

HOUSES OF JOEL LEVINSON

BACKGROUND MATERIAL FOR THE BRASLER SECTION OF THE WHITAKER MONOGRAPH

A HOUSE FOR SIBBY AND ROBERT BRASLER

The house I designed in 1965 for Bob and Sibby Brasler was my first residential commission. It is a relatively small house of fieldstone and redwood, and large sheets of glass that open onto a ravine running through virgin woodlands. [Figure 1] I later designed an addition that was constructed in 1986.

When I was commissioned for the project, I was about 25 years old and had already graduated from the School of Fine Arts at The University of Pennsylvania, but I was not yet a registered architect.

The Brasler house is important in my career in that I experimented with many architectural themes of space, materials, light, and 'bridges' to nature that found continuing expression in future projects for other clients.

THE SITE

In the early 1960s, Bob and Sibby Brasler purchased a wedge-shaped site off a cul-de-sac at the end of Apalogen Road in the East Falls section of Philadelphia. The 2+ acre, steeply sloping, wooded lot had many old trees and was a contiguous extension of the woodlands of nearby Fairmount Park. Today most of their plot would probably be deemed unsuitable for construction given the current concern for erosion control, but back then, if I recall correctly, steep-slopes were not yet a condition constrained by government control.

A ravine bisected the site and a brook slithered along its lowest contours headed for the nearby Wissahickon Creek. One of my earliest drawings, if not the first, shows the sloping contours in section and a car parked up at the cul-de-sac. [Figure 2] I have learned through the years that contours do not look as steep in a drawing as when one is present in the landscape and looking



Figure 1. Brasler Residence. Living room looking out across the ravine. Photo taken soon after the Braslers occupied the house.



Figure 2. A very early section through the Brasler site, undated. Joel Levinson.



de-sac. [Figure 2] I have learned through the years that contours do not look as steep in a drawing as when one is present in the landscape and looking out perpendicular to the contours. Because the Braslers purchased parcels on both sides of the ravine, their view of woods, deer, possum, skunk, fox, and all manner of fowl would be preserved in perpetuity.

I was immediately attracted to the virgin woodlands but my first impression of the site was that there was no visual focus; there was nothing special to look at except a glimpse of a handsome stone house on the far side of the ravine. [Figure 3] Although it was a spectacular site for a house in terms of its potential, (especially for an architect still wet behind the ears) I must confess that for me, the landscape had no unique personality, nothing memorable, except for a good number of sturdy ancient beeches and tulip poplars. The problem as I experienced it was that I was simply **in** the woods and **looking at** more woods, but there was no focus.

I have come to learn that placing a house in a site suddenly gives it experiential focus, gives it an unmistakable sense of uniqueness, and imbues it with a memorable quality that may be lacking initially. Another way of expressing this idea is that a visual 'dialogue' immediately unfolds between the natural environment and the house placed within it, and that dialogue has a voice that resonates palpably in the psyche of the observer.

ARRIVAL AND ENTRY

From the outset I knew that I did not want to descend the hill from the parking area near the cul-de-sac, and thus encounter the house by 'slamming' into the uphill facing side of the house. (For future reference, I have come to refer to the side of the house facing uphill as the back of the house because it doesn't face the primary downhill view.) I also did not want to enter the house immediately but rather to first experience the site the way I had experienced it on my first visit with Bob and Sibby. In effect, I wanted visitors (and the owners) to be **in** the site and **of** the house at the same time at each arrival. I achieved this by proposing a large two-story porch at one end of the house that by volume was close to one-third of the entire, original structure before a sizeable addition I designed was built in 1986. [Figures 4A and 4B] In retrospect, I find it interesting that I proposed this-roofed over outdoor space in my first residential commission because Outdoor Rooms have become a dominant theme in my work ever since.

I don't know if I specifically referenced my many books on architecture while designing the Brasler residence searching for possible points of departure, but I am sure that design ideas illustrated in the many books and magazines I owned resonated with me as I began to design. I abhor copying and take pride in forging fresh designs, but I still remember the influence of the



Figure 3. View from near the cul-de-sac before the Brasler house was designed and looking out toward a house on the far side of the ravine.



Figure 4A. Brasler Residence, porch, as viewed from the ravine.



Figure 4B. Brasler Residence porch, originally called the Court.



owned resonated with me as I began to design. I abhor copying and take pride in forging fresh design concepts and details, even though these may have been inspired by the works of other architects from previous eras. Nevertheless, looking back, I feel certain that I was more influenced at the time by the Outdoor Rooms of Le Corbusier than those of Mies van der Rhoe.

Mies van der Rhoe's Farnsworth House (designed in 1946 and built in 1951) [Figure 5] was one I deeply admired. Mies's vocabulary, however, was too spare and glassy for what I thought Bob and Sibby wanted. I sensed the Braslers' preferences to be more naturalistic and a tad earthy (in fact I think the switch from brick in the early studies to stone came from them, despite their tight budget). Even though the Farnsworth House is not rooted in the landscape but floats above it like an art object, the Farnsworth design has an Outdoor Room on the left side (as one approaches the house), and I find it interesting looking back that this relationship is echoed in the *final* design of the Brasler house. Endless earlier studies had the porch on the right side. In the Farnsworth house a thin, flat, lid-of-a-roof extends in one plane over the house and porch alike. The Brasler house has a similar lid, but it is more engaged into the visual fabric of the structure and does not float as an aesthetically independent plane.

I was also an enthusiastic admirer of the French architect Le Corbusier and am near certain that several of his projects that involved Outdoor Rooms also influenced me. A good example is the Villa Garches, [Figure 6] which has an exterior stair leading from the porch to grade, a feature that is echoed in the Brasler house, but in the Brasler house, however, the stair to grade in the final scheme is concealed behind a stone wall. Another inspiring project by Le Corbusier was the mock-up of an apartment for the Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau. [Figure 7] Note the small balcony and the grid of windows above it, features I explored in my early studies.

Little did I know at the time that porches would become one of the most dominant and philosophically significant themes of my later work. Some 17 years after designing the Brasler house, I was invited to write about the theme of *Outdoor Rooms* in a pioneering article for Global Architecture (GA Houses 1982), under the title of *Outdoor Rooms*.

A page from the article illustrating Outdoor Room types is reproduced in [Figure 8]. "Outdoor Rooms" is a term I adopted to refer to a broad category of open-air, roofed-over spaces that marry buildings to their immediate landscape. In this article, I broke Outdoor Room types into seven Categories. The Brasler porch fell into the first Category and is the second of five subtypes in that category, which I simply called *Porch Type*. Category 2 was called *Balcony Type* and the Brasler House includes two



Figure 5. Farnsworth House, Mies van der Rhoe, architect.



Figure 6. Villa Garches. Le Corbusier, architect.



Figure 7. Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau. Le Corbusier, architect.

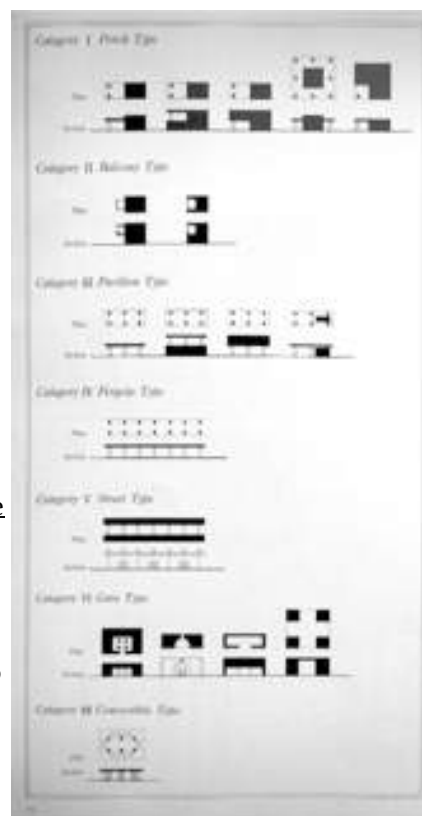


Figure 8. Drawing by Joel Levinson prepared for his article

second of five subtypes in that category, which I simply called *Porch Type*. Category 2 was called *Balcony Type* and the Brasler House includes two such balconies; one each of the two subtypes illustrated. There is a small projecting balcony at the top of the stairs to the second floor (see figures 4a and 7) and a balcony off the master bedroom cut into the body of the building.

The Brasler porch was foreshadowed by a design I did when I was a student of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. The assignment called for a summer school on the coast of France to serve the School of Fine Arts at Penn. One of the buildings I designed had an outdoor room that was easily 80% of the building volume. There is a some chance that scheme was influenced by the Ali Quapu, long one of my favorite buildings in all of world architecture. [Figure 9] I got a high mark for my building in France (one of the few high marks from Penn) and this should have been a clue to me back then that Outdoor Rooms was a theme that resonated deep within me.

BARN ARCHITECTURE

This section, cut through the site and building, [Figure 10] shows an early attempt to deal with the constraints and opportunities associated with placing a house on and in this steeply sloping hillside. The house is set partly into grade and well down from the cul-de-sac. This diagram incorporates some of the features that were carried through into the final design: a three-story block with a flat roof, walk-out basement on the creek side of the house, and a two story entry space with a balcony. The lines running out like rays from the basement floor possibly indicate an early effort to see if a ramp down to grade was feasible, except for the fact that the basement is one floor lower than the porch floor, and it was from the porch floor that I wanted the ramp to extend. [Figure 10]

I had in mind offering the Braslers and their visitors the option of either coming onto the porch and then walking down an earthen ramp to the creek and from there up the far bank, or, alternatively, entering the house immediately from the porch. I was enamored at the time with barn architecture, and the model for earth ramps is found in what is called *bank barns*.

A bank barn I once saw in Upper Black Eddy, Pennsylvania [Figure 11] struck me on several levels. The utter simplicity of its box-like form had a power and strength that deeply appealed to me. I found its no-nonsense architectonic expression compelling. I don't think I understood the interior functionality of the ramp at the time nor had I heard the term *bank barn*, but I loved the way the landscape rose up in the form of the ramp and how the ramp wed the building to the ground.

Aesthetically, this barn was certainly a separate and freestanding *object* in the landscape -- but *object* and

Figure 8. Drawing by Joel Levinson prepared for his article *Outdoor Rooms* in *Global Architecture: GA Houses, 1982*.



Figure 9. Ali Quapu, Isfahan, Iran.

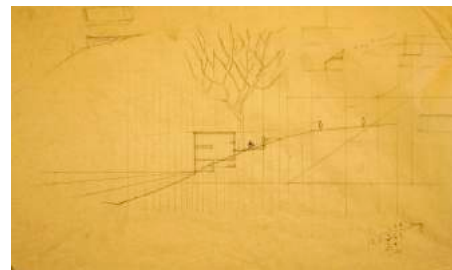


Figure 10. Brasler Residence. Early cross section through the site and the house.



Figure 11. Bank barn. Vicinity Upper Black Eddy, Pennsylvania. Photo, circa 1955, Joel Levinson.



the ramp wed the building to the ground. Aesthetically, this barn was certainly a separate and freestanding *object* in the landscape -- but *object* and barn were of an integrated and shared aesthetic spirit, through the use of the ramp. A model of the completed design of the Brasler house illustrates the themes of outdoor room, balconies, roof as lid, building as a no-nonsense, box-like form set in the landscape.

[Figure 12]

RAMP, STAIR, and DIAGONAL

Although my early rough sketches [Figures 13 and 14] properly conveyed my design intention regarding the ramp, it became apparent through further study of the actual site contours that the slope of the land was too steep for the ramp.

After abandoning the ramp, I explored a stair that swept out from the house on a 45° diagonal over the ravine, then back on itself to get down to grade. The stair was supported on a wall set at the corner of the house that also was angled to the house's basic orthogonal format. [Figure 15]

A very simple stair hugging the creek façade won out finally as the most economical way to get down to grade. In the final design I introduced a wall to conceal the stair and this properly played down the importance of access to the woods from the porch. [Figure 16]

Note that the left side of the ramp in figures 13 and 14 slants off at an angle to the orthogonal disposition of most of the walls of the house. This diagonal, like others in this and other plan studies, reflected an increasing use of diagonals in 20th century architecture. My fascination with diagonals in the Brasler house was an extension of my interest with this renegade angular geometry that started while still a student at Penn. The interest led to a life-long investigation in this theme that is currently nearing completion in the form of a book tentatively titled The Daring Diagonal: Architecture, Geometry, and the Impact of Revolutionary Thought.

LE CORBUSIER

I am certain that the architect that affected my thinking the most while designing the Brasler House was Le Corbusier. I was very taken by several of *Corb's* residential projects that featured grand porches. Among these was the aforementioned proposed Villas Apartments (never built) and The Pavilion Espirit-Nouveau in Paris executed in 1925, which was, I believe, a full-scale mock-up of one of the dwelling units in the Villas Apartments. [Figure 7] It was a scheme that resonated powerfully with me when I first saw the project published in the book titled *Le Corbusier 1910-60*,



Figure 12. Model of Brasler House. Circa 1966



Figure 13. Creek elevation showing ramp.



Figure 14. Early plan with ramp.

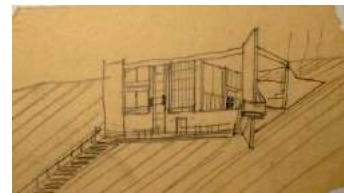


Figure 15. Brasler Residence. Angled stair leading from the porch to grade.

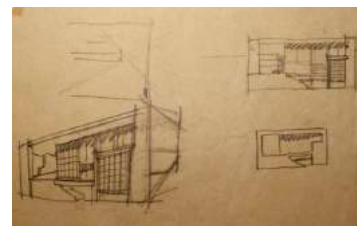


Figure 16. Brasler residence. Final location of exterior stair leading down to creek.



Apartment. [Figure 7] It was a scheme that resonated powerfully with me when I first saw the project published in the book titled *Le Corbuser 1910-60*, which came out in 1960. To the right of Corbu's garden terrace in elevation was the Mondrian-like grid of fenestration of the living room. A small balcony is centered on the wall of glass. Early studies of the Brasler residence show a similar window grid. What I came to call the Romeo and Juliet balcony on the front façade of the Brasler house also seems to have been influenced by the *Espirit-Nouveau* project.

Another Corb house that appears to have been in my head when I worked for the Braslers was La Roche-Jeanneret house in Paris, executed in 1923, particularly the entry-hall. [Figure 17] A comparison of my early sketches of the interior entry at Brasler and photos of Le Corbusier's entry hall appear to confirm the connection. [Figure 18]



Figure 17. La Roche-Jeanneret house, entry hall. Le Corbusier.

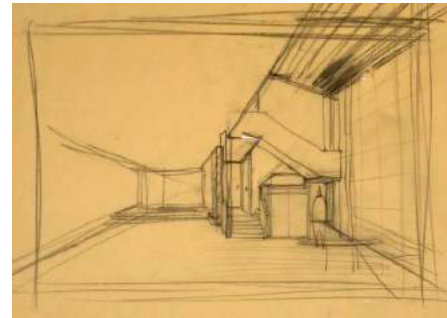


Figure 18. Brasler Residence, study of stair in entry hall.

CORB'S HOUSES at GARCHES and JAOUŁ

Yet another house by Le Corbusier that I am sure influenced me at the time was the 1927 Villa at Garches. [Figure 19] At the rear of the house is another of his ubiquitous 2 story porches.

Interestingly, at Garches the porch appears on the left side of the façade as it does in my early studies.

A stair proud of the rear façade leads to grade. I remember studying this porch in plan and in the photos for hours to fully understand the architectural relationships; I basically built a model of the space in my head. I was not enamored of all the relationships of this porch (in many respects I found other views of it stark and uninviting), but the fact that it was part of the body of the house and yet belonged to the landscape resonated with me in the profoundest way. I must have felt at this early time in my career what I can only describe as a genetic connection to the theme of Outdoor Rooms.



Figure 19. Villa at Garches, garden terrace. Le Corbusier.

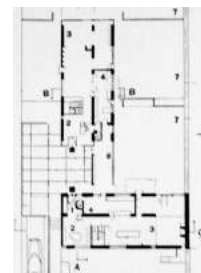


Figure 20A. Maisons Jaoul, plan. Le Corbusier.

Lastly, Le Corbusier's Maisons Jaoul at Neuilly, impressed me greatly in terms of the plans' organization (two bays wide, longitudinally) and the Catalan barrel vaulted floor and roof structures. [Figure 20A and 20B] Although I toyed with barrel-vaulted roofs for the Brasler house, a more conventional framing system prevailed, primarily for budget reasons. Nevertheless, the two-bay framing system was adopted and remained in the final design. [Figure 21] The brick exterior of Jaoul at Neuilly also may have inspired the early studies of the Brasler house. The connection to Le Corbusier did not end with his architectural influence, as I will describe later when I mention the first contractor the Braslers hired.



Figure 20B. Barrel vaults at Maisons Jaoul. Le Corbusier.



Figure 21. Early section through Brasler Residence.

The Brasler porch situated on the left side of the creek facade was more distant from the parking area, but the longer run across the back of the house permitted a more gradual descent. However, after

the creek facade was more distant from the parking area, but the longer run across the back of the house permitted a more gradual descent. However, after countless studies in plan, section and elevation, the 'outdoor court,' as it became identified on the drawings, was switched to the other side of the house, and from my perspective today, the change is one that I am happy I made. [Figure 22]

Figure 21. Early section through Brasler Residence.

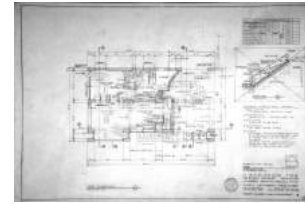


Figure 22. Final plan of Brasler Residence.

PHILIP JOHNSON'S HOUSE AT CAP BÉNAT.

Some early studies of the Brasler House showed people actually walking out onto the roof of the house to experience the site before descending into the rooms below [Figures 23 and 24]. One section illustrating that scheme was influenced by the Eric Boissonnas House under construction in 1962 in Cap Bénat, France [Figure 25]. It was designed by Philip Johnson, whose work I hated until I actually visited his own masterful home in New Canaan, Connecticut, which I got Sibby and Bob to visit along with a houses Elliot Noyes designed for himself. (Later I went on to dismiss much of Johnson's architecture in large measure as frivolous).

The Boissonnas house has a grand terrace with a curvilinear slab of concrete that looks like a blanket floating on an upwind. Four columns support the 'blanket' of concrete, forming a graceful outdoor room with a commanding view of ocean and landscape. Although I abandoned the idea of a pavilion-like shelter sitting atop the roof, the idea of the roof as something other than a weather membrane remained in my thinking primarily because I knew it would be visible on the descent from the parking area. One way of treating the roof to make it look presentable was to cover the built-up roofing and gravel surface with duck-boards, that is to say panels composed of individual boards much like a boardwalk. This feature was detailed right into the construction drawings but fell by the wayside due to costs. However, the intended plan to use duck-boards shows in the model.

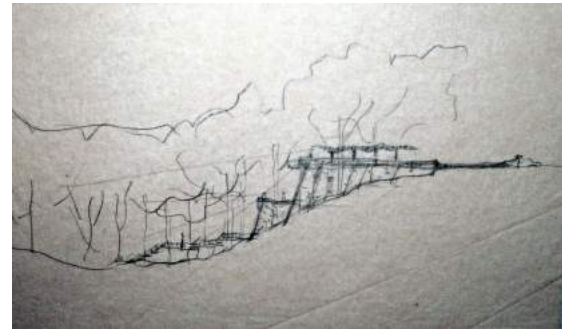


Figure 23. Early study. Brasler residence.

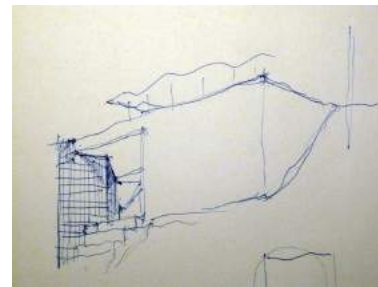


Figure 24. Early study. Brasler Residence.

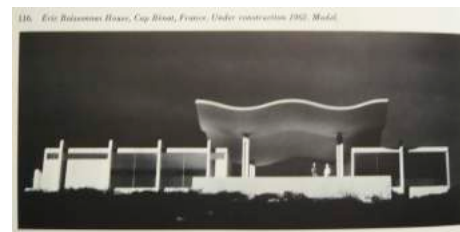


Figure 25. Model. Eric Boissonnas House in Cap Bénat, France. Philip Johnson.

VENTURI AND THE READING OF CLIENTS

Apalogen Road has been known for houses designed by several respected, mid-century modern architects including Frank Weise, Charles Oller, and Montgomery and Bishop. For this reason, I felt very fortunate that the opportunity from Bob and Sibby came my way early in my career. Bob told me after I was hired that he had interviewed an architect who had been my professor at Penn, Robert Venturi,



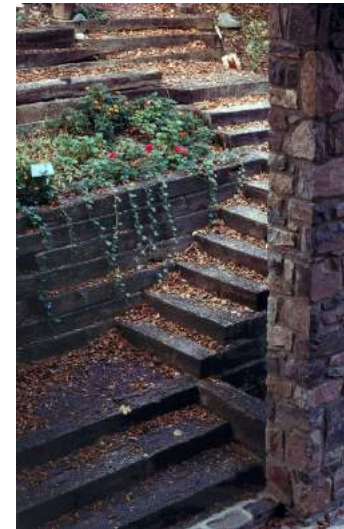
I came my way early in my career. Bob told me after I was hired that he had interviewed an architect who had been my professor at Penn, Robert Venturi, but had been turned off by Venturi's idea for a tower scheme on the site. My sense was that Bob and Sibby were looking for a house that would be more intimately engaged with the natural landscape than a modern abstraction in the form of a tower.

The design concept I began to explore was in fact a distinct object with certain abstract qualities, but also one that was intimately engaged with the landscape. My intention was to immerse the owners in the natural world, since that is what initially attracted them to the site.

I think that my instinct on this was an early indication of my fortunate ability to understand on a fundamental level what my clients are all about; what they truly desire, how they live, what their essence is, or could become over time. My clues in this regard are the client's clothes, jewelry, manner of speech, gait, posture, subjects of conversation, handwriting; that is to say all the personality traits that a writer of fiction would employ to express a character in a work of fiction. [Figures 26 A and B]



Figure 26A. Brasler Residence, soon after completion.



Figures 26 B. Brasler Residence soon after completion.

CONSTRUCTION DOCUMENTS

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For a long time I found it frustrating and troublesome that I could find no draftsman willing to help me convert my design studies into construction drawings. I recall that several draftsmen found the house too strange and simply refused to work on it, even for pay.

Eventually I hired a gentle fellow by the name of Eugene Mugnier, roughly ten years my senior who knew far more than I about construction, but drafted in a style that was not to my liking. Details were muddy and how things went together was oftentimes far too open for contractor-interpretation, which can be risky.

Aesthetically, I knew what I wanted, however, I had to follow Gene's lead on how things went together constructionally. Aside from a few leaks, I believe the Braslers would say the house has performed reasonably well for roughly 45 years.

Although I was a novice at the time, I wanted clarity and precision in the drawings, positively not obfuscation. This may seem odd coming from a designer who worked initially in the Louis I. Kahn style of loose charcoal studies. [Figure 27] But as time passed, the use of charcoal gave way to harder and harder pencils. [Figure 28] The presentation drawings, executed by me when the construction was finished, express a nice balance of

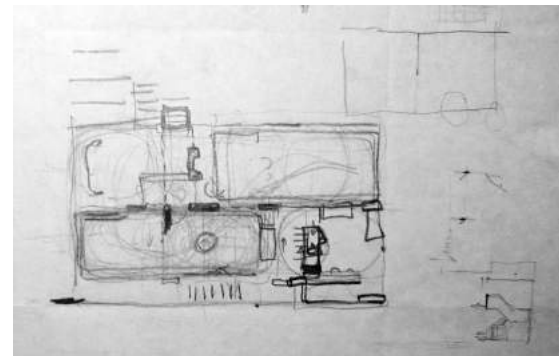


Figure 27. Very early study. Brasler residence.

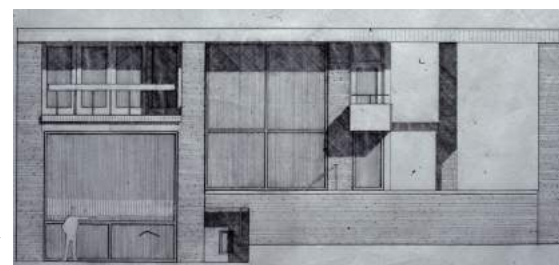


Figure 28. Elevation study. Brasler residence.

to harder and harder pencils. [Figure 28] The presentation drawings, executed by me when the construction was finished, express a nice balance of precision and expressive line weight. [Figure 31]

STAIRS 1 1

Stairs, I have learned through the years, are a real challenge and when I designed the Brasler stair I was not experienced in the subtleties of stair design.

Fortunately, that has changed with time. Bob and Sibby replaced the original stair I designed for the entry hall [Figure 29] with a more graceful curving stair designed by an architect-friend-neighbor of theirs, Galen Schlosser, who worked for the great 20th century architect, Louis I. Kahn.. This architect also designed the lovely pool and deck on the porch side of the house. In figure 31, it is to see that I did study a stair with a partial curve up at the landing. I know for sure from the wide initial tread and curved corners that this scheme was influenced by a wonderful stair that Alvar Aalto designed for the Villa Mairea in Noormarkku, Finland.

There are actually three stairs in close proximity to one another at the Brasler house. The one to the second floor sails above the masonry stairs to the basement. [Figure 30] And just outside the exterior wall and parallel to the replaced stair is a stone stair that hugs the front of the house and leads from the porch to grade. This 'tangle' of intertwined stairs has a history.

In the small kitchen in the Mt. Airy house I grew up in, there were two identical doors, side by side. One door led to the basement, the other door opened onto what I regarded as a 'secret' narrow stair with winders that led up to a landing of the main stair, before that stair rose to the bedroom level. That entwined network of stairs, somewhat akin to several strands of interlaced spaghetti, became indelible in my psyche for the following reason. Just after my parents bought the house, they took me to see it for the first time and I became enchanted with the secret stairs, as most kids are attracted to unexpected architectural features like hideaway nooks and crannies. My brother came along on the next visit to the house and I raced with him to the kitchen to show him the secret stairs — but in haste I opened the wrong door and tumbled head over heels into the basement nearly breaking my neck.

Years later I visited Mercer's castle in Doylestown and fell in love with the numerous small and grand stairs that rose in improbable locations (some of them intertwined as those in our Mount Airy house were). Mercer's stairs provided glimpses of spaces already visited, not yet visited, and to be visited. Stairs with mvstery and

Figure 28. Elevation study. Brasler residence.



Figure 29. Original stairs to second floor. Brasler residence.



Figure 30. Stairs to basement and second floor. Brasler residence.

Mount Airy house were). Mercer's stairs provided glimpses of spaces already visited, not yet visited, and to be visited. Stairs with mystery and unexpected 'dimensions' remain a theme throughout my work.

FUNCTIONALITY

2

Those who have visited Bob and Sibby's house regard it as a pleasant place to live in and a delightful place to visit. On a functional level, however, it has its drawbacks. I grew up with a highly undeveloped sense of what an orderly and functional house looks like. I am a make-do kind of person who could probably conduct an architectural practice at my kitchen table, if need be. This did change over time as a result of working with clients who had a very developed sense of how a 'real' house should function.

To illustrate this, my drawings for the kitchen at the Brasler house called for an *icebox*. [Figures 31] This was cause for much embarrassment on my part and quite a few good laughs on the part of Bob, Sibby, and the contractor. In my family, we called the refrigerator an icebox in part because in my grandmother's house there was, literally, an ice box – a small oak cabinet with a compartment for a block of ice delivered by the iceman and another compartment for food.

More embarrassing still was the fact that I had no good idea how large a bedroom should be. I grew up in a house with small bedrooms and, again, had that make-do philosophy about living with conditions that were not ideal (and still live that way today, to some degree.) As seen through the eyes of some people, the bedrooms I designed for the Brasler's children could be regarded as spite rooms – that is to say rooms so small they could only have been designed as an act of spite. Yes there was space for a bed and a desk and there was a good sized closet. [Figure 32] But the bedrooms were in fact so small that the boys ended up sleeping on top of their closets, which were redwood built-ins that were about 5'-6" high. What I later learned was that the boys loved their perches because there was a large window against which they slept and when they awoke, they saw all sorts of wildlife scampering through the woods. I am fortunate that a lawsuit never arose from one of the boys falling off the top of the closet in the middle of the night and breaking his neck.

Although the boys' bedrooms were dysfunctional on a basic level, I did endeavor to create at least a visual separation of the bedrooms from the entertaining areas on the level below. This was achieved through a privacy grille made of redwood slats.

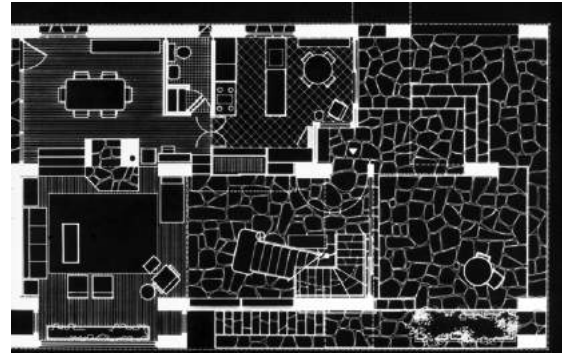


Figure 31. Near final first floor plan of the Brasler residence.

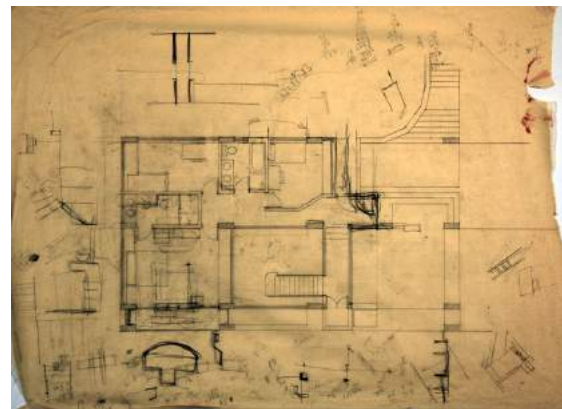


Figure 32. Near final first floor plan of the Brasler residence.



Figure 33. Second floor privacy grille at balcony. Brasler residence.

basic level, I did endeavor to create at least a visual separation of the bedrooms from the entertaining areas on the level below. This was achieved through a privacy grille made of redwood slats. [Figure 33]

An open-air bridge connecting grade at the bedroom level (the bridge was enclosed when the addition was added in 1986) was another feature developed in response to functional needs. The bridge avoids having to descend to the main level and then take the stairs back up to the second floor when returning home late at night. [Figure 34]

Lastly, I took the risk of calling for no railings around the perimeter of the porch. Codes would never permit that these days, but their absence adds a level of intimacy with nature that I would do again, if the choice were mine. For the most dangerous edge of the porch fronting on the ravine, I designed a planter to keep people back from falling 9 feet into the woods below.

MATERIALS

3

In my youth, I oftentimes visited the quaint historic town of New Hope, Pennsylvania on the banks of the Delaware River, about a forty-five minute drive from my home in Mount Airy. The drive to New Hope and beyond put me in touch with rural scenery and earthy materials such as argellite, a reddish stone that was warm, appealing and decidedly unlike the gray schist that was in common use in the neighborhoods around my home. Argellite is a metamorphic rock, halfway between shale and slate, but doesn't cleave like slate. The stone ranges from a light sandy color, through reds, purples, and browns, to black stones which the masons called *nigger heads*. Back in the early 60s when the house was being built, I could not believe my ears when I heard the masons use this bigoted phrase. It caused me great discomfort.

One summer when I was about 20 years old, I took a job at the New Hope Fine Arts Workshop doing maintenance and, on occasion (when my talents were recognized) assisting the instructor who taught sculpture. During that summer I came into constant contact with walls made of argellite. I fell in love with the way large (sometimes huge) dressed stones were used at the corners of a building and smaller, rougher stones formed the field areas. It should come as no surprise therefore that when the decision to switch from brick to stone for the Brasler house was made, I recommended argellite. It is an interesting coincidence that argellite happened to be the common building stone in the area around Schwenksville, PA where Sibby grew up.

I hand drew every stone in the elevations to



Figure 34. Entry Court showing bridge.



Schenksville, PA where Sibby grew up.

I hand drew every stone in the elevations to give the masons a clear idea of the horizontal rubble pattern I wanted to use. Because there were many piers in the design I had to temper the use of large corner stones because the piers were almost all corners with no field. Joseph Colegreco and Sons were the masons, and they generally did a fine job laying the stone and tooling the joints. But this was not without one challenging situation. Joseph's grandson was the first to lay up the rear wall of the living room, which is the main wall of the house visible upon entering the front door. His attempt failed miserably to match the pattern shown in the drawing, and I had to condemn it. Then Joseph's son tried his hand and his effort also fell short, so I had this wall removed also. Finally, Joseph, himself, took the chisel and trowel and laid the wall as required.

On this first residential project I learned the difference between fieldstone (which was naturally weathered and even had traces of moss on its surface) and what the quarry called guillotined material, which was quarried stone, chopped to size and shape with a steel blade. Bob and Sibby agreed with me to have the stones hand selected even though there was an extra charge. [Figure 35] In my specifications I went so far as to require that the moss not be removed except on the bedding face and to use brushes and water $\frac{3}{4}$ not steel and acid $\frac{3}{4}$ to clean the walls when the work was finished. I even called for argillite fieldstones as the paving material for the court and the entry hall, hoping it would be laid even enough that no one would trip.

I noticed too late a very light colored yellow stone in the column that supported the vierendeel truss at the front entrance. It troubled me so much that I considered sneaking onto the property at night and painting it with shoe polish. Later in my career I had the self-confidence to actually call for offensive stones that were out of color range to be cut replaced.

In this discussion of materials I should mention as an interesting side note that the builder first hired to construct the Brasler house was H. Pierre Sallé, a handsome and charming Frenchman who claimed that his father was a cabinetmaker for none other than Le Corbusier. Sallé's skill as a raconteur and salesman was not matched by his skills as a builder. His first act in the field was to drive his hatchet into one of the old trees that my plans called for to be protected with extreme care! Whether Sallé's claim of genealogy was true or not, and despite Le Corbusier's influence on the design, we had to fire Sallé and find another contractor to complete the project.



Figure 35. Masonry work and balcony railings. Rear of the Brasler residence.

we had to fire Sallé and find another contractor to complete the project.

CONCLUSION

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Soon after I finished the house a book came out about Philadelphia architecture written by Richard W. Longstreth and Edward Teitleman. [Figure 36] Although their photo of the house made me cringe, (distorted perspective) I was pleased when they wrote that “. . . Joel Levinson, while just beginning his practice, is part of no school but a source of tasteful and inventive works.” They could not have paid me a finer compliment because if there is anything about my work that makes me the proudest, it is the originality of many of my designs. This was true when I was a student at Penn, and seems to have been borne out by the Brasler residence and many of the projects that followed.

Why the Braslers put their trust in a young almost untested architect to design a house on a very challenging site is something of a mystery. Why they accepted a design that gave over one-third the volume of the house to a large porch in the face of a tight budget is even more puzzling. [Figure 37] When they saw that their architect couldn't tell a refrigerator from an icebox, it was too late.

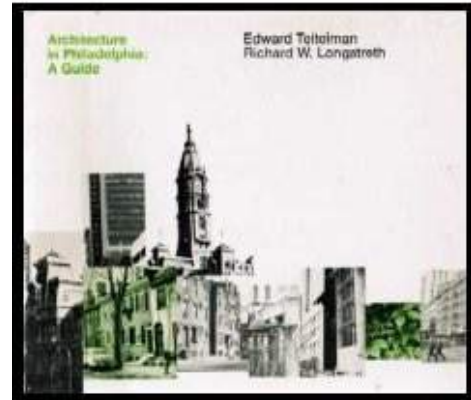


Figure 36. Cover. Architecture in Philadelphia. A Guide.



Figure 37. Final elevation. Brasler Residence.