The Architectural Foundation of Cincinnati Presents

GREAT HOUSE TOUR
J. Ralph & Patricia Corbett Residence
2501 Grandin Road, Cincinnati
Sunday, October 2, 2016

AFC’s purpose is to help people discover – and experience – the transformative power of design.
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FRONT AND REAR FACADES

Front Facade

Front Covered Entry

Rear Terrace

Rear Facade

Photo Credit: Ezra Stoller
The House as a Work of Art, by John deKoven Hill (credited)

We tend to think of art as something detached from everyday life. We expect to find beauty only in museum, concert halls, or art appreciation lectures. When we think of art in relation to our home, it is apt to be something to hang on a wall or to place on a shelf. Our concept of art has become limited, isolated and piecemeal.

House Beautiful’s Pace Setter for 1960 shows you that a larger and more inclusive concept is possible. The whole house, its furnishings, and the way of life within it, can be a work of art in the finest sense. Such a work of art can be more meaningful, in relation to human life, than any detached bit of sculpture or painting or piece of music.

Here is a fusion of technological advantages with emotional values: a synthesis of the practical and the aesthetic with no sacrifice of either. Mechanization has not taken command, but kept in a proper supporting role. It merits your study.

Through the ages, man’s ultimate goal has always been to make his home a work of art. The palaces and near-palaces of Europe and the Orient certainly aimed to produce satisfactions that went way beyond animal needs.

This house is a traditional house in this sense. In it, one can live in such a way that the process of living can be made into an art. It represents a continuation of the human values which have always been associated with living at its highest level. It also represents a continuity of those aesthetic values that lift building beyond functionalism into the realm of architecture. But it is not a traditional house in the common meaning of the word.

This house does not imitate any previous building. But it does symbolize those hopes, aspirations, and human emotions that are summed up and expressed in the single word, home.

Photo credits: House Beautiful
Cutting into the living room from the entrance hall leading to the lower floor, the house, which has a total floor area of 4,000 square feet, is centered upon a great room. A spacious lounge is set off by a screen of glass, with the rear veranda extending back. The view is magnificent, and the design is a triumph of modern simplicity.

A cubic building in the living room floor was used to create a great room with a large, open space. The living room was designed to be a flexible space, with plenty of room for entertaining. The room features a wall of glass that opens onto the deck, allowing for natural light and fresh air.

In this particular room, the living room is also designed to be a flexible space, with plenty of room for entertaining. The room features a wall of glass that opens onto the deck, allowing for natural light and fresh air.

In the living room, the furniture is custom designed to fit the space and provide comfort. The room is also designed to accommodate a variety of activities, from reading to entertaining guests. The overall design is modern and minimalist, with clean lines and a focus on function and utility. The use of glass in the design allows for a connection to the outdoors, creating a sense of openness and flow.
DESIGN TEAM

Designer
John deKoven Hill

Original Client
J. Ralph and Patricia Corbett

Associate Architects
John W. Geiger; Paul L. Soderburg

Supervising Architect
Thomas H. Landise, Jr.

Landscape Architect
Henry Fletcher Kenney

Construction
J & E Warm Co; Stanley Cohen, supervisor

Interior Decoration
John deKoven Hill, with House Beautiful staff

Construction Date: 1959
Square Footage: ca. 3,500

Photo Credit: Gary Landers, WCPO.com
In 1957, John deKoven Hill was commissioned to design a house for J. Ralph & Patricia Corbett in Cincinnati, Ohio. Corbett, a long-time friend of House Beautiful and the owner of the NuTone Company, had been a major advertising client for nearly two decades. Because of his close contact with House Beautiful, he knew Hill was actively producing interiors and exhibition spaces featured in the magazine, and was certainly aware of the Pace Setter House Program established in 1946 by editor in chief Elizabeth Gordon. Corbett approached Gordon and Hill, with the idea and an ideal lot. By 1958, the house was underway, and it had been selected as House Beautiful’s Pace Setter for 1960.

The Corbetts were relative newcomers to Cincinnati, and were the perfect client for a new kind of modern home. In conversations with Hill, they expressed their desire for a home that stood outside of convention and design tradition, yet expressed quality and good design. As the head of a successful corporation, Corbett wanted a house that was appropriate to his status, and ultimately, his success. He had a profound interest in the performing arts, his wife being a professional musician, and together, they had built a large collection of fine art. Given their particular needs, from rehearsal and performance space, to areas for entertaining, to display and storage space for artwork, Hill was faced with a complex programmatic challenge.

From start to finish, the house was designed as a Pace Setter. Hill, known for his exceptional taste, artistic sensibility, and creative spatial concepts, was the ideal architect. He was able to balance the Corbetts specific needs with those of the magazine, and those of major advertisers who donated building supplies and decor gratis.

Corbett had acquired a large tract of land in a well-established and prestigious neighborhood on the outskirts of town. The lot was large, and had stunning views of the Ohio River Valley. This greatly appealed to Hill’s sense of organic setting. Taking his cue from Wright, he chose to position the Pace Setter house at the brow of the hill, rather than atop. The plan of the house extended lengthwise across the lot, and paralleled the course of the river below. It was compactly planned and provided large areas of indoor and outdoor living spaces, including an enclosed pool. Framed in steel, the house was conceived as a roofed pavilion, punctuated by ample skylights and window-walls. The pavilion roof, clad in standing-seam aluminum, was supported on masonry piers, reinforced concrete faced with limestone. The overall exterior envelope lent a sense of shelter, security, and privacy, yet provided enough transparency to remain unrestrictive. With Hill’s skillful planning and his apt use of fenestration and lighting, the house moved beyond its walls. It extended into the landscape by means of extensive patios and terraces.

Hill’s Pace Setter was the pinnacle of architectural integrity. The house illustrated an inclusive and organic approach to design: every architectural and decorative element, and the client’s way of life were considered. Architecturally, two themes dominated: the space within (including visual movement), and integrated design of furnishings, fittings ornament and pattern. Hill achieved dynamism with his interiors, particularly in the most public areas. Space flowed outward in the living areas and upward at the light tower.

Hill established a rhythm for the house through the method of the module; an eighteen-inch module served as the basic unit of design upon which all else was based. With this unit in place, the theme of the rectangle dominated many of the finishes, form the concrete floor surface with ceramic tile, to the paneled wall surfaces. The repetition of the rectangle provided unity, while simultaneously allowed layers, depth, texture, light and shadow. Horizontality was emphasized on both the exterior and the interior, in part by the choice of rectilinear building materials, such as cut Indiana limestone laid in a random pattern and protruding segments.

Hill’s decorative cast aluminum grillwork was perhaps the most striking architectural element within the home. He designed the pattern – rather Sullivanesque – to be non-directional, and the individual units were combinable in any manner necessary. The custom furniture for the home, designed by Hill and manufactured by Henredon, repeated the design motif and hinted at an oriental influence.

The Pace Setter for 1960 was a true masterpiece and Gesamtkunstwerk (translated, “total work of art”), Hill’s greatest achievement as a designer.
J. Ralph Corbett, Owner (1896–1988)

J. Ralph Corbett was born in Flushing, Long Island, NY where he attended Dwight Preparatory School in New York City and worked part-time as a mail clerk in the advertising firm of J. Walter Thompson. After law school, Corbett worked in the office of Clarence Darrow as law secretary to the attorney who assisted Clarence Darrow in the Scopes trial.

In the 1920’s, Radio enticed those with creativity to join the industry. Corbett enjoyed writing radio scripts until he had enough money to organize his own advertising firm that specialized in radio presentations. He became actively involved in creating, writing and producing programs for radio stations throughout the US. In 1931, he caught the attention of executives at Cincinnati’s WLW, and was asked to move to Cincinnati and act as marketing consultant.

During the depression years, Crosley suggested that Corbett produce a show to give Americans some confidence despite their economic difficulties. Corbett produced a series of programs that focused on business opportunities. He titled the show, "New Ideas in Business." It is not known whether it impacted anyone else's life, but it changed Corbett’s life. During some preliminary work for the show a man from Dayton, Ohio, who had invented a musical door-chime, approached Corbett for ideas on how to market his new, unique invention. The inventor needed backing and Corbett, who liked the idea, invested in the operation. It was not long before Corbett realized that the chime was too costly and bulky. Soon the company went broke.

Corbett would not accept defeat. He believed the melodious door chime was a more welcoming sound than the conventional door buzzer. In 1936, Corbett assumed the operation and moved it to Cincinnati. He continued his consulting agency but also founded, in partnership with wife, Patricia, a new company called NuTone Chimes Inc. The company employed only four people and operated in a one-room building downtown. In 1940, NuTone opened manufacturing facilities at Third Street and Eggleston Avenue.

In 1949, to meet the growing demand, Corbett moved the company to Red Bank Road and Madison Road; this location expanded several times during Corbett’s tenure as president and chairman of the board.

Corbett's success was based on five basic beliefs: recognize the consumer's needs; invent new products; insist on quality production; and be dedicated to sales and marketing excellence as well as customer service excellence. Adhering to these philosophies, coupled with the continued demand for the company's products enabled
Patricia Barry Corbett was born in Long Island, N.Y., where she developed a love for music, dance and theater at an early age. She graduated from Columbia University with bachelor’s and master’s degrees in science.

She was active on countless boards and committees, supporting a wide range of worthwhile projects, and maintained a schedule of arts attendance that would exhaust the average person.

Patricia Corbett was a Renaissance woman. Her life-long interest in the performing arts, education, medicine and architecture, combined with her philanthropy, have touched countless lives.

When the Corbett’s sold NuTone in 1967 for $30 million, they placed half of the proceeds into the Corbett Foundation, which they established to grant funding to organizations involved in the arts, education, medicine and community activities. The foundation has given away more than $70 million since 1955, mostly to Cincinnati endeavors.

Mrs. Corbett, chairwoman of the foundation, was known as a person of great vision, yet detail-oriented and with a hands-on involvement in the particulars and practicalities of projects.

“Giving away money wisely is very hard work,” she said. “You have to study up and figure out what will do the most good for the most people.” From the beginning, the Corbetts believed that more is accomplished when money is given in massive, concentrated doses than in “drips and drabs.”

Cincinnati’s Music Hall, the University of Cincinnati’s College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) and Riverbend Music Center have been major beneficiaries of Mrs. Corbett’s giving.

Mrs. Corbett served on many boards, including the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Opera and the Wellness Community.

The Corbetts had two children, a son Thomas R. Corbett of Dallas and a daughter Gail Goldsmith of Manhattan.

Excerpts from Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber website.
John deKoven Hill, Corbett House Designer (1920–1996)

John deKoven Hill was born on 19 May 1920 in Cleveland, Ohio, the only child of John deKoven Hill, Sr., and Helen Muckley Hill. Hill’s father was a journalist from Manhattan, and Hill’s mother worked as a newspaper editor in Cleveland. Hill spent most of his youth in the suburbs of Chicago, first in Wilmette and later in Evanston.

John deKoven Hill originally intended to study architecture at the University of Virginia, Hill instead chose to study under Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin. Hill arrived at Spring Green, Wisconsin, on 17 June 1938; he was eighteen years old and had just graduated from high school. He studied engineering, drafting, composition, and interior design under the senior Taliesin apprentices.

By 1941, Hill was promoted to the position of senior apprentice and draftsman. Though he had training in all aspects of architecture, he specialized in interior design. Wright, recognizing his talent in this area, discouraged him from further training or licensure as an architect. For the next decade, Hill worked closely with Wright on at least sixty-nine built commissions. Hill also had the primary responsibility for maintenance and “decorating” at the Taliesin complex. At Taliesin — in addition to his design duties — Hill was instrumental in arranging social events and music programs (he was a talented pianist).

In 1953, at Wright’s recommendation to editor-in-chief Elizabeth Gordon, Hill joined the staff of House Beautiful as the architectural editor; he became the executive editor in 1957. He worked with Gordon for ten years, serving both as editor and as in-house designer for many of House Beautiful’s exhibitions and photo staging’s. Hill’s House Beautiful team produced at least a quarter of what the magazine photographed and published between 1953 and 1963. Hill was Gordon’s “right hand man,” and the two became lifelong friends.

One of Hill’s greatest endeavors was House Beautiful’s Arts of Daily Living Exhibition for the Los Angeles County Fair in 1954. He designed this twenty-two room exhibit. The exhibit illustrated good design in common environments, and showcased House Beautiful’s preference for organic architecture. The Exhibit was dedicated to Hill’s mentor, Frank Lloyd Wright.

In the following years, Hill and Gordon formed an alliance between several manufacturers and Wright, and helped to establish Wright’s line of Schumacher fabrics and Martin-Seymour paints. By 1956, Gordon and Hill had formed a freelance design firm, Joël Design Projects Company. Under Joël, they produced a line of fabrics for Schumacher, interiors for Wright’s Tonkin’s House (Cincinnati), and a line of furnishings for the Corbett House (Cincinnati) for Heritage Henredon.

It was during the time that Hill was leading the architectural and design team on the Corbett project, the Pace Setter home for 1960, that Wright died (1959). Hill considered leaving House Beautiful to return to Taliesin once the project was completed, but was persuaded to remain at House Beautiful as the public “voice” of organic architecture. Hill did return to Taliesin in the fall of 1963 to assume the role of secretary and director of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. In the 1960s and 1979, he worked on several projects in Iran, and was instrumental in guiding the restoration work at Taliesin. Along with his Taliesin colleagues, Hill managed the Wright Decorative Designs Collection, including reproductions by Cassina, Schumacher, and Tiffany. Hill retired in 1989, but continued as an advisor and director emeritus until his death in June 1996.

Photo credits: House Beautiful
ABOUT THE AFC

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