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Landis Gores House A New Canaan jewel

by Janis Gibson

"This house is a jewel of its time; if it is updated, it is just another house," said Pamela Gores of the place she has called home since 1948. "In the current market, I am concerned that the land may be worth more to someone than the house. I don't want it to become another teardown so someone can put up a McMansion."

The only way to save houses such as hers, she continued, is to get them into the hands of – under the stewardship of – a group such as the National Historic Preservation Society (NHPS) or the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA). To help make that happen, Pamela began a lengthy process – it took more than three years – that was rewarded when on March 21, 2002, the house was deemed "worthy of preservation" and added to the National Register of Historic Places.

She is currently working to draft legal easements (covenants) on the house, creating limitations on what any future owner can or cannot do. For example, the stone walls are a key element of the design; they must remain and no plantings can obscure them. She notes that while such easements decrease the value of the property on the open market, they also lower the house's taxes. Some changes could be made, however, such as updating the kitchen appliances and changing the fixtures.

"The person who eventually buys this house has got to buy it as a collector's item," she said.

The Harvard Five

And what is it that makes the house so special? It was designed and built by her late husband, Landis Gores – who was associated with the legendary Philip Johnson, from 1945 to 1951, before he established his own firm. Among the Johnson-Gores projects was a major addition and gardens at the Museum of Modern Art. It was also during this period that Johnson built his famed Glass House in New Canaan. Landis did all the drawings and models for the Glass House – he was considered to be a "perfectionist draftsman" – which are now at Columbia University. Johnson stayed with the Gores while he and Landis supervised the layout and foundations for the project.

Gores and Johnson were part of a group of leading modern architects, which also included Marcel Breuer, Eliot Noyes and John Johansen, who lived and worked in New Canaan following World War II. Because of their common academic affiliation, they became known as the Harvard Five. Johnson and Gores first come to New Canaan "to see this low-cost housing Eliot Noyes was building," Pamela said.

"It is amazing to think that those five men lived in the same town at the same time and all built houses here; aside from Philip's Glass House, this is the only one left as designed," said Pamela.

"Every architect wanted to build his own house," she continued, and Johnson and Gores were no exception. But to them, the land – the site – was also critical, so for about a year "they spent hours on the weekends traipsing around the countryside, looking for just the right piece of property for about a year. Philip found his on Ponus Ridge Road. We didn't have as much money so we ended up on the east end of town ..."

The Gores bought four acres, and Landis set about designing the house that would sit atop a long, narrow ridge of land. The rear of the property drops off appreciably, leading to a woods. In front of the rise but before the street is a gentle depression that was retained as a meadow. The driveway was designed to drain into that area.

Designed To The Land

The house was built to the land. Taking advantage of the ridge, Landis designed a linear home with a façade 130 feet long with varying heights along the flat roof. It features a central living room and two wings; the three bedrooms to one side, the kitchen, playroom, utility room and carport to the other. The carport was converted into a drafting room for Landis and a detached two-car garage added in 1970.

Landis liked to use local, natural materials, so wood and stone are in abundance – roundish stones as corner column supports and in three solid fireplaces, plus a bluestone terrace, under a six-foot, eight-inch canopy, that draws the visitor into the house and continues through the foyer to the rear terrace. Landis also designed the pattern of the bluestone.

The entrance foyer is dominated by stone – the floor, the massive back of the living room fireplace and a support column with a planter at the base, which originally was a goldfish pond. It has a skylight trellis and a glass rear wall and door to the back terrace that bring in light, softening the ruggedness of the stone. In the evening, lighting, which comes on automatically, provides subtle illumination, a detail that is repeated in spaces throughout the living room.

Making a double left turn from the solidity of the foyer into the large, light and airy 37-by-32-foot living room, with 11-foot ceilings, is startling. The room's north and south walls are all glass and the side walls have long clerestory windows above the roof lines of the wings, bringing in light from every direction. The house was oriented to get the winter sun and the summer shade. "It is amazing," noted Pamela, "but on December 21, the sun comes into the room and on March 21 it leaves." A recessed alcove beside the fireplace accommodates a library area, and the floors of the living room and those in the wings are of oak parquet.

Looking at the window walls, one cannot help but wonder about the heating costs. "At the time of construction, oil was about 11 cents a gallon, and the windows were plate glass, like a store," Pamela explained. As a student of the environment, however, Landis replaced the windows with Thermopanes around 1970, which keep heating cost more in line with that of traditional homes.

When Landis was designing the house – which took about a year working around his professional obligations – some of Pamela's friends thought that with her husband being an architect, she could get whatever she wanted. While her input was considered, Pamela noted, "When designing their own homes, architects have their own ideas they want to explore." Landis was particularly interested in the design and implementation of building ideas to conserve fuel and to protect the environment. She added "I got a blue bathtub and a steel-framed roof."

That blue bathtub, however, ended up being an intrinsic part of the open design of the 18-by-23-foot master bedroom. The bathroom fixtures are set behind another stone fireplace (the third fireplace is in the playroom, which today would be called a family room), about a third of the way into the room. One can sit in the blue tub, and look over the bed and out through back window. The roof's steel frame eliminated any concerns that one might have about heavy snows on a flat roof.

The Modern Idiom

There are any number of unusual touches in the 3,250-square-foot house, from the cypress strips between all plaster panels and floors, ceilings and door frames to the choice of 26 doors to the outside. The same contractor and many of the same subcontractors were used by both Gores and Johnson when building their New Canaan homes. Upon completion, at a cost of \$53,500 in 1948 dollars, the house earned an award of merit from the American Institute of Architects for its use of natural materials and its compatibility with its surrounds.

An article on the house appeared in the January 1952 issue of *House & Home*. Titled *A Traditional House in the Modern Idiom*, it describes the house as "the first major job by a young architect who steeped himself in the classics at Princeton before going on to Harvard to study architecture under Gropius and Breuer. In designing this house for himself, Landis Gores drew upon both classical discipline and modern, technological freedom for inspiration.

"Some critics will dismiss the house as a compromise. Others may consider it a harbinger of how such diverse influences as Gropius and Breuer and Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright

may eventually be reconciled in the main stream of architecture's advance."

In 1951 Landis opened his own firm in New Canaan. Pamela easily remembers the date – November 1 – because their son was born the same day. Interestingly, Landis's place in Johnson's New York office was taken by Richard Foster, whose 1969 Round House in Wilton was featured in the June 2003 issue of *The Home Monthly*.

Landis also fell in love that year – with an elegant automobile from the Roaring Twenties. Pamela laughed as she recalled his excitement. She was skeptical about the purchase, which seemed extravagant at the time, but figured "better a car than another woman." And hence was the vehicle dubbed *The Mistress*. It was a love that lasted the rest of his life. They would often take the car out for drives and participate in auto shows and parades.

In The Beginning

Landis Gores and Pamela Whitmarsh met as teenagers. He was a 19-year-old working as a cowhand on a Wyoming ranch owned by a Princeton grad who hired students to work during the summer; she was a 15-year-old guest with her aunt. They rode horses together and he showed her the Grand Tetons, which he had climbed that year.

After graduating from Princeton University, *summa cum laude*, in 1939, he received a graduate degree in architecture, three years later, from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, and was awarded the Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects. That same year he and Pamela were married and he was called to duty as he was an officer in the Army Reserve Officer Corps. During the war, he rose to the rank of captain.

He served in the counterintelligence corps and was part of a military elite known as the Ultra, whose top-secret Operation Overlord was credited with cracking German and Japanese military codes. He was awarded the Legion of Merit and the Order of the British Empire for his war service. The unit's exploits are discussed in *Ultra Goes to War, The Secret Story* by Ronald Lewin, 1985, and a 1995 book by Bruce Lee, *Marching Orders: The Untold Story of World War II*. Landis was a major in the Military Intelligence Reserve until 1955.

Life changed radically for the Gores family in 1954, however. Pamela and her four children – their fifth child was born later – fell ill while Landis was on an out-of-state building site. He rushed home to find a house full of polio, and contracted the virus himself. (Now virtually nonexistent in this country and in many parts of the world, polio infected thousands annually prior to the introduction of polio vaccine in 1955.)

While the rest of the family recovered with few lingering effects, Landis Gores fell into the category of those who sustained severe permanent disability. After a year in an iron lung, he required a wheel chair and life support system for the rest of his life. At the time the disease struck, he had 33 commissions, and many of his clients stuck by him. When he was confined in a Boston hospital, he was assisted by students at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, who drafted his ideas. The family spent another year living in Wellesley, Massachusetts, while Landis underwent rehabilitation, and he was able to maintain a limited practice for many years.

Multi-faceted Designer

Pamela joined Landis in his business and a special vehicle was outfitted that allowed Landis to travel and live on project sites. Pamela noted that he "designed everything from houses to hospitals, apartments and office buildings."

Among Landis's local projects were the Libner Building on New Canaan's Main Street, work on New Canaan's middle school, and the science buildings on the New Canaan Country School campus, plus Van Doren Hospital and Strathmoor Village in Stratford. Landis was also a prolific writer, contributing to a number of magazines, as well as writing of his war exploits. In 1973 he was inducted into the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Architects.

Landis and Pamela built a number of homes in the area, most of which were subsequently modified. They built their last house in 1979 – the All Seasons House, which was semisubterranean and energy efficient. It incorporated heat pumps and solar panels, among other features, that could heat the house without using oil.

After 45 years, what she likes best about her own house is, "I could live in any corner of the house and see something different." When Landis died in 1991, at the age of 71, she considered selling the house but decided to stay because "it is a happy house, full of light. I can see his mind, ability and talent throughout. It is comforting."

One change she did make, however, was to convert Landis's drawing room into a place for a large whirlpool spa. Getting the spa in without damaging the house was challenging – contractors told her it couldn't be done without removing a wall.

But then she called George Rotunno of Stamford, who did the original enclosure, and he told her there was a keystone which enabled the windows to be removed. "Only Landis would do such a thing," he told her. He completed the task in a couple of hours and replaced the windows after the spa had been positioned.

Asked what he was owed, Mr. Rotunno replied, "Nothing ... consider it my tribute to your husband." Pamela said that Landis tended to elicit this kind of response from people. "I really like that the workmen he worked with really admired him."

Today Pamela lives with four dogs that have been rescued over the last half-dozen years – a Siberian husky, a Norwegian elkhound, a cocker spaniel named Pandy ("He was left tied to the door of a vet with instructions to destroy if a home could not be found for him."), and a mixed-breed that she and a friend laughingly named a "Tennessee tree hound."

She continues to work to preserve the home so that others may know and appreciate it in the future. ©

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