

Monument to Mid-Century Modernism

*A legendary architect's 1950s vision
gets re-imagined for the 21st century*

BY DUO DICKINSON

Huge plate-glass walls and double doors allow the outside and inside to seamlessly blur between courtyard, living room and meadow beyond.

Never has there been a more beloved professor of architecture at Yale than King-lui Wu. He was a full-time professor from 1945 until he retired in 1988, but remained active including serving as a critic on juries until his 2002 death. Yale architecture students loved his gentle, insightful and inspirational critiques.

Unlike other architecture professors who can be abrupt and downright petty, King-lui was affirming and enthusiastic. Thus it is no surprise that he was inspired by his client's 1952 directive to design a summer home on three acres of Woodbridge farmland. What he created was a classic Modernist pavilion ensemble where plate glass, a five-by-five-foot "regulating grid" and precise detailing resulted in an exemplar of mid-century Modern architecture.

King-lui's clients were Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Dupont, and as they were original patrons, the house is known as the Dupont House in the official record of the architect's work. The structure was intended to be the very essence of a summer home "in the country," designed with an almost Caribbean sensibility in providing for natural cooling. The house is a two-part ensemble with a detached five-car garage (complete with plate glass rear walls to showcase 1950s automotive technology in all its glory) and a "doughnut" house with an open courtyard at its center — resulting in a vast expanse of exterior wall surfaces relative to the square-footage of the house.

Rather than the traditional cooling approach seen in the tropics that uses deep eaves and ample operable windows, Wu attacked the cooling imperative with the same fervor and internally reinforcing justification of today's "green" design movement using a conceptually pure theoretical approach that was a hallmark of mid-century Modernism's mindset for all building technology.

Rather than have pedestrian operable windows spec'd out of a catalogue, King-lui decided to create fixed plate glass-and-



Perched nobly on a Woodbridge hillside, King-lui Wu's mid-century Modernist home has commanded the view for nearly 60 years.

mullion window walls that were sized to integrate into the five-by-five-foot planning grid. Instead, some of these fixed pieces of glass provided ventilation from their open-able sills with built-in vents that allowed air to flow out into the central courtyard.

Additionally the full-height glass walls elsewhere in the home had centered pairs of tall doors that opened outward to reveal interior screen doors (versus the more normal reversal where the solid door opens inward and the screen doors face the outdoors). King-lui used these small openings in relatively large spaces to allow for the "Venturi effect" (the acceleration of flow caused by the constriction of aperture).

Although the home is a *tour de force* of Modernist design at the hands of a careful and inventive master, King-lui's personal ebullience and inclusivity is manifest in his invitation to Josef Albers, the artist and color theory

maven who was chairman of the art department at Yale during the time Wu designed this home to create the one built-in interior feature that commands attention to itself: the fireplace. Although gridded and carefully constructed, there is



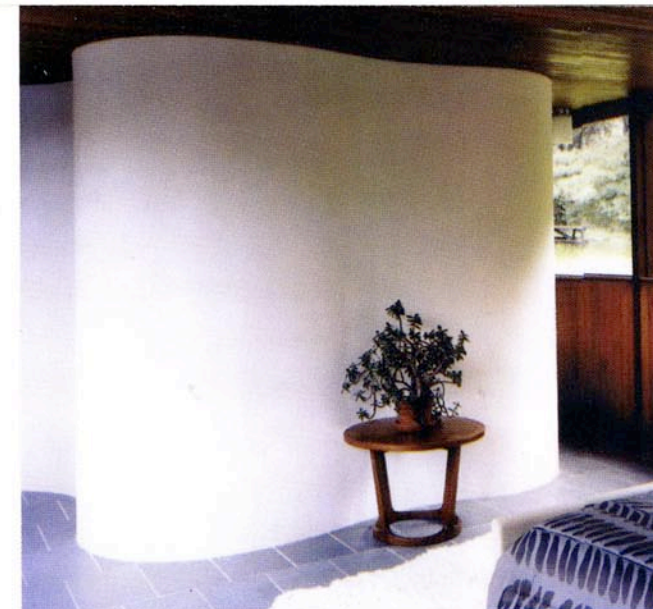
A new ceiling designed by architect Sakamoto and a fireplace designed by former Yale fine arts professor Josef Albers mesh easily into King-lui Wu's original living room design



The owner's desire for curves finds a loving response in architect Sakamoto's new kitchen design that leaves intact the original walls and windows of the cypress-infused interior.



A cypress interior was fully restored and new lighting installed in the master bedroom.



Owner Cohn's wish for curves to soften a Modernist interior's gridded wood interior was energetically embraced by architect Sakamoto in a dead white and sinuously sculptural expansion of the master bedroom closet.

a hint of the decorative in its assembling of tones, mortar joints and shapes in its concrete-block assembly.

Although the original patrons, the Duponts, never occupied the home, the subsequent owner loved the art piece enough to remain there for a full half-century. Its next (and current) owner, Yale pulmonologist Lauren E. Cohn, saw the beauty as well. The house languished on the market for a couple of years before Cohn (at the time eight and a half months pregnant with her son Noah) bought it almost ten years ago.

The first thing Cohn had to address was a flat roof that had no downspouts. King-lui originally designed the roof to contain rainwater with a gravel bed — the idea being that the surface area of the gravel facilitated a large storage capacity and rapid evaporation, versus providing drainage via internal downspouts or directing water to gutters. Effectively it was a rooftop swimming pool. She recreated a roof that actually would pitch rainwater and melting snow to its outside perimeter, away from the courtyard to be collected by a ring of not-so-modern Colonial gutters that since their installation have effectively kept most of the water from getting into the house.



It took the better part of five years for Cohn to figure out how to approach renovation. She knew she had to find an architect who was sympathetic with King-lui's classic mid-century Modernist view of architecture as the abstracted manifestation of form, light, space, plane

and line (with a little bit of materiality thrown in as spice). Being a scientist herself, she approached the selection of an architect with an objective eye.

She contacted the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, which referred her to a number of architects who might suit her purpose. She settled on Dean Sakamoto, also a professor at Yale, and like Cohn herself a professor who practices what he teaches. A member of the faculty of Yale's architecture school, Sakamoto has a richly diverse practice, having designed Miso restaurant in New Haven and many projects in his native Hawaii. His split practice has done nothing to blunt his productivity or clarity of vision.

Just like King-lui, Sakamoto listened to his client as she described the one element that depressed her about the house: "The house needed curves," noted Cohn. In all likelihood, King-lui used the classic curvature of mid-century Modernist furniture to complement the otherwise three-dimensionally rectilinear format of the home. But Cohn wanted more.

Beyond mere curves, the kitchen needed updating, the dining room needed to be opened up into the kitchen, the built-in lighting had a variety of problems, most of which were related to its experimentally fluorescent ambiance.

All of these renovations obviously involved the manipulation of a "perfect" building form, one where unity of vision, purpose and crafty scientific expression triumphed over more mundane concepts such as maintenance, energy-efficiency or access to mechanical systems.

So when new plumbing had to be installed, the Bluestone-covered concrete floors had to be breached and jack-hammered out, and since this classic vacation home has four bedrooms and four bathrooms for large-scale part-time summer occupancy, there was plenty of plumbing to be updated.

The end result was a home that now accommodates the softening curves of Cohn's desire, creating a fully renovated and updated kitchen with curving cast concrete countertops and an expanded master bedroom closet that has a sinuous white plaster presence.

The living room ceiling that had been comprised of warping cypress slats with fluorescent lighting above it became a classic glowing grid under Sakamoto's design. Cohn's desire to salvage the cypress that had comprised the ceiling couldn't be accommodated. But a wide variety of beautiful cypress detailing creating partitions, cabinetry and minor wall work was executed by gifted artisan/woodworker Jeff Carter.

Lauren and Noah Cohn occupy the house with an *ad hoc* informality that is perfectly complemented by the home's crisp, clear detailing. One room is filled with Noah's constructions, and the kitchen is actually used for cooking. The southerly views from the home are spectacular, looking down a rolling hillside lawn that Cohn allows to lie fallow for a year or two before haying.

As with any home, the land it sits can afford rich amenities for those who build carefully upon it. In this case, the rolling hill view is completely gathered in by

the oversized window walls that frame the panorama, but more lyrically the new, water-shedding roof has provided wonderful places for picnics, upon which Long Island Sound is in full (if distant) view from deep in the heart of Woodbridge.

Homes either suit their occupants or they don't. For reasons no longer known, the Duponts never moved into the home they commissioned King-lui Wu to design for them, but the next owner loved that design enough to occupy it for five decades. King-lui's design spoke to Lauren Cohn in a way that

was irresistible, but she needed to have her own sensibilities massaged into its potent context.

Ultimately, it's not whether a house perfectly fits its occupant on Day One; it's whether its bones, guts and heart beat with the same central purpose and values of those who live there. And if a home needs to be altered to fully reflect those values, it will only make an existing fit more intimate and rewarding. And, as Lauren Cohn found out working with the gifted Dean Sakamoto, its essential delights could be further enriched. ❖



Grids on grids unify outside/inside/outside space in a classic mid-century Modernist house, where super-consistent detailing, material use and full plate glass blur all distinction between indoors and out.

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