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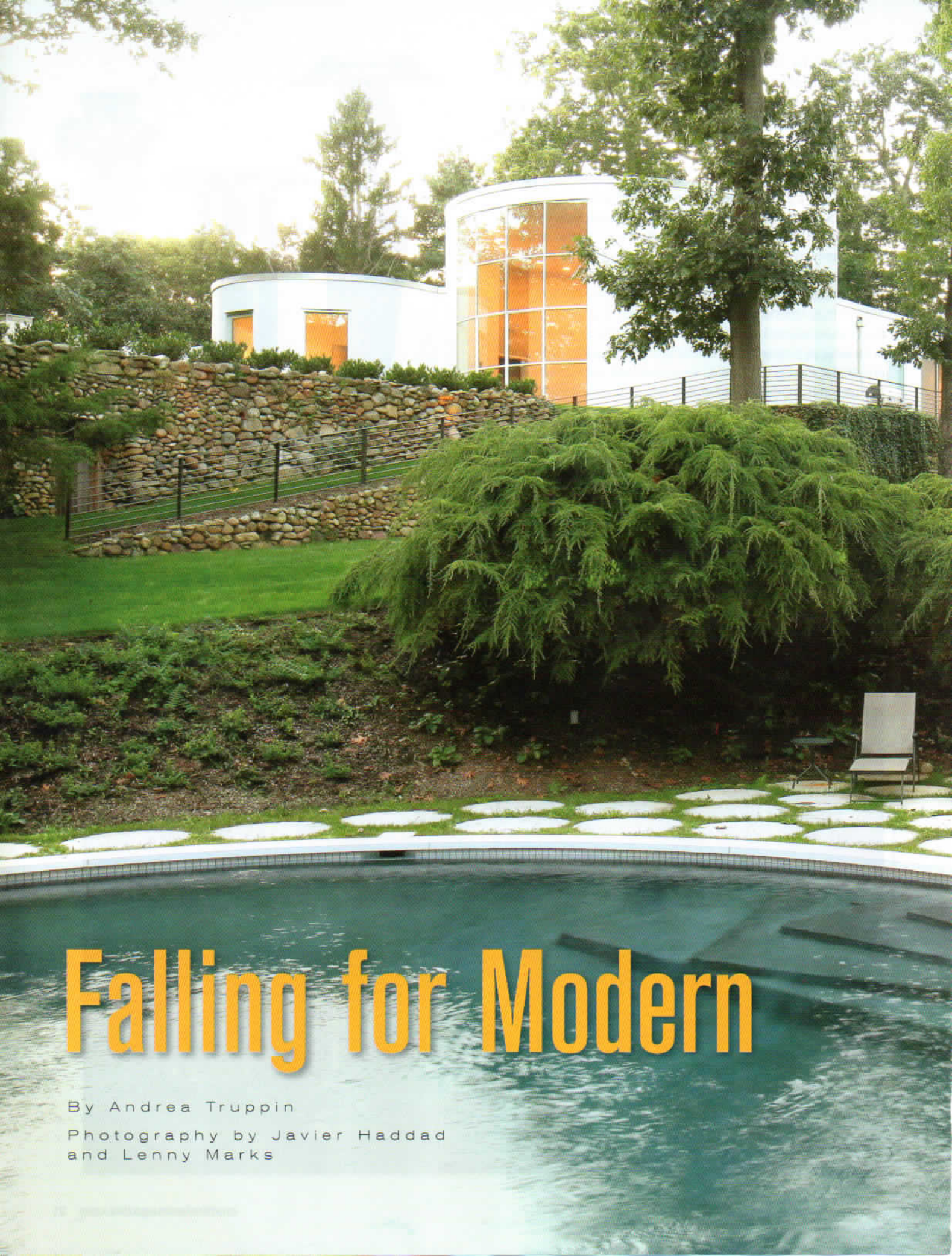
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# Falling for Modern

By Andrea Truppin

Photography by Javier Haddad  
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Architect Wallace K. Harrison's landmarked summer home in Huntington, Long Island, built in the 1930s, is today an amalgam of old and new.

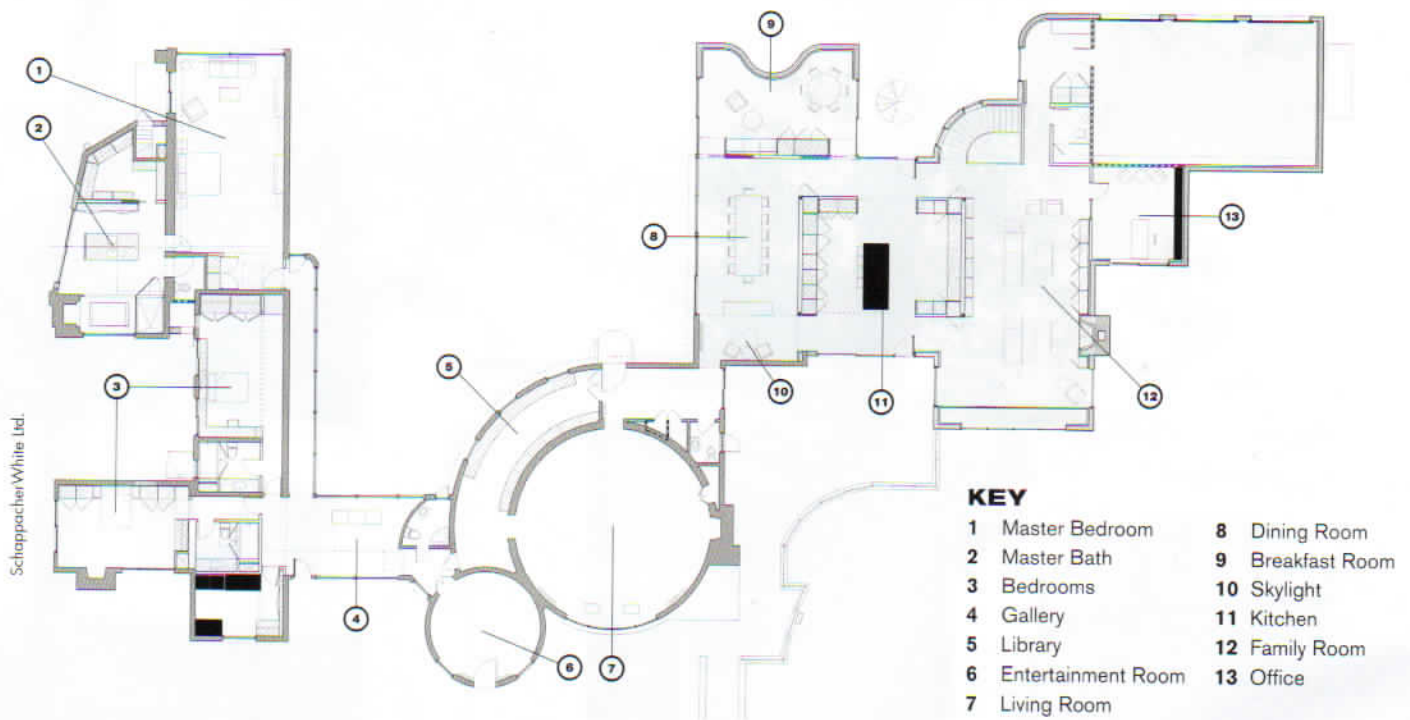
***Inset*** Harrison treated the house as an ongoing design experiment, adding to it and altering it over many years. Exploring his interest in circular structures, he initially built two round rooms onto a prefabricated steel and aluminum house that he had moved to the site.

Photo by Katrina Thomas, Wallace Harrison Collection, Department of Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University



## RESTORATION

## ADDITION



**Above** The west wing was restored as fully as possible, relying on a variety of sources, including a map drawn from memory by Hester Diamond, a friend of the Harrisons and the house's second owner. In a map (inset) based on Diamond's, one can see horse stalls in the west wing (Harrison's wife, Ellen, enjoyed riding), which were later modified to accommodate staff members overnight, after Harrison moved his architecture office to the house. Those spaces and the caretaker's apartment are now two children's bedrooms and baths. The drafting room became the master bedroom and Harrison's private office the master bath. The east wing, right, was entirely reconfigured, while respecting the original footprint. The dining room, originally occupying the small round room, was moved to the site of the old kitchen. The new kitchen is now in the wing's center, with direct access to the stone terrace for outdoor dining. A glassed-in breakfast room, in place of the old laundry room, looks onto a miniature courtyard that mimics, in miniature, the grassy semi-enclosed space between the two wings.

**Below** The entrance door opens into a hallway that partially wraps the large round living room rising behind. Harrison outfitted the hallway as an office, with bookshelves up to the ceiling on both sides. Its dark blue ceiling and cork floor, now restored, contrasted strongly with the dazzlingly white space of the adjacent living room. A raised roof above the kitchen mirrors, in square form, the two-tiered volume of the large circular room. The breakfast room, far left, and dining room, facing west, are illuminated by the sun through early evening. The new design honors Harrison's use of cement cesspool covers for paths, using them as pavers throughout the property.

**Opposite, top** A walnut partition with its cut-out section screens the walkway past the dining room to the kitchen. The *Archie* table is by Paulo Piva and the *Max Alta* chairs by Antonio Citterio, both from B&B Italia.





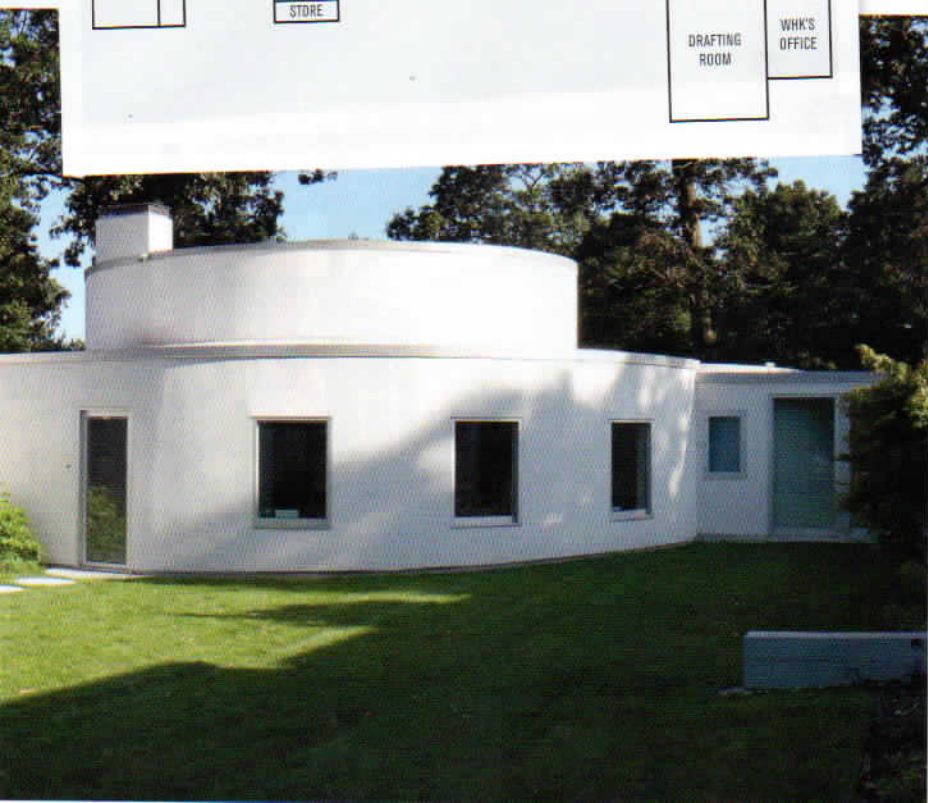
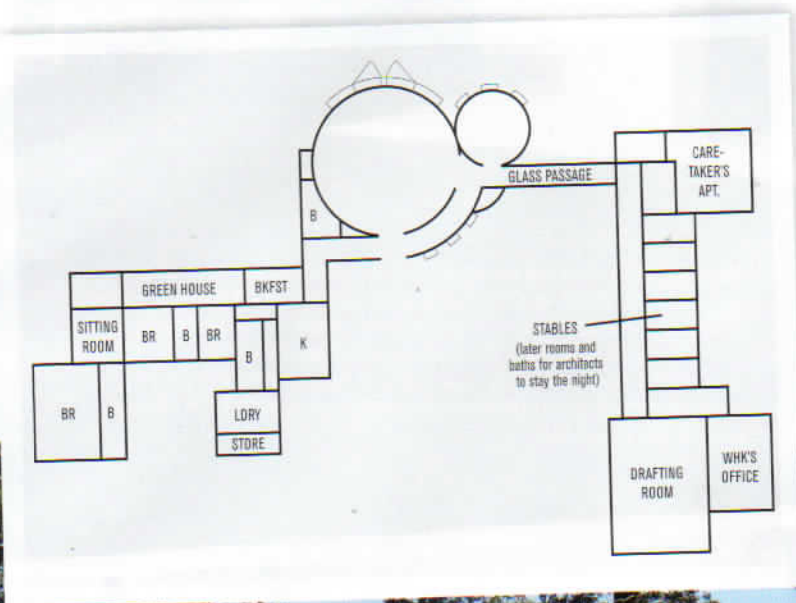


When architect Wallace K. Harrison visited New York's Allied Arts Exhibition in 1931, he took home quite a souvenir: for \$1,000, he bought the Aluminaire House, a gleaming experiment in steel and aluminum designed by Albert Frey and A. Lawrence Kocher. He had it dismantled and transported to a 25-acre site he had purchased in Huntington, Long Island, to serve as his weekend home.

The radically modern house must have seemed a curious choice for the young architect. His marriage in 1926 to Ellen Milton had catapulted him, through her familial connection to the Rockefellers, into a high society not particularly known for its daring. His work in the 1930s on Rockefeller Center — an enlightened integration of urban planning, architecture and the fine arts, but still solidly in the reigning Art Deco mode — led to a close friendship with the young Nelson Rockefeller, an association that aided his meteoric rise in New York's architectural establishment. He lived up to his opportunities, however. By all accounts an affable and practical man, Harrison became known for his skill in handling large projects. He managed a team of outsized egos, including Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, as director of planning for the United Nations headquarters in the 1940s and played a key role in the development of Lincoln Center in the 1960s; he also designed its Metropolitan Opera House. From 1940, when he went into partnership with Max Abramowitz, he made his mark on corporate America as well. Their firm, which counted a staff of 200 in the 1960s, designed a slew of well-known office towers, among them the stainless-steel paneled Mobil building and the Time & Life building, both in New York, and the Alcoa building in Pittsburgh, the first skyscraper with an all-aluminum skin.

Solidly ensconced within New York's cultural elite — he served on the board of the fledgling Museum of Modern Art, headed the Architectural League, directed the Office of Inter-American Affairs, made the cover of *Time* magazine in 1952 and won the AIA Gold Medal in 1967 — he was seen by some critics, such as Ada Louise Huxtable, as cautious and even conservative, nominally a modernist, yet without the daring that could take mediocre projects to greatness.

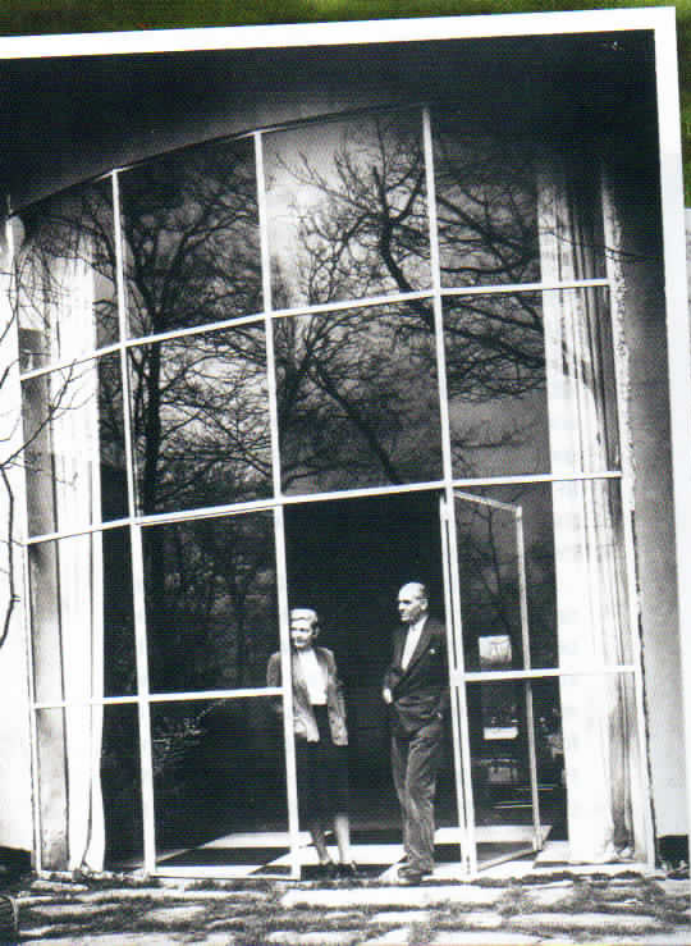
It is easier to understand Harrison's fascination with the Aluminaire House if one looks beyond the mega-projects for which he is best known. These experimental designs show a man drawn to the arts and passionate about new forms and materials. In 1933, with Raymond Hood and Joseph Urban, he proposed planned communities of affordable mass-produced steel







The magnificent round room, with its wooden dance floor and 16-foot-high ceiling, was the scene of many social and artistic gatherings at mid-century. The two large doors at the center of the window wall once opened, but were later welded shut. Making the doors operable again would have forced the owners to replace them with hurricane doors to comply with local codes, so they left them as is.





houses. In 1937, he designed a model home with a semi-circular living room whose glass façade disappeared into the ground, seamlessly joining the interior with the exterior living space. Together with André Foullhoux, he designed the central attraction of the 1939 World's Fair: the spectacular *Trylon* spire and the enormous spherical *Perisphere*; Harrison had hoped to install a water ballet in colorfully illuminated jets of water by Alexander Calder, still relatively unknown in the U.S. And his First Presbyterian Church of 1958, in Stamford, Connecticut, took the shape of an abstract fish, symbol of Christ, its soaring precast concrete armature merely a frame for the stained glass that sends swirling patches of color into the interior.

It was this spirit of experimentation that Harrison brought to his summer home, which he added to over the years and eventually lived in year-round. His first addition delved into his longstanding interest in circular space. Next to the Aluminaire, he created two round rooms, the larger one as majestic as a ballroom, 32 feet in diameter with a 16-foot-high ceiling and an enormous steel-framed window-wall. One walked unsuspecting through the house's diminutive entry, then continued into the great round room to be dazzled by its bright, airy volume and the enormous canvas of the sloping, wooded terrain beyond. Paved

**Opposite, bottom and below, left to right** Wallace and Ellen Harrison in the doorway of the large round room, c. 1947; Wallace K. Harrison mows the lawn, with the Aluminaire House still in its original place behind, 1940s; Wallace and Ellen Harrison in the living room, before the creation of Fernand Léger's mural; Harrison, right, and his friend, urban planner Robert Moses, under the Léger mural, *The Divers*, 1940s.

**Right** The great round room today, with an interpretation of Léger's mural in stainless and painted steel, entitled *Stealing Léger* (2011), by Brandon d'Leo. The black sofas are by Florence Knoll, the pony-skin *Wassily* chairs by Marcel Breuer, the coffee table from Maurice Villency.











in black-and-white checkerboard terrazzo with a wooden dance floor in the middle, the room was reportedly a model for the Rainbow Room at Rockefeller Center. An adjacent smaller round structure served as a dining room. Curving along the outside of the large room was a hallway that Harrison outfitted as a study. He also brought the circular form to the swimming pool and the cement pavers — septic tank covers, in fact — of the property's paths.

Harrison eventually moved the Aluminaire House 50 feet down the sloping site — it would house employees of his firm at various times — and added wings to the east and west of the round rooms, forming a three-sided grassy courtyard at the front. A transparent glass hallway led to the west wing, a long suite of rooms housing a caretaker's apartment, stables and a garage. In the 1940s, Harrison moved his architectural office to the site and retrofitted some of these spaces into bedrooms for staff, drafting rooms and his own office.

The Harrisons cultivated a lively social and artistic scene at their home, hosting everyone from Alvar Aalto and Marc Chagall to the formidable urban planner Robert Moses, and mounting a show of Calder's work in 1940. French painter Fernand Léger lived at the house for a time, along with other European artists fleeing World War II. In an early photograph, the vast white walls of the living room are too bare, dwarfing the Harrisons on the sofa. But between 1941 and 1943, Léger created a mural for the wall, a monumental black-and-white composition of interlaced figures entitled *Les Plongeurs* (The Divers) that finally made sense of the room's immense scale. The artist also painted figures on the bottom of the swimming pool and created a freeform skylight in the east wing. The Harrisons and their house were profiled in *Life*, the most widely read news magazine of the day, in 1947.

In 1975, Harrison sold the house to friends, art dealer Harold Diamond and his wife, Hester. They sold it, in turn, in 1984 to a doctor who made plans to sell some of the land as building lots and to demolish the Aluminaire House. A furious — and ultimately, successful — campaign ensued to save the Aluminaire, which was eventually moved to the Islip campus of the New York Institute of Technology. The doctor lived in the 6,500 square foot Harrison House with his



**Above** A photograph from the 1940s shows the transparent walkway connecting the round rooms to the west wing, created when the Aluminaire House was moved down the hill.

**Top** The house's many transparent façades offer multiple vantage points for viewing the landscape or different parts of the house. With clear glass on one side and a deep-red wall on the other, the long hallway provides an enjoyable route to the master bedroom.

**Opposite, top** The transparent walkway to the west wing today, seen from inside the grassy courtyard at the front of the house, with an *Undulatus* bench designed by Stanley Jay Friedman from Brueton.

**Opposite, bottom** The walkway seen from the back of the house. The smaller round structure now serves as an entertainment room.





Clerestory windows in the raised roof send additional daylight into the kitchen, which has only one window wall; the raised ceiling also helps define the semi-enclosed space. The cabinets are set into walnut frames, purposefully aligned to announce them as new additions. The spiral staircase to the new lower level is at left. The stools are by Gubi; the sculpture by Brandon d'Leo.

family, but in 2001, with his children grown, he put it on the market. When he found no buyers, he made plans to demolish it. Though the house had been listed by the Diamonds on the National Register of Historic Places, that designation offers no protection, and a multi-year battle ensued between the owner and the town of Huntington, which wanted to save the house. Meanwhile, it was left to deteriorate until a local couple, Lawrence and Lori Spiegel, intrigued by a photograph of the house, went to see it in 2003. Overgrown with trees and vines, "it was beyond a disaster," with major water damage, a plastic hot tub in the family room, Mexican tile in the entryway and plastered-over windows, remembers Mr. Spiegel, an attorney. But the couple, who knew nothing about modernist architecture, saw enough — the huge windows, the immense round room — to know that it was special. "We couldn't believe that no one had bought it," says Mr. Spiegel. "We were living in a standard four-bedroom ranch, thinking of redoing our kitchen. Someone should have restrained us!"

After the purchase, as they examined the sprawling house with a local architect, it revealed more problems than they ever could have imagined: cracked foundations, rotted ceilings and mold, and windows that ended so close to the ceiling, there was no room for utility ductwork. There were buried oil tanks and floors

that threatened to collapse into mysterious underground rooms. The Spiegels began to understand the scale of the reconstruction that was required. At the same time, they were researching Harrison, and starting to grasp the enormity of the responsibility they had taken on as owners of a piece of the nation's cultural heritage. "Most people who buy a house like this are knowledgeable about architecture and know when it is impractical," says Mr. Spiegel, "and are smart enough to walk away." But they didn't, and after interviewing multiple architects who seemed too eager to impose their own aesthetic, they realized that they had to find someone who would not only bring the knowledge of historical modernism that they lacked, but would share their growing commitment to preserving the house's integrity.

For two years, while they searched for the right architect, they lived in the crumbling house with their children, aged 8 and 11 when they moved in. It was not unlike camping, freezing all winter in the huge, uninsulated space. "Water would seep in when it rained and for days afterwards," recalls Mrs. Spiegel, a retired DNA research scientist. "We had buckets everywhere. There were snakes, bats, birds and more varieties of rodents than I knew existed. It was a glorified abandoned home. When parents would drop their kids off, they would give me looks like, 'Is it safe?' It



The new family room provides a more intimate environment than that of the large round living room. The treatment of the fireplace, with its attached bench and built-in storage, recalls midcentury designs. The *Tempo* sectional is from Italy Design Group; the *Moebius* coffee table from Design Within Reach.

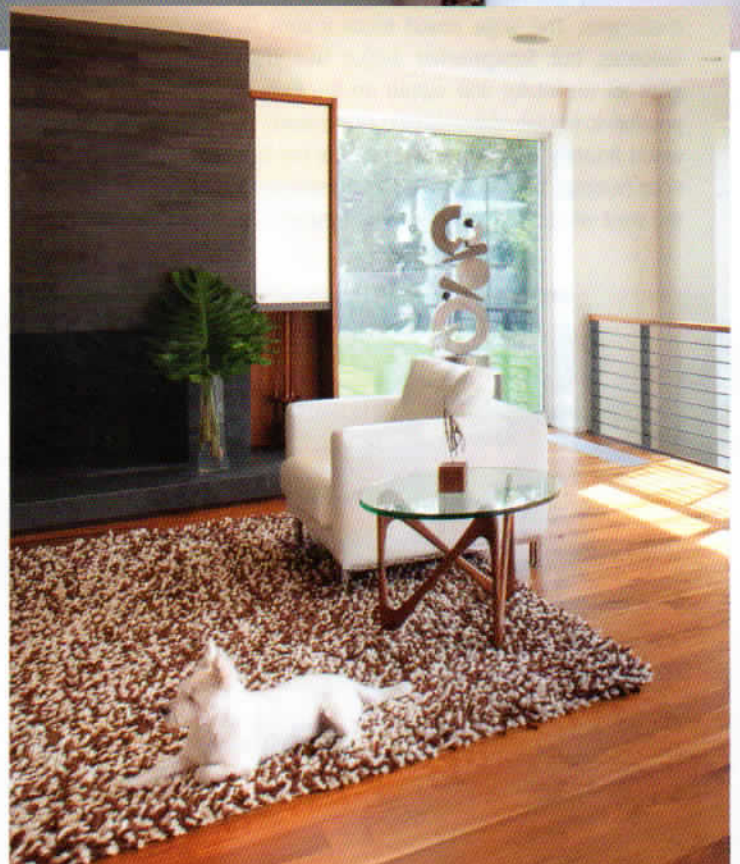


was not even clear where the front door was. There were calls on my cell phone from lost moms. The combination of local haunted house and modern house was so different from the colonials in the area."

It was not until 2005 that they happened to read a magazine article about architect Steve Schappacher's restoration of a 1964 Ulrich Franzen house in Connecticut. "We couldn't believe someone had actually restored one of these things," recalls Mr. Spiegel. "At that point, if we hadn't found Steve soon, it would have been a disaster. I left him a voice mail saying, 'I love you! Let me tell you what I own. You are the person who can help me.'"

Schappacher's first impression of the house was not promising. "There were air conditioners and ductwork on the roof," he recalls. "It looked like a bad industrial park that has been around for 30 years and you'd drive in at night and be scared." But then he went through the front door and entered the vast round room. "It was so exciting to see that circular space, the huge windows," he says. "It has such a strong emotional impact. I was thrilled with the house, moving through all the different rooms, the way they are connected."

Over the next year and a half, Schappacher studied the house, consulting Harrison's archives at Columbia University's Avery Library, and worked on the plans: at final count, a 100 page document that detailed everything from the HVAC engineering to the





hinges. And still, during the construction process, there were 225 revisions. "You would move anything and you would find a piece of the foundation missing, or another rotted part of the roof or a buried room," says Mr. Spiegel. "And this was an everyday occurrence."

The redesign combined the restoration of the west wing and the round rooms and a complete reworking of the east wing, keeping within its original footprint. It was as if Schappacher were channeling Harrison, conserving anything he could and asking himself, when he had to invent, what the architect would have done. The biggest change was cutting away part of a raised terrace and burrowing into the hillside to create a lower level in the east wing, with a wine cellar, gym and mechanical room and a sitting room that opens directly onto the grass. Schappacher designed a massive steel-framed window for the two-level space, making it flat instead of convex, to reflect, rather than imitate, the window of the large round room. He terminated the floor of the new upper-level family room two feet short of the façade, so that the window, like the round room's window, reads as a continuous plane from the exterior.

Throughout the house, wherever cabinets or partitions were installed, Schappacher made it clear that they were new additions. Clad in walnut, instead of the lighter woods of early modernism, they end short of the ceiling and have deep reveals at their base to look as though they were simply "slid into place," says Schappacher. On the other hand, he carefully matched details such as door levers, doorframes and bullet hinges. He collaborated with his wife and professional partner, Rhea White, an interior designer, who specified finishes, furniture and colors, including an intense red on the back wall of the glass-enclosed hallway leading to the bedrooms.

Invisibly inserting mechanical systems was one of the greatest challenges. The large round room retains its two original steam radiators, but Schappacher added two custom-designed curved grills for air intake and output on the back wall. Since it was not possible to insulate the original concrete walls, he installed engineered wood flooring in the restored parts of the house to permit radiant floor heating. To match the original transparency of the walkway to the west wing, Schappacher sought out windows and sliding doors

with the thinnest of structural frames. The original stone walls, built by the sons of a neighbor of Harrison's, were rebuilt — and new ones created — by an Italian mason who lives across the street.

Getting financing for the renovation was not easy. "You learn how difficult it is to restore a house as artwork," says Mr. Spiegel. "Banks look at comparative sales. It's like looking at a Picasso and saying it is such and such a size, so it's worth \$14. We had to explain why the windows had to be custom-made from steel."

Construction took two years, and the Spiegels moved back into the house in late 2008, six months before it was finished. "It was a stressful process," says Mrs. Spiegel. "We had electricians working until midnight. We'd go to the bathroom late at night and bump into a guy working on the house — at least you'd assume he was. Our twelve-year-old got used to walking around in pajamas with the workers there. It built character to give our children this experience," she laughs. "They will clearly be telling stories about this for a long time."

Once the house was complete, however, there was still something missing. The huge round room looked bare and cold without its mural — painted on canvas, it now resides at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany. The Spiegels finally decided that the perfect — and impossible — thing to do would be to bring the mural back. Their creative solution was to commission sculptor Brandon d'Leo to reinterpret Leger's figures. He created a 12-by-34-foot wall sculpture in stainless and painted steel, playfully entitled *Steeling Leger*. "Since the sculpture went up, we don't have 'the room that no one goes in' anymore," says Mrs. Spiegel. "The use of that room has skyrocketed."

"We got lucky," says Mr. Spiegel. "We found knowledgeable people who were able to do something far beyond what we could have done ourselves." The house, which is now protected by local landmarking, has turned the couple into modernist design enthusiasts. "When you are not at the house, you miss being there," says Mr. Spiegel. "It becomes part of you. It has also given us an entrée to talk to lots of interesting people who wouldn't normally talk to us. It has given us credibility in an odd way. But we're not doing another residence like this. We're satisfied." ■





**Design Architect:** SchappacherWhite Ltd.  
**Principals:** Steve Schappacher, AIA, Rhea White  
**Project Team:** Darin Reynolds AIA, Mike Krochmaluk,  
Arno Adkins, James Christerson  
**Architect of Record:** William J Hennessy Architect  
**MEP Engineer:** RHL Engineering, Richard Lemansky  
**Landscape Designer:** Terrain, Steven Tupu  
**General Contractor:** Certified of New York  
**Cabinetry:** Dune



***This page and opposite*** The architects burrowed through the terrace and hillside to create a lower level, while keeping to the house's original footprint. The floor of the upper-level family room stops just short of the façade to allow the window, inspired by the monumental glazing of the large round room, to read as a single plane. The original stone walls were restored and new ones built to match.