

# A R B O R   H O U S E

DESIGNED BY

JOEL LEVINSON AIA

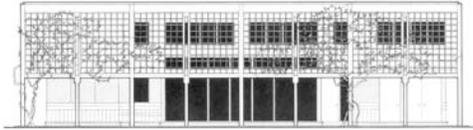
FOR

HERBERT AND MAE KURTZ

1969-1971

5 Latham Parkway  
Cheltenham Township  
Melrose Park, Pennsylvania

# ARBOR HOUSE



## EVOLUTION OF THE DESIGN

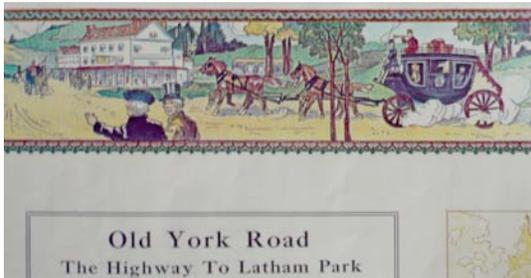
When one looks at the Arbor House, either in the form of the final drawings or the actual building on its site in Latham Park, Pennsylvania, one sees a simple rectangular form, symmetrical in many respects, with an unbroken, repeating rhythm of column bays and trellises, which form the Arbors. Contributing to this simple architectural composition is a flat roof and the rectangular concrete plinth upon which the house sits.



ARBOR HOUSE FROM LATHAM PARKWAY

Upon seeing this elemental composition, one might be inclined to assume that the scheme was conceived all at once in a quick doodle on a piece of yellow trace. This was not the case. Because I am writing this handout primarily for architectural historians, I will endeavor to reconstruct the design process from its very beginning and explain the disparate sources of inspiration as well as the design challenges that brought Arbor House into being.

After purchasing their site in Latham Park, Herb and Mae Kurtz considered buying a stock house plan and having it modified for the site. Then they saw a house in Rydal, PA designed and occupied by Philadelphia architect, Jack Thalheimer. They asked Jack if he would modify the design for them and make it much more modern. Jack's house was a successful contemporary version of a center-hall Colonial. He declined but recommended they contact me. Jack had seen my recently completed Hillside House (also in Rydal) and had hired me part-time as a design consultant. I had just opened my own office and needed supplemental income. I met with Herb and Mae in their small developer house and was impressed with their fine artwork and some of their furniture. We drove to the site and on the way I was filled with excitement. I was familiar with Latham Park and regarded an assignment in that exclusive enclave as a marvelous design opportunity.



FROM ORIGINAL LATHAM PARKWAY OFFERING



ENTRANCE GATES IN OFFERING



ACTUAL ENTRANCE GATES TO BEAUX ARTS STYLED DEVELOPMENT

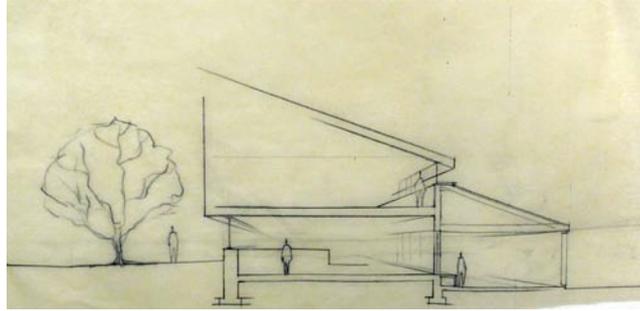


SUGGESTED HOUSE STYLE IN OFFERING

However, when the car stopped in front of their property, my heart dropped. Their plot sat at least five feet below the adjacent parcels and imposing homes, many built of stone, looked down from higher ground. The sunlight that fell on their mostly treeless site was harsh and flat. To my eyes it was a parcel of land without mystery. I knew that Herb and Mae had a relatively modest construction budget, and so all I could envision was a small wood structure sitting in a hole. Worries about the assignment soon turned to nightmares in which I saw a doll's house sitting in a depression with grand mansions looking down scornfully on their new neighbor. Our contract for architectural services was dated June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1969.

## FIRST SCHEME

My first sketch for the Kurtz residence was a two-story house whose main level was half a flight below the pavement level along Latham Parkway but situated close to the divided roadway. I think the section was influenced by a then recent design by Finnish architect Alvar Aalto and also by the turn-of-the-century Rhawn residence (a.k.a. Knowlton) in northeast Philadelphia designed by our city's renown master, Frank Furness. Both houses are wedge-shaped in section.

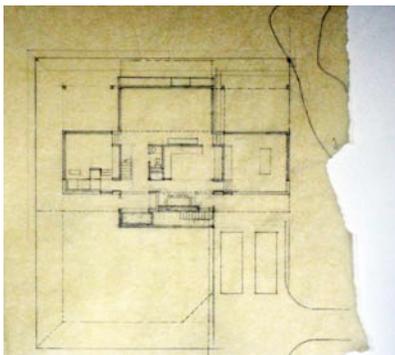


SECTION THROUGH FIRST SCHEME.  
PERSON UNDER TREE IS ON SIDEWALK

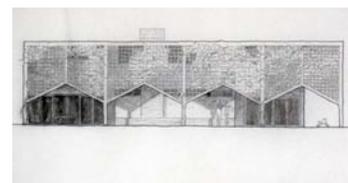
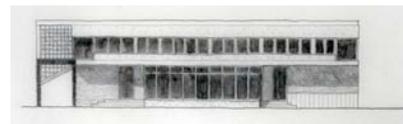
Even in this early scheme, there is a wide deep porch running the length of the house. The sloping roof gave the vertically emphasized street façade a greater presence along the Parkway. This scheme had to be abandoned when I realized that a 50' deep front yard setback would push the house almost into the middle of the site where the ground was flat and the wedge-shaped massing made little sense.

## SCHEMATIC STUDIES

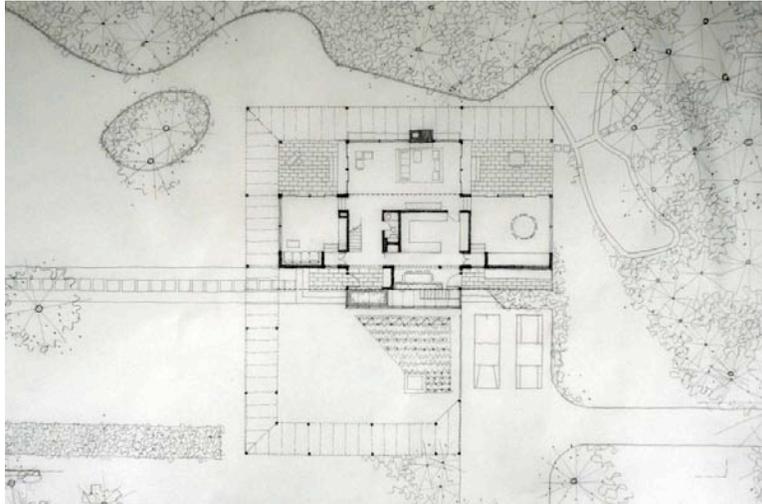
Once the house moved to the center of the site, the schematic floor plans held fairly much intact throughout the entire design process. The southeast-facing greenhouse (which was called for in the Program as a future element) became part of the basic scheme as a result of my desire to bring light into the basement. The living room, conceived of from the beginning as a two-story space, faced northwest, and trellises (which I envisioned as covered with wisteria vines) were already part of the scheme.



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



ELEVATION STUDIES



In a letter to Herb and Mae dated July 11, 1969, less than a month from the contract signing, I wrote with typical exuberant overstatement:

“I am writing this letter in a mood of relief, creative passion and quiet ecstasy. Several weeks have passed and I was beginning to become very frustrated with the design – I was feeling the ‘direction’ but was not able to conjure up the architectural image to satisfy all the requirements. At last, the magic wand touched me on the shoulder and the pencil did all sorts of nice things.

“What I came up with is a combination of a Quaker meeting house, Japanese shrine, and an Alvar Aalto country estate for genuine aesthetes. The site concept is very simple; the architecture is also very simple, very tranquil, very grand in a quiet unpretentious way. It’s as if you were living in the house of the estate keeper of Latham Park as it must have been when owned by the original family.”

## REFERENCES

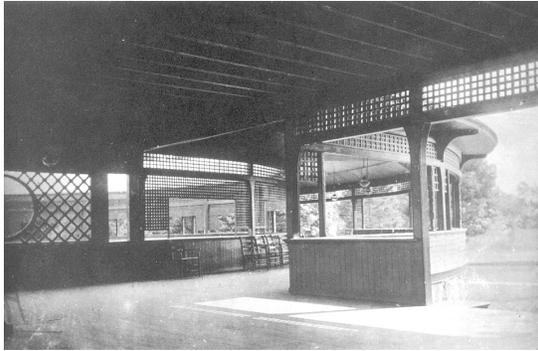
Quaker Meeting Houses: Around this time I had seen and photographed several Quaker Meeting Houses and was enamored of their simple power, their presence, the unpretentious and substantial use of materials and, in the case of several meetinghouses near my home, the commodious porches that wrapped around their exteriors providing shelter for the congregants who originally arrived by horse and buggy and waited outdoors to enter the place of worship.

Japanese shrines: Japanese architecture has always appealed to me. Features that resonated strongly with me were the honest use of natural materials, the pavilion-like aspect of their designs that opened onto lovely gardens, a sense of repose and timelessness, the expression of structure, a mellow sense of suffused daylight, and a spatial ordering with an implied diagonal flow pattern.

Alvar Aalto country estate: In contrast to the more geometrically rigid architecture of Quaker meeting houses and traditional Japanese structures, Aalto’s work has a lyrical quality that always appealed to me. Purity of structural expression never seemed so critical for him; he was

motivated by the desire to create a lovely place to live and in capturing the spirit of a site. His buildings were clearly manmade artifacts that gave focus and emotional spirit to a site.

One feature not mentioned in my above-quoted letter to Mae and Herb was trellises. I had visited Cape May some years before and had been struck by the delicacy of Victorian trellises that added a wonderful decorative quality to the houses and also a sense of mystery. I had also seen and photographed the Wedding Cake house in Kennebunkport, Maine on my honeymoon in 1962. Those trellises were mesmerizing. I had also studied the Newport Casino and felt trellises offered a potential not yet fully explored.



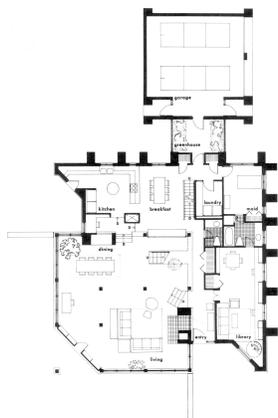
NEWPORT CASINO



WEDDING CAKE HOUSE KENNEBUNKPORT

## WEINER HOUSE

It was roughly a year before starting the Kurtz residence that I began work on a house in Rydal, PA for Shirley and Lee Weiner. The plan was inspired by a schematic design for a house by renown Philadelphia architect, Romaldo Giurgola. It consisted of a square plan with an 'L' shaped wing that wrapped around two sides. Giurgola's square room became a 36' foot square two-story great room in the Weiner residence.



WEINER RESIDENCE PLAN



WEINER RESIDENCE EXTERIOR



WEINER RESIDENCE GREAT ROOM

I went to the Weiner house one night when it was under construction and the glass walls became huge black mirrors because there was nothing to cut through the reflection and carry the eye to the exterior. I believe it was that troubling observation in combination with Mae and Herb's desire for a sense of privacy that contributed to the birth of the Arbors concept. What I also realized about the arbors that I was beginning to show in Herb and Mae's house was that they anchored the house to the low-lying lawn area. The photo

below gives a sense of how the arbors wed the house to the site and eliminate the sense of a house sitting in a hole. The trellises focus the eye on the plane of the grass and subdue any view of larger houses sitting on higher ground.

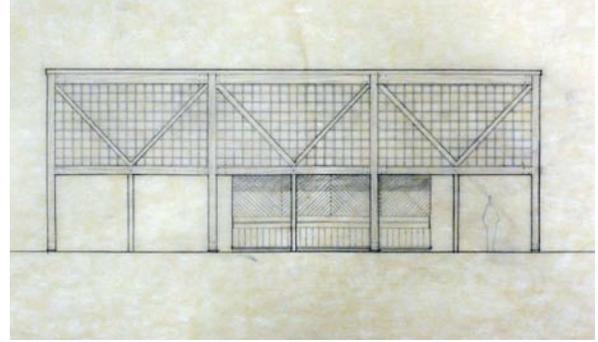


LIVING ROOM ARBOR HOUSE

In the early studies of the Kurtz residence the arbors did not go around the entire house but were clearly an integral part of the design concept. I had a slow-speaking Southerner working for me at that time by the name of Curt Hemlepp. He arrived at my office all sweaty from riding his motorcycle to the office and I didn't quite know what to expect of him. But one day he asked why I didn't just take the trellises all the way around the house. I think I paused for a moment then said, "draw it." Arbor House was born.



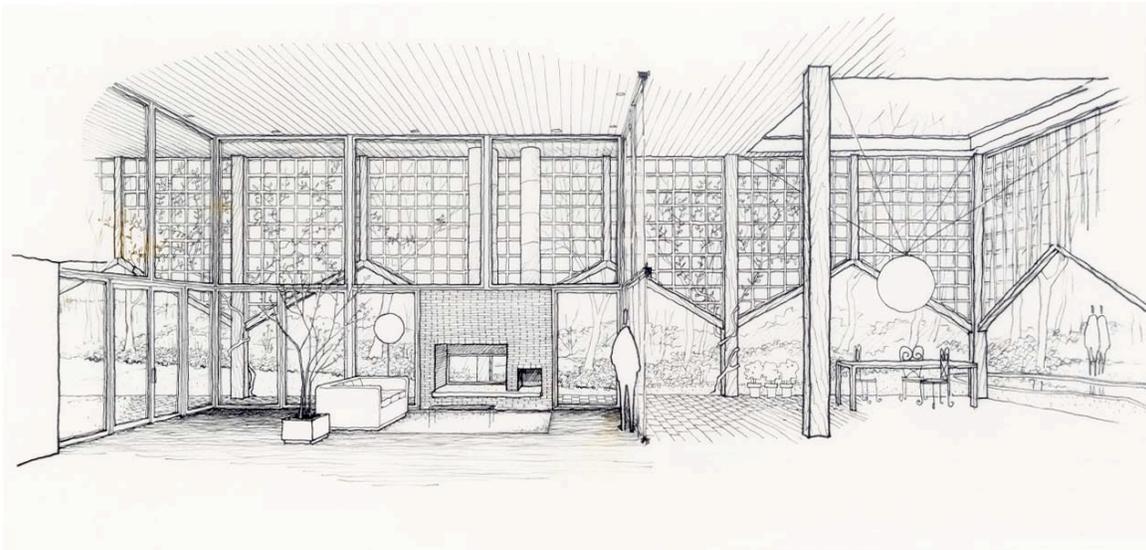
SCHEMATIC PHASE PERSPECTIVE



LATER SIDE ELEVATION STUDY

## DESIGN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

The original concept for the living room (illustrated below) was a two-story room with glass on three sides that opened onto and was protected from glare and excessive heat by the trellises. While I still like the concept and may use it in a future project, Mae and Herb wanted a house with more walls for their growing collection of art. I fought but fortunately lost the battle (for their sake) to preserve the all-glass room. I had previously visited Philip Johnson at his Glass House in Connecticut and was awe-struck by the magic of an all glass architectural pavilion. Johnson's house didn't work as a house, (he slept in a nearby brick 'bunker'), and I was intent on making houses that were truly designed for living.



As the images on the following page indicate, losing some glass for solid wall did not take away from the basic concept.



## OUTDOOR ROOMS

The first house I designed for Robert and Sibby Brasler had a grand two-story porch that consumed fully one third of the building volume. I didn't know it at the time I designed the Brasler house, but porches (which I later called Outdoor Rooms) were to become a dominant theme in my subsequent works. Certainly Arbor House was the fullest expression of that architectural motif. After finishing Arbor House, GA Houses, which featured the house in one of their residential volumes, asked me to write an article on the subject of Outdoor Rooms. The article codified my own thoughts on the subject and expanded my vision of the potential for these spaces that wed buildings to their landscapes.

For these reasons you can imagine my horror when Herb and Mae had second thoughts about proceeding with the trellises while the houses was under construction. They were concerned, as I recall, that the trellises would darken the interior and perhaps render the house

too unconventional. Finally, I suggested that I have the contractor erect just one bay of trelliswork so they could see the effect. Not another word was required. The images below reveal the full range of qualities produced by the arbors.



## TWO EXTERIOR DETAILS WORTH NOTING

An architect friend of mine, Rob Decker, was working for me at the time I designed Arbor House. He drafted exquisitely (that was the age before computers) and he executed the artful drawings for two special features on the building exterior.

### THE BUGGY BENCH

I felt there was a need to have a place to leave a package or wait for someone at the front door. Perhaps my appreciation of the values of the Quakers was revealing itself, but I envisioned a modern version of a buggy bench with not too much spring to feel disconcerting. Rob and I collaborated on the detailing and the scale of the bench that one finds at the front door.



### THE WOOD ZIPPER

The exterior of the house became, through the design process, something like a piece of furniture. Herb and Mae were positively not looking for a barn-like look; they wanted a MODERN house, crisp and clean. Mae has used the word slick to describe her design wishes but that was not to imply a pejorative connotation. Consequently, I did not want the exterior siding to look casual. If one nails up equal width vertical boards, it is likely that when one reaches the end of a wall, the final board width would have to be ripped to a special width to fit. To avoid this casual condition -- inappropriate for such a tailored house -- I came up with the idea of working in from both ends of the wall in question and then *zipping up* the center boards. It is purely a decorative detail that seemed totally consistent with the other building details. The zipper and the buggy bench are expressions of a design approach we practice in my office called *Creative Accommodation*.

When the head carpenter saw our drawings for the first time he was naturally puzzled by the detail for a wood zipper. Proudful of his experience, he was reluctant to ask a young architect what a wood zipper was all about. He asked other architects and engineers but no one had ever heard of a wood zipper. He went so far as to visit a library to find out about this odd detail, but he found nothing. Finally he sheepishly questioned me at the site, swallowed his pride, and found out that the detail was nothing more than what was illustrated in Rob's fine drawing.

## MASTER BATH

In 1992, Herb called to give me a new assignment; renovating the master bathroom. Herb and Mae had a clear sense of what they wanted and I worked with my senior associate, Monroe Buckner to develop a design and document it. Monroe (we call him Monty), is an architect of many talents that has kept this office functioning for more than a quarter of a century. Some people have called us the odd couple because we bring to every assignment diverse but complimentary talents. He has been the unsung hero of Joel Levinson Associates for many years; the steady, loyal bulwark that has contributed to JLA's reputation for well-documented, well-managed projects.



## CARL STEELE

Carl Steele is one of Philadelphia's foremost interior designers. I was very fortunate that Herb and Mae were friends with Carl and asked him to do the interiors. The class, sophistication, and polish of the interiors is largely due to Carl's great eye and vast experience. A house after all, is nothing more than architectural space, light, and form -- and an orchestrated palette of materials. It can easily be debased or raised to great heights by the objects, colors and textures that are added to the house. Carl, working closely with Herb and Mae and together they made magic in bringing the potential of this simple house to its fullest realization.

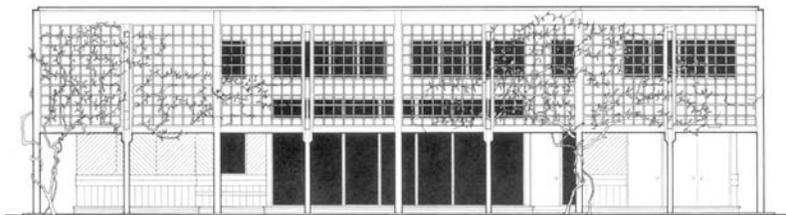


## TEXT OF THE ARTICLE THAT APPEARED IN GA HOUSES

The Arbor House was the first building I designed with an enclosure that is omni-directional. Viewed from the exterior, the arbors give the impression of a simple pavilion, open to and accessible from all areas of the garden. No hint is given as to what might be the front, back or sides of the house. The position of the house on the site, however, and the layout of the entrance walks begin to imply the location of the public side, and in turn, the private side of the dwelling. By de-emphasizing the image of the building as that of a house and accentuating its image as a garden pavilion, one is inclined to view the building on its own terms rather than by comparison with the houses that surround it. Because of the horizontal screening effect of the raised trelliswork and the open and continuous colonnade at grade level, one's line of vision is kept low and ground related. As a consequence, the marriage between the horizontal plane of the lawn and the restful volumes of outdoor space held captive behind the arbor eradicates the strange and unappealing quality the site presented before the house was built.

My early drawings of the house always showed vines climbing the columns and engaging the trellises. My clients who were very practical people feared the vines would be a costly maintenance concern and might damage the arbors. After they moved in I kept sending them postcards reading 'Think Wisteria,' but they never planted any vines. After I got over the disappointment of not seeing the vines, I came to realize the arbors were a compelling and poetic architectonic element in their own right and needed no vines to soften their appearance. The Arbor House and the clients who still live there some thirty five years after it was built have become a single integrated and happy combination of dwelling and occupant.

Joel Levinson AIA

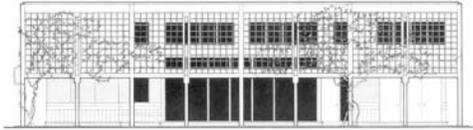


# ARBOR HOUSE

## Honors and Publications

National Design Award 1972	Western Wood Products Association	In Association with the American Wood Council
Publication 1977	<u>Philadelphia's Phantom School</u> - Architects after Kahn By Roberts Coombs	Progressive Architecture <i>"Joel Levinson's houses have a romantic warmth and love of materials that recall some aspects of the Shingle Style or Greene and Greene's Architecture."</i>
Publication 1977	"A View of Contemporary World Architects	Japan Architect
Publication 1977	"40 under 40" – Honoring the work of Forty American Architects Under the age of Forty.	Special feature of the international design journal Architecture and Urbanism. <i>"This house is sited in the former sunken garden of an adjoining stone mansion. Because the site is almost treeless and without view, an in order to cope with the greater size and scale of the adjoining house, the quite modest plan of the house is enveloped in a porch or 'arbor' of lattice which modulates the natural light penetrating the interior while it enhances an image of house-as-gazebo that seems particularly appropriate to the context."</i>
Publication 1981	"Arbor House"	<b>GA Houses 9</b> Special Feature: New Waves in American Architecture Global Architecture
Publication 1982	"Outdoor Rooms" by Joel Levinson	<b>GA Houses 10</b> Global Architecture
National Traveling Exhibit 1983	American Architecture "Innovation and Tradition in American Architecture"	Organized by the Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, Columbia University
University Exhibit 1991	"The Legacy of the Philadelphia School: An Exhibit of the Work of Students and Colleagues of Louis I. Kahn"	Exhibition at the School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania
Publication 1998	<u>A Guide to Twentieth Century Contemporary Architecture</u>	By Carole Rifkind Dutton/Penguin/Putnam

# ARBOR HOUSE



## CREDITS

Owner	Herbert and Mae Kurtz
Architect	Joel Levinson
Structural Engineer	Stephen Jocum
Mechanical Engineer	Walter Spiegel
Contractor	E. Arol Fesmire
Forman	Carl Tomlinson
Interior Designer	Carl Steele
Architectural Assistants	George Blaker Ed Dardzinski Rob Decker Henry Wilcots Graham Phipps Curt Hemlepp John Devine Norbert Keane Brad Earl Neil Hoffman Monroe Buckner (1993 - Master Bath)