



**OWNERS AS  
STEWARDS:**  
the Breuer Lauck  
House in Princeton



When we at DOCOMOMO learn that important Modern houses are for sale, we worry...a lot. Aside from the risk of tear-downs, there is the seemingly ever-present threat of new owners making unsympathetic alterations and inappropriate expansions. Sellers who wish their houses to be preserved after they move on don't have many tools at their disposal. Few are willing to risk reducing the financial value of what may be their largest asset with a preservation easement. Local landmark regulations are absent in many communities or lack teeth. The best way to assure a house's future is to find an informed buyer committed to being a good steward. Holly and Roger Ketron, former owners of Marcel Breuer's Lauck House (1950) in Princeton, NJ, understood this.

Of four Breuer houses originally constructed in New Jersey, the Lauck House is one of only two extant. Breuer, the Bauhaus master, realized a total of about 65 houses in Europe and the United States, some designed with Walter Gropius while they taught and practiced together. Representing an extremely significant chapter in American Modernism, approximately 25 remain within the Tri-State region.

The Lauck house is among several constructed in New York and New Jersey patterned directly

after Breuer's "House in the Museum Garden" prototype, constructed at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, and open to the public from April until October of 1949. Intended as a tangible example of "good design" at a moderate price for the family of a suburban commuter, the MoMA house was extensively visited and widely published. As Isabelle Hyman has observed, this initiative was an East Coast counterpart to John Entenza's Case Study House program begun several years earlier in California. The Lauck House largely resembles

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the exhibited model (now on the grounds of the Rockefeller Kykuit estate in Pocantico Hills, NY) except the plan was mirrored and lengthened by eight feet to provide a two-car garage.

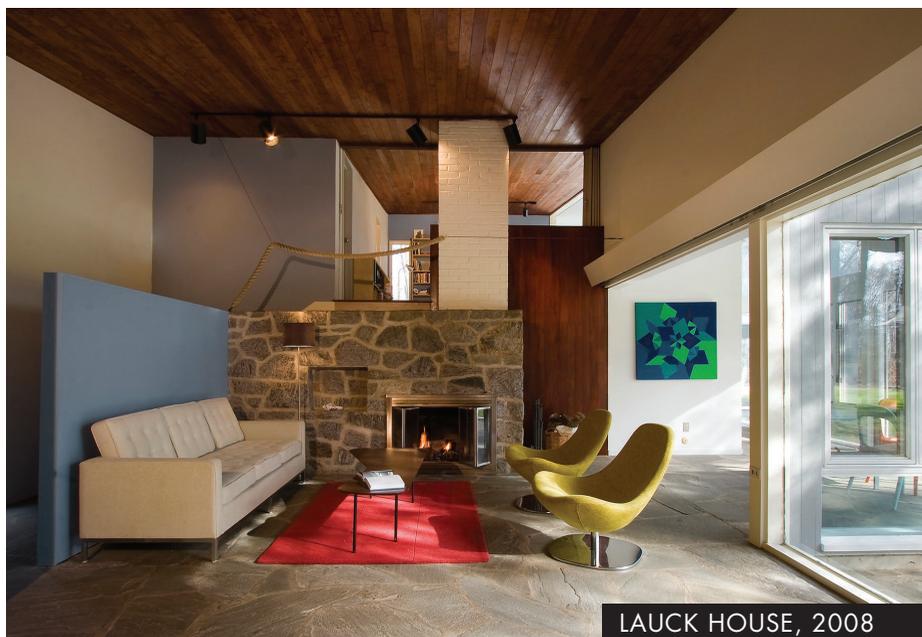
By the time the Ketrons became the third owners of the Lauck House, it had already received a fairly sympathetic addition at the garage end (prior to 1986) making it a total of 3,700 square feet,



*South elevation, Lauck House (with garage addition), Marcel Breuer, 1950, Princeton, NJ. Photo: © Jeff Tyron*

but it was otherwise largely original. They enhanced and maintained the garden, a critical element of its design. Architect Rafi Segal, then a PhD candidate at Princeton, first saw the house and met the Ketrons around 2004 while he and a colleague were scouting local architecture to visit with their students. He responded to questions they posed about some renovations they were considering and encouraged them to remain true to the original spirit of Breuer's design.

Later, Segal happened to run into Holly Ketron on the train, and to his surprise—without his ever having raised the subject—she told him that she was going to sell him the house. She explained that it would soon be time to downsize, they didn't want it torn down and only wanted to sell it to someone who would respect and preserve it. They met occasionally after that. Some time passed and Segal and his wife Sara, who is also a native of Israel who studied architecture at Technion, bought a different house in the area and renovated it. Less than half a year afterward, the Ketrons contacted them on a Wednesday and told them they were ready to sell them the house.



LAUCK HOUSE, 2008



MoMA HOUSE, 1949

*The living space of the Lauck house was designed by Breuer as a mirror image of the same space in the architect's Museum of Modern Art "House in the Museum Garden" model house. Signature details such as the fireplace wall niche, rope stair rail, bluestone floor and "Breuer Blue" floating wall were replicated one year later for the Lauck commission—at the client's insistence. Photos: top © Jeff Tyron; bottom © Ezra Stoller/Esto.*

Eager to seize the opportunity, the Segals responded that if they could sell their house they would buy the Lauck house. They succeeded in selling their house on Friday and entered into a contract to buy the Lauck house that Monday, in July of 2008. Rafi Segal pointed out that their becoming owners of the Breuer house would not have happened had it not been for a series of rather unlikely circumstances.

Rafi, who now has his own architecture and planning firm, Rafi Segal A + U, and Sara, who is a partner in DaCruz Segal Architecture, embarked upon a careful and respectful restoration. Completed in 2008, it was recognized with a restoration/preservation merit award from *Residential Architect* magazine. The Rockefeller Foundation, which has been restoring the house now at Pocantico Hills, shared its thorough research into the original colors and their translations into current Benjamin Moore colors, which the Segals employed. They stripped multiple layers of paint from interior surfaces to restore original finishes and located hardware identical to the originals. Using the original plans, they reconstructed walls that had been removed. The

contractor encouraged them to use gypsum board, but they opted instead for plywood, not only to recreate the original materiality but also to maintain the precise original dimensions. They renovated the kitchen and bathrooms, employing Ikea kitchen cabinetry that closely resembled the appearance of that used in the 1950s. Many original elements, such as the bluestone flooring favored by Breuer and the radiant heating, remain.

More than 60 years old, the house continues to function well and to inspire. During the five years they have lived there, the Segals have found the house extremely well suited for contemporary family life for themselves and their three children. Their guests, even those who don't share their love of Modernism, respond emotionally to the architecture and are impressed by the strong and carefully choreographed contrast between the interior and the surrounding landscape, as well as the simple and rustic yet elegant materials. We hope that more Modern houses will be entrusted to such dedicated stewards.

—JOHN ARBUCKLE



*DOCOMOMO NY/Tri-State is interested in documenting the numerous Breuer-designed houses that remain in our region. If you own or are familiar with one please contact us.*

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