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Cool Glass Pavilion, Warm Family Home

Zutt Residence by Studio27 Architecture
by Ronald O'Rourke

Donatella Lorch prepares dinner as three prized possessions casually watch. Glass block on the front wall brings light in during the day and transmits it back out at night, while preserving privacy.

At the Zutt residence in Bethesda one recent Saturday, lunch is being prepared. Just outside, coming up the front walkway, is homeowner John Zutt, back from a trip to the airport to pick up his nine-year-old son Nicholas, who has returned from a school-sponsored trip to Canada. Seeing their arrival from the kitchen window, John's wife, Donatella Lorch, hurries out the front door to welcome Nicholas home with kisses and hugs.

It's a typical family scene in Bethesda. But the home that John, Nicholas, and Donatella are now walking back into isn't a typical suburban home. It is a newly built, modern structure inspired by the

glass-clad, pavilion-style homes of architects such as Le Corbusier and Philip Johnson.

How did a house like this come to be on an established Bethesda residential street lined with mostly older, conventionally styled homes? The answer includes an existing house in poor condition, a homeowner with a strong vision for his new home, and an architectural firm that could translate that vision into a warm, affordable residence for him and his family.

In 1999, Zutt, a recent widower, needed a new home with more space in which to raise his three children



The living room looks out to the backyard and is filled with light from all sides. During parties, those in kitchen, left, won't be isolated from the action.

– Nicholas, Madeline (now age 12), and Alexander (now age 6). After searching for some time, Zutt came upon a 1940s-era Colonial-style house in Bethesda. The house hadn't been modernized in decades—it still had its original galley-style kitchen—and it suffered from structural problems.

"When married couples came to see the house, the wife would take one look at that kitchen and run the other way," Zutt says. "I bid \$50,000 under the asking price and got it."

To make the residence livable for him and his children, a major renovation was needed. Zutt, who developed

a strong interest in architecture at an early age, wanted the renovated home to have a modern sensibility.

"I like the uncluttered lines of modern architecture," Zutt says. "I've got a job where I go from meeting to meeting all day long; I'm seeing people constantly. I like to be able to come back to a place that's more tranquil and not as busy. And I find this type of a structure is just that—it's not as busy as more traditional housing."

In search of an architect that was right for the job, he contacted the Washington Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA/DC). Zutt inspected the portfolios at AIA/DC's Architect/Client Resource Center, which has binders from 70 area firms (see list page 42).

"The first cut was going through the binders," Zutt says. "One of things that I remember was that the binder for Studio27 Architecture used some odd materials, and that caught my attention. There was a basement renovation that showed some creativity—it's a hard space to work in, and to make it interesting was not simple."

A good project binder, however, doesn't always guarantee a good client-architect working relationship; only an interview can give you an indication of whether such a relationship is possible. Zutt contacted Studio27 Architecture and met with principals Todd Ray, AIA, and John Burke, AIA. "When I interviewed with them, it was clear that we were talking the same language," Zutt recalls. He told the architects that he wanted a modern, four-bedroom home that would facilitate family life and take particular advantage of the view toward the property's deep, park-like backyard. "When I was talking about my concept, they had an understanding of how that might work, and I could see that they were building on it and not trying to substitute something completely different."

"I also knew," Zutt adds, "that I was not going to be able to supervise closely absolutely every step of the project through construction, because I travel quite a bit. There would undoubtedly be some crucial weeks when I would have wanted to be here but I would have to be away, and I knew I was going to have to rely on somebody to make the right call

about the color of this or the material of that. So I knew I needed somebody whose judgment I could rely on."

Ray and Burke, who playfully suggest that their firm's name can be understood as "2 guys working 7 days a week," infuse their work with a rigorous, theoretical understanding of modern design, which Zutt welcomed.

Zutt presented the architects with a preliminary concept sketch for his new home. The sketch showed a modern, two-story, pavilion-style house. On the first floor, the kitchen and dining rooms were to be in the front, and a double-height living room was to be in the rear, facing the backyard. Nothing too unusual about that. But Zutt also wanted one of the four upstairs bedrooms to "float" in the upper part of the living room like an isolated object in space—not the kind of request an architect gets very often.

"The Maison de Verre was an inspiration," Zutt says, referring to a famous steel, glass, and glass-block house in Paris that was designed by Bernard Bijvoet and Pierre Chareau and built in 1927-1932. "Corbusier was [another inspiration], and that's why I was interested in having some kind of a space within a space."

Zutt asked Ray and Burke to develop his scheme into a finished design that would be filled with light from as many sides as possible. "At one point I had actually talked about having all glass all the way around the entire first floor, but then I realized, for an urban house, that's ridiculous," Zutt recalls. Views toward the street, facing south, were screened to preserve privacy and prevent overheating from a harsh summer sun, but views toward the yard were designed to exploit the view and take in the gentle northern light.

After considering the condition of the existing home, the functional limitations it would present even if renovated, and limits on the cost of the project, Zutt and Studio27 decided that the best option was to build a new residence on the foundation of the old home. Now the most basic challenge was to fit a comfortable four-bedroom home with a double-height living room into a two-story structure built on the modest footprint of the original house.

Ray and Burke solved this challenge on the first floor by designing a largely open plan that permits the kitchen, dining, and living rooms to borrow space from one another. On the second floor, the challenge was to fit in a master suite, three bedrooms and a bathroom for the children, open space for the living room, and a hallway to get to the children's rooms. "We had a traditional corridor," Zutt says, "and I remember Todd said, 'Well why don't you just cantilever it out and make it a bridge?' Which immediately we recognized was exactly what we should do."

Ray and Burke fulfilled Zutt's wish for a bedroom that floated in the upper part of the living room by converting Madeline's room into an independent, tower-like structure with a billowing, curved side. Centered on the second floor, the tower extends both upward, piercing the second-floor roof of the house to provide Madeline's room with a third-level loft space, and downward, into the first-floor living area, where it rests on a narrow support that divides the area into a main family space on one side and a study on the other.

The curved side of the tower is clad in large, diamond-shaped shingles made from zinc roofing material. Above the second-story roofline, the cladding blends in with the gray asphalt roof shingles of neighboring homes. In the living room, it suggests the scaled skin of a dragon flying upward through the house. With its floating aspect and shingle-clad side, the tower is the most dramatic element in the house's design.

Madeline says of her bedroom, "I have two windows up there, and it's really an incredible view. At night you can see all the houses with the lights on, and it makes you feel like you're on a balcony."

Large glass windows on the rear wall connect the house to the backyard and the sky above it. "Major storms are very dramatic," Zutt says. "Whether it's snow, or rain, or lightning, you see it and you experience it from the comfort of your sofa."

On the front wall, glass block admits additional light while preserving privacy and preventing summer overheating. The large expanses of clear glass and glass block fill the house with a soft ambient light

Does good architecture make for unusually calm children? Like a ballerina on point, Madeline's tower rests on a single narrow base and gently divides the first floor into a living room and study. Scale-like shingles are formed from zinc roofing material.



Nicholas practices guitar in his room. In the distance, a glass-enclosed balcony with curtain opens the master suite to the living area so the parents can keep an eye on things.

during the day. "I'm not a fan of artificial light," Zutt says, "and what I wanted was to live in a place that, during the day, didn't require any lights on.... Ordinarily, nothing is on until dusk." In spite of the large amount of glass, the house is energy efficient: "I pay less to heat and cool this place than I did the old house, which just staggers me," Zutt says.

The master bedroom includes a glass-enclosed balcony overlooking the living room, which permits Zutt and Lorch to monitor the children's activities in the living room while screening out unwanted noise. The bridge, meanwhile, gives the children their own overlook of the living room, strengthening the room's role as the center of family life. Ray and Burke, who conceived the house as a city in miniature, liken the living room to a town plaza.

"The space is divided by function, but it's not divided by walls," Zutt explains. "I have small kids, and I wanted to be able to do surveillance without having to run around the house from place to place. I can keep an eye on everything that's going on."

Zutt sees other advantages in the home's open arrangement: "I don't like houses where if you have guests over for dinner, you are stuck in the kitchen and they are in some other part of the house having drinks in the living room, and you can't even talk to them," he says. "You are cooking and they are having fun and you can't interact at all. So an open plan was very important." Eliminating partitions on the first floor also helped lower the costs of the project.

"The irony," Zutt says, "is that this is a smaller house than the one that we were originally going to build, but in some ways it feels bigger."

Though clearly modern, the Zutt residence fits in easily with its traditional neighbors. Part of this is





Zutt Residence
Architect: Studio27 Architecture
Contractor: Glass Construction, Inc.

Homeowner John Zutt wanted a Corbusier-like space-within-a-space, and he got it. Daughter Madeline's tower, with a spianakor-like curved side, plunges through the interior of the house.

due to the home's exterior colors, which are compatible with those of the homes around it. And part is due to the house's size and proportions, which are not much different than those of the original house.

Burke explains, "It is about the size of the older homes around it, as opposed to some other newer homes in the area, which are done in a traditional style but are much larger than their neighbors." And although modern residential design is sometimes viewed as strange or foreign, Burke argues that this couldn't be further from the truth: "Americans at bottom are a practical people, and modern design, when rigorously done, is practical and functional."

Construction began in 2002 and was finished the following year. Between the start of the project and its completion, Zutt met and married Donatella Lorch, turning a home originally intended for a family of four into one for a family of five. Lorch, like Zutt, has lived in and traveled to numerous countries around the world, and the house acts as a setting for the handcrafted items and other objects she has collected.

Although Zutt has long been interested in modern architecture, Lorch grew up differently. "I was raised in a very traditional European family where my father collected antique furniture," Lorch says. "I never have lived in a modern house. John made me part of [the project] every single step of the way. . . . I had no idea exactly what it would look like." And when she saw it taking shape? "I loved it."

"We sit on the couch at night," she says, "and we look out at the snow falling or the rain falling, and we turn to each other and say, 'Wow, it's really nice here.'"

"We had some friends over for dinner a few weeks ago," she continues, recalling the email one guest sent afterwards: "With that house, I don't see how you can ever leave to go to work." And sometimes we feel like that. You wake up in the morning, and you know you're going to spend your day in the office and basically not see the sky. On a beautiful, sunny spring day, you don't want to leave here." @