.

### **IN WHAT WAYS DO YOU INTEGRATE MCM PRINCIPLES INTO YOUR DESIGNS?**

Many of the principles that emerged in domestic architecture of the midcentury are ones that I embrace in my work: clarity of structure, connections with nature, openness of space from one room to another and less is more. As I mentioned, many of the MCM homes were quite compact and efficient. The glazing for windows was not insulated, exterior walls and roofs were not thermally robust, so the homes became leaky and were energy inefficient.

What has evolved is how we see the architect's role in reducing our carbon footprint and energy consumption, given climate change. Houses are typically built much better than they were in the midcentury. Also, there are many innovative, sustainable materials now employed in the design of single-family homes. Innovation was central to Midcentury design thinking, but the challenges and resources that we have today require a different mindset.

### **HOW HAS THE LEGACY OF THE MCM MOVEMENT IN NEW CANAAN INFLUENCED YOUR ARCHITECTURAL PHILOSOPHY?**

New Canaan's Midcentury architecture is one of many influences on me as an architect.

The New Canaan architects, most notably the Harvard Five, were experimenting with new building techniques and materials, and many of their clients had bold aspirations and embraced Modernism. The approach they took in their designs was not always celebrated by a more conservative and tradition-loving public. Many consider these New Canaan dwellings as groundbreaking and important in the continuum of architectural history. It was the architects' boldness and commitment to a new vision that gives me inspiration today and, I believe, is their true legacy.

### **WHAT DO YOU FIND MOST REWARDING ABOUT WORKING IN A COMMUNITY WITH SUCH A STRONG ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY?**

I am proud to live in a community that values not just the legacy of its midcentury domestic architecture but also that of the historic New England vernacular. This community is knowledgeable and appreciative of the arts and culture and celebrates its local architecture.

### **ARE THERE PARTICULAR HARVARD FIVE ARCHITECTS WHOSE WORK HAS SHAPED YOUR THINKING?**

I have studied the work of Eliot Noyes, and his New Canaan home is simply perfectly conceived. Proportions, materials, spaces... everything has its logic, as a supporting piece and as part of the whole. I love the way the house connects both to the woods and the outdoor courtyard and employs stone and wood such that it disappears into its landscape.

I was lucky to know John Johansen when he was in his 90s. He was so lively both socially and creatively— in



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** This sleek staircase connects the lower sleeping quarters to the living room, where the homeowner has sweeping views of Greenwich Harbor. **RIGHT:** Martocchio redesigned this 1960s Greenwich home to give it a clean, reconfigured form.



his continuous experimentation of architectural form and construction techniques—a true innovator. Also, he was unafraid of decoration and pattern, used appropriately, to reinforce his architectural ideas. He was radical in that way, as decoration was counter to many of the Midcentury Modernists working at the time.

**HOW DO YOU BALANCE MODERN NEEDS (COMFORT, TECHNOLOGY, STORAGE) WITH THE ORIGINAL MCM AESTHETIC?**

When we are tasked with renovating a MCM home, our first question is: Is it an architecturally superior example of the period and worth taking a preservation approach? If so, we are sensitive to not compromising the original features but replacing or modifying that which has run its useful life span.

Often, we encounter a home designed and built in the midcentury that is less noteworthy, is tired and needing repair. It may need new windows, proper insulation, new, discrete lighting and mechanical

upgrades. If the footprint is simply too tight, we'll consider an addition that allows for ample storage and the expansion of floor area. We would design an extension that is architecturally in sync but not slavishly identical. Sometimes, a new connecting hallway or linkage space allows the new addition to be less about mimicry. Adding new, for example, may be an opportunity to improve flow, provide a contemporary kitchen or family space, make a stronger connection to the exterior with high performance sliding doors, etc. Balancing modern needs within an existing MCM requires sensitivity and establishing priorities in order to create an updated environment that is cohesive with the original and also achievable within budget.

**HOW HAS YOUR EXPERTISE IN MCM ARCHITECTURE AFFECTED YOUR CLIENT BASE?**

Sometimes clients come to us with a studied appreciation of Midcentury architecture. More often, they have seen either historic images of midcentury homes or photos in magazines, or on social media,

“Our clients may not be the average homeowner who seeks a home like their neighbor.”

that feature new homes with large expanses of glass, contiguous space, edited detailing and an abundance of daylight. These are components that we often include in our development of a design. Our client base may find us because they appreciate the originality in our work, they recognize and respond positively to elements they see in our portfolio and they observe a consistency of thoughtful detailing, quality and warm, comfortable modern environments. Our clients may not be the average homeowner who seeks a home like their neighbor. Ours is a singular client who is looking for a unique contemporary home like no other.

**WHAT DO YOU SEE FOR THE FUTURE OF THE MCM MOVEMENT IN OUR AREA, AND HOW DO YOU PLAN TO**

**BE A PART OF THIS CONTINUUM?**

New Canaan and surrounding communities are fortunate to have a higher share of noteworthy Midcentury Modern homes built in the '50s and '60s. Homeowners have either preserved them or updated and reimagined them for our current time. Amanda Martocchio Architecture joins the enthusiast for preserving and updating the noteworthy examples of these homes. We draw inspiration from this period and seek to honor the local legacy of innovation. Yet, we are principally interested in designing new homes that feature forward-thinking and original solutions that address current-day environmental and energy concerns, as well as addressing our clients' contemporary lifestyle.

STAIRCASE, LIVINGROOM AND ELEVATION EXTERIOR BY MICHAEL BIONDO; TOP RIGHT: MODERN EXTERIOR BY MICHAEL MORAN



**HOW HAS MODERNISM AFFECTED YOU PERSONALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY?**

Growing up in Barcelona, I was exposed at an early age to Cataluña's unique form of Modernism (*Modernisme*) which flourished in the late 1800s to early 1900s. It still plays a strong role in the city's identity and legacy today, and when I transitioned my retail career from apparel to home in 2012, the influences of Catalan architecture were a frequent reference point creatively. However, it was not until I moved to New Canaan in 2016 that I started to appreciate the unique distinction of American Modernism—with plenty of European references—that emerged in the midcentury.

My desire to understand the impact of Modernism—both in New Canaan and on the world stage that our town occupies among MCM enthusiasts—only deepened when I joined Herman Miller (now MillerKnoll) in 2020 to run Design Within Reach and Herman Miller's retail business. At the end of the day, Modernism is not a style; it's an ethos. That ethos prioritizes functionalism, minimalist clarity and truth to materials.

**WHAT FIRST ATTRACTED YOU TO NEW CANAAN?**

The moment I visited New Canaan, I felt an immediate connection: It was the first time in 15 years I truly felt at home in America. Before moving to Barcelona as a young teenager, I lived in the south of England where narrow roads trimmed with old stone walls and abundant, mature trees served as delineators of land.

Our first home in New Canaan sat opposite the Landis Gores house, so that sparked an interest in the town's listed properties. But I've learned so much about our Modernist legacy through my work with local institutions such as The Glass House and the research which supported the Capital Committee for the New Canaan Library. Through these organizations I've had the chance to visit many of the listed properties and meet the people that cherish them.

**HOW HAS THE LEGACY OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN NEW CANAAN SHAPED HOW YOU LEAD YOUR BUSINESS?**

The modern architecture movement in New Canaan was about more than design—it was about vision. Those architects weren't afraid to push boundaries, creating homes that solved real problems for modern living. That philosophy mirrors how I lead our business.

Our heritage is a source of strength and credibility, and I feel a deep responsibility to honor it. But just as

modernists reimagined what a home could be, we must continuously innovate—creating solutions that keep our brands relevant, respected and at the forefront of global design.

For me, leadership is about balance: preserving the essence of what makes a brand iconic while moving it forward. Innovation isn't about novelty for its own sake—it's about solving problems and shaping the future, without losing sight of the legacy that got us here.

**WHAT ORGANIZATIONS AND PROJECTS ARE YOU INVOLVED WITH IN NEW CANAAN'S MODERN DESIGN COMMUNITY?**

I'm a member of the Grace Farms Design for Freedom Working Team (missioned to abolish slave and forced labor in the built environment), and MillerKnoll has been involved in the Design for Freedom Summit and Exhibitions at Grace Farms. I'm also a member of the Glass House Advisory Council, and DWR has been a sponsor for various fundraising and educational events at The Glass House over the years.

I had the chance to meet Devon Chivvas through my social network in New Canaan and within seconds of hearing her vision for the Harvard Five documentary she was producing, I knew it was something that MillerKnoll would want to help bring to life. It was a joy to support her project given how integral our product portfolio is to the homes celebrated in the film.

We also recently supported the Onera Foundation by providing iconic designs to complement one of their inaugural exhibitions.

**TELL US ABOUT YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH THE NEW CANAAN LIBRARY PROJECT.**

The library is a perfect example of how the town rallied together to transform a historical local landmark into a contemporary center for education, community and culture. The new architecture references New Canaan's modern traditions and having the interior experience reflect the design excellence of the exterior was important to continuing the New Canaan spirit. I was happy that MillerKnoll was able to contribute to this important project with authentic modern furniture.

**YOU ALSO COLLABORATE WITH FELLOW NEW CANAANITES CRAIG BASSAM AND SCOTT FELLOWS. TELL US MORE ABOUT THAT.**

Over the past couple of seasons, we've had some really exciting introductions from BassamFellows, including a product with The Glass House. This was extra-special to work on as it was a true reflection

# DEBBIE PROPST

▲ THE CURATOR:  
Where design meets influence

● AT WORK:	● INFLUENCE:	● POINT OF VIEW:
President of Global Retail for MillerKnoll	A cultural and institutional connector within the MCM community	MCM is not an aesthetic style but a living ethos.



“I’ve learned so much about our modernist legacy through my work with local institutions.”

**WHAT DEFINES MCM FOR YOU BEYOND VISUAL AESTHETICS?**  
Honesty and optimism.

**HOW DOES MODERN DESIGN INFORM THIS BRAND?**

MillerKnoll is a collective of dynamic brands that has come together to build a more sustainable, caring, equitable and beautiful world. The MillerKnoll purpose reflects the desire of all our brands to leverage the power of design to improve people’s lives. These values strongly connect with modernist ideals. In fact, the brands that make up our collective, such as Herman Miller and Knoll, were platforms and driving forces for the mission of Midcentury Modernists.

**HOW CAN NEW CANAAN AND OTHER COMMUNITIES ENGAGE FUTURE GENERATIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THESE DESIGNS AS WELL AS THEIR PRESERVATION?**

The most impactful way to inspire future generations to value these designs and their preservation is through education. Without an understanding of the history and context of Midcentury Modern architecture and design, its relevance today—and the ways its principles can continue to shape and enhance our lives—will be lost. Fortunately, we have institutions, protected sites and community leaders who are passionate about educating future generations. Hopefully, their work will continue to expand, and we’ll continue to make more architecturally significant homes, exhibits and programs accessible.

**ABOVE:** Design Within Reach showcases curated modern furniture. **TOP RIGHT:** Propst discusses her partnership with Craig Bassam, Scott Fellows and Kirsten Reoch. **RIGHT:** DWR brings modern design to the PiauLe Catskills landscape resort.

of the New Canaan spirit, with various parties coming together to not only preserve but to also make a pioneering Midcentury design relevant to today’s audience.

This past October, we launched the BassamFellows reissue of the Philip Johnson and Richard Kelly Floor Lamp. Considering our close relationship with Craig and Scott and also our partnership with both The Glass House and The National Trust for Historic Preservation, being able to bring this lamp to our customers across North America was a remarkable experience.

In addition, the BassamFellows Leatherwrap Sit-to-Stand Desk, which we introduced in 2022, was such a success that over the past year we worked with Craig and Scott to expand the line and create an entire New Canaan collection. We say that meticulous construction meets tactile richness in this collection, with solid wood frames precisely wrapped in a range of Geiger Textiles’ premium leathers. This brings BassamFellows’ ethos of Craftsman Modern to life across new desk sizes and configurations, a media console and bookcase styles.

COURTESY OF ADRIAN GAULT FOR DWR





# BASSAM FELLOWS

▲ **THE CRAFTSMEN:** Craig Bassam & Scott Fellows  
Designing—and living—the principles of Modernism

● **AT WORK:**

Architect and creative director leading a bespoke furniture design house

● **PRACTICE:**

Creating refined, modernist pieces rooted in craftsmanship and material integrity

● **ETHOS:**

A seamless integration of modernist design into both home and work

**CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR COMPANY AND ITS MISSION/ PHILOSOPHY?**

We founded our furniture and design brand in 2003 with a focus on Modernism, craftsmanship and beauty. Everything we do ties into the modernist philosophy: how we design our products, where we live and where we work.

**WHAT IS THE HISTORY BEHIND YOUR OFFICE SPACE?**

The building in Ridgefield was the former Schlumberger Research Center Administration building, designed by Philip Johnson in 1952.

It took us two full years [to restore] and was a massive project. The building had been cut off from all services (water, heat, electricity) for several years, so it was in a sorry state. But surprisingly, much of the original "historic fabric" was intact and could be restored.

**WHAT'S YOUR APPROACH TO RESTORING HISTORIC BUILDINGS?**

Restoring an old, important building is like restoring a classic car. They have historical significance, and they can be quirky. There are always a million details to be addressed. There's a fine line because you want to avoid making the space feel like a museum, but you want to keep it fresh while respecting the integrity

of the building. Our intention was to honor the building's past while evolving its use as a showroom and office for our brand.

**WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST MODERNIST RESTORATION IN NEW CANAAN?**

Our first house was the Willis Mills House on Ponus Ridge. We bought it in 1998 and painstakingly restored it over a four-year period. These older modern homes do require changes to be livable today, but when restoring a special home like this you must maintain its historic character. Because there's so much modernist heritage in New Canaan, the Glass House commissioned a modernist survey completed in 2008 to establish a group listing for the National Register of Historic Places. We're very proud, as the Mills house was listed on the National Register after the renovation, which meant that our alterations were sympathetic with the original design of the home. We sold this home in 2007 but since then, the current homeowners commissioned us to design an entertainment and guest pavilion by the pool in 2023.

**TELL US ABOUT YOUR CURRENT HOME, THE HODGSON HOUSE.**

In 2007 we bought the Hodgson House, designed by Philip Johnson in 1951, from the Hodgson heirs.

It's on the National Register of Historic Places, and in addition, it has preservation easements administered by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the highest tier in this kind of historic designation. The Hodgsons, to preserve their legacy, put these easements on the house prior to our purchase, which means the fundamentals of the house cannot be altered. Because of our passion for Modernism, we take the responsibility of preserving this home very seriously.

This house was important for many reasons, but mainly because it won an international award in the 1950s for a single-family dwelling. The Glass House was built in 1949 and considered to be somewhat of a modernist experiment in living. One year later, Johnson designed the Hodgson House with family living in mind. The proximity of our home to The Glass House makes it even more important for preservation. Our home is built in two pavilions: One contains the living spaces, and the other is the bedroom wing. The pavilions were built in two stages in 1951 and 1955, as banks would not grant a mortgage on a modernist house at the time.

**HOW DOES YOUR PASSION FOR THE MODERNIST LIFE AFFECT HOW YOU LIVE?**

We believe that great architecture is art and can improve the quality of your life. Simplicity, clarity, light and a strong connection to nature all contribute to your well-being. These are very calming buildings in which to live and work. At our office, for example, every space directly connects to nature via giant



The duo's first modern restoration, the Mills House (above and below), is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



PORTRAIT BY SAM TERRANTE; WILLIS MILLS HOUSE BY MARK SELEN

“Rooms should be designed for the people who live in them and the furniture designed for those people.”



The couple's lighted-filled home (above) and office (below) are both furnished with Bassam Fellows-designed pieces, like the iconic lamp, Spindle Chairs and Geometric Dining Table (below).



windows. In both our work and home spaces, there's a real optimism because they're flooded with natural light. They feel rational, calm and ordered, but mostly they feel alive.

**HOW IS THIS DIFFERENT FROM LIVING IN NEWER CONSTRUCTION?**

With modernist homes, people tend to hang on to them for decades and see themselves as stewards of something special. You're constantly editing and curating when you live in a Modern, and the same is true of your life. With young people, we're always trying to instill this idea that before you buy anything you should consider: Do you need it? Is it long-lasting? Does it do what you want it to do? If the answer is no, forgo it. The idea is to do more with less and this translates into the home.

The other thing with modernist architecture is that it isn't forgiving if not designed well. If done right, however, every room has well-designed storage, and everything has its place.

**TELL US ABOUT YOUR REISSUE OF THE JOHNSON/KELLY FLOOR LAMP**

The original 1953 lamp was a collaboration between lighting designer Richard Kelly and Philip Johnson to create a lamp for The Glass House that didn't emit a glare off the glass walls. Johnson experimented with several ways to illuminate the space, but he wasn't satisfied with the results. Kelly solved the problem by positioning a high-powered bulb near the floor and directing light upward onto a conical shade that in turn reflected the light back downward. The result is a soft pool of light at the perfect level when sitting in a chair or sofa. There's no harsh light from above, so it makes a room feel warm—and makes everyone look good. The lamp became iconic and lived in the Glass House, as well as many modern homes and art collectors' residences of that time.

**HOW DO THE HARVARD FIVE'S IDEAS ABOUT SIMPLE, FUNCTIONAL**

**DESIGN AND NATURE CONNECT TO YOUR WORK?**

We believe in the concept of "total design," which is what Frank Lloyd Wright believed in, too. Furniture is how you experience architecture. It can either make the building feel comfortable or disjointed. Rooms should be designed for the people who live in them, and the furniture designed for those people.

**HOW DO YOU DESIGN WITH LONGEVITY IN MIND SO THAT YOUR PIECES REMAIN BOTH BEAUTIFUL AND FUNCTIONAL OVER TIME?**

If you're designing for timelessness, that intention has to be built into the design. You make certain choices when you're making something for forever. Clean lines, functionality and simplicity are important as are material choices. We use natural materials and are obsessive about the quality of anything we build. Natural materials do not date—instead, they patina and look more beautiful with age.



BASSAM FELLOWS OFFICE BY MICHAEL BIONDO



# Q&A

## TELL US ABOUT GROWING UP IN NEW CANAAN AND YOUR FAMILY'S HOME HERE.

My family moved to town in 1956, as many modernist homes were being built. My grandparents were looking for a place to raise their three sons, and one house stood out: a home designed by Eliot Noyes on Lambert Road, built in 1954. When it came on the market in 1958, my grandmother apparently walked in and simply had to have it. She loved the light and the design elements.

My grandmother, Joan Feick, was a prolific abstract artist, and a few years after moving in, she asked Eliot Noyes to design a painting studio next to their house. It was imagined as a smaller version of the main home with glass walls, stone floors and white brick. The studio was generously sized and included a kitchen, living area, bath, sleeping quarters, a darkroom for photography and a private patio.

After I was born, my family lived at the Ault House briefly before moving into our own home. In 2000, my mother, brother and I relocated to France. The Ault House remained our home base in New Canaan, where we spent summers and every holiday with my father and grandmother.

The house remained in my family for 60 years until it was sold in 2018 and remained largely unchanged, aside from two big kitchen renovations over the years.

**TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR GRANDMOTHER AND HER INFLUENCE ON YOUR LOVE OF MCM.** My grandmother was larger than life. She lived for some time in London

and in her later years spent the colder months in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, where she painted and had a thing for adopting street dogs. She was quite the personality, and her eclectic style mixed her love of Midcentury Modern with French and English antiques and other great finds of hers from all over the world.

I remember her annual New Year's Eve black-tie dinners, the gallery hall of her home filled with long tables of beautifully dressed guests. It was always well past my bedtime, but there was plenty of dancing and live music. She loved to host, but loved it even more when everyone finally went back to their own homes!

## WHAT WAS IT LIKE LIVING IN A MODERN HOME AS A CHILD?

It felt special and very different. I grew up around art and antiques, and learned early to be careful with other people's belongings—to respect what wasn't mine. We dressed for meals, and there was a gentle formality to daily life (always wear your shoes at the breakfast table), but there was also a lot of joy. The TV room and entertaining space were separated, but you always knew when someone was home: The golf game was on in the library, or the news was emanating from the kitchen, Ella Fitzgerald or Cole Porter drifting in from the great room. With the open floor plan, everything felt a little more communal, and it was especially hard to sneak home late after a night out at Tequila Mockingbird with friends.

## SO NO RUNNING WILD THROUGH THE HOUSE AS A KID?

We were definitely not allowed to throw a tennis ball around the antiques or rare artwork, although I'm fairly sure there are photographs of my brother and me doing exactly that, just moments before being scolded. Golf balls, however, were fair game, as long as we chipped them on the lawn toward the pool, which later became a frog and fishing pond. Band posters on the walls were totally out of the question. Life revolved around the family art collection, respecting antiques, keeping rooms neat and never leaving anything in the hallway. Which may explain why I later covered my bedroom walls in France with floor-to-ceiling posters.

## HOW DID THIS AFFECT HOW YOU CHOSE YOUR HOME AS AN ADULT?

My husband and I split our time between New Canaan and New York City, and about two years ago we bought a modern house here. It was the first home built in New Canaan by John Johansen in 1950, known as the Barlow House. There are only two Johansen houses left in town,

# ANDREA FEICK ATKISS

## ▲ THE SCION:

Carrying Modernism forward

### ● AT HOME:

Raised in a New Canaan modernist house; now owns and renovated her own midcentury home

### ● AT WORK:

Senior Director of PR & Communications at Akris

### ● POINT OF VIEW:

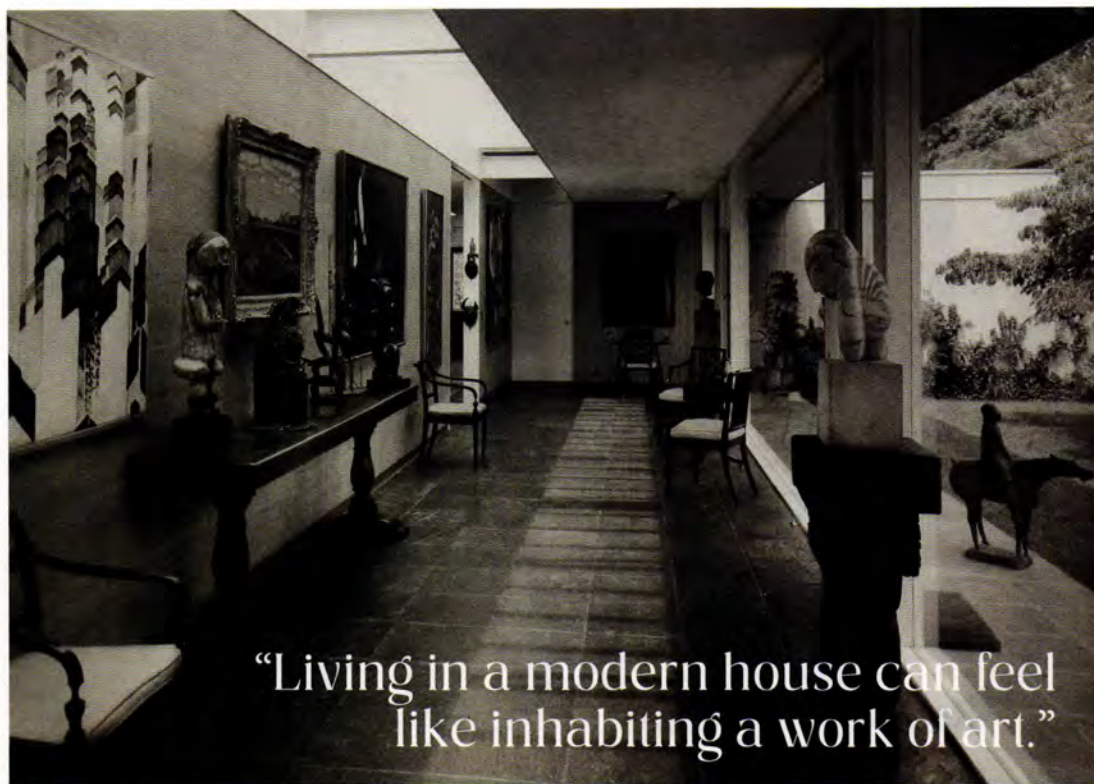
A new generation preserving the Midcentury Modern legacy

the other being the Warner House, also known as the Bridge House. What's especially crazy is that my grandmother was friends with the original owners, the Warners, who sold the house to Doug Wurth and Michael Fedele, who later became our closest friends. Most of the other Johansen homes were torn down over the years as tastes shifted, and more traditional houses and "McMansions" moved in.

My husband and I were not in a rush to buy and probably looked at four homes in total, all in different styles, but it didn't take much convincing for him to agree this was the direction we wanted to go. Every room has large, original panes of glass that overlook the surrounding preserve, making each space feel like you're looking into a painting. With the changing seasons, it can feel almost surreal how close you're living with nature.

**HOW WOULD YOU SUM UP THE MODERNIST WAY OF LIFE?**

Everything is meant to be simple, clean, and easy to live with. My husband loves fancy high-tech features, but in these houses



“Living in a modern house can feel like inhabiting a work of art.”

**ABOVE:** The Ault House, designed by Elliot Noyes, was purchased by Attkiss' grandparents in 1958 and remained in the family for 60 years. **BELOW:** Attkiss and her husband recently renovated the Barlow House—one of only two remaining John Johansen houses in New Canaan.



**ABOVE:** Attkiss' grandmother, the abstract painter Joan Feick. **BELOW:** The Ault House was featured on the cover of the July 1955 issue of *House & Garden*.

less really is more, which feels refreshingly opposite to many newer homes in New Canaan. There's also a strong sense of curation, where everything is edited, and clutter just doesn't have a place. I've loved weaving in some of my grandmother's artwork with antiques I've collected over the years, and adding great modern furniture from Brazil and Europe. It all feels very personal.

**ANY OTHER ORGANIZATIONS YOU HAVE COME TO BE A PART OF THROUGH THIS COMMUNITY?**

Many of us are on the Granger Society, a membership group of MCM homeowners and donors of The Glass House. They host wonderful cocktail parties, frequently held in private Midcentury Modern homes where everyone comes together. Through these gatherings, we've met so many like-minded people. We share a deep belief that living in a house like this comes with responsibility—you have to respect its history and architectural intent. If and when you sell, it's important to pass the home on to someone who will honor its integrity.

**HOW ARE YOU PROJECTING YOUR LOVE OF THIS STYLE IN AND AROUND TOWN?**

Our house was recently featured on the [New Canaan Museum &



Historical Society's] Modern House Tour. My grandmother also loved opening her home to visitors during the early MCM house tours. For us, it has been a true privilege to open our home to such passionate and thoughtful people. That said, the renovation was just barely completed, and we found ourselves tackling projects we certainly hadn't planned to take on for years. My close friend Cas Friese, who owns the Arden + White Gallery in town, helped me patch a wall just hours before our first guests arrived!

**IT SEEMS LIKE A LOT OF MCM HOMEOWNERS IN TOWN KNOW EACH OTHER AND HAVE A SPECIAL BOND. WOULD YOU AGREE?**

Yes. It's truly an honor to be part of this community. The other week,

Fred Noyes hosted an informal dinner at his home where everyone brought a dish and, before we knew it, 13 Midcentury Modern homeowners were gathered around the table. The Glass House also plays an important role in keeping us connected, regularly bringing everyone together for cocktail parties. Their summer party, in particular, is not to be missed. Living in a Midcentury Modern home can feel like inhabiting a work of art, and the relationship with nature here is extraordinary. It often feels as though we're living outdoors with these big windows. We host many dinners and parties, and there's a genuine *joie de vivre* that fills the space. There's also a strong sense of legacy, of being connected to a larger architectural story.



BLACK AND WHITE INTERIOR BY ANDRE KERTESZ