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Thoroughly Modern, Amid the Traditional



Steve Legato for The New York Times

MIDCENTURY OASIS Polly Apfelbaum and Stan Allen found the perfect contemporary house in Princeton, N.J.

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IT'S not easy being a modernist in a town known for traditional architecture. For Stan Allen, an architect, and his wife, Polly Apfelbaum, an artist, finding a contemporary house in history-laden Princeton, N.J., was a process fraught with disappointment.

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Three times, Ms. Apfelbaum said, they found houses they liked, only to be outbid by developers who wanted to replace the buildings with McMansions. What does it say about their taste, Ms. Apfelbaum wondered aloud, if every house they liked has been torn down?

Except for one, designed by Jerry Ford, a 1954 graduate of [Princeton University's](#) architecture school. Ms. Apfelbaum spotted the house online and sensed that it was the work of a modern architect.

When it was built in 1965, the house consisted of a single

A contemporary house owned by Stan Allen and Polly Apfelbaum in Princeton, N.J., includes a large deck, which they sometimes use for parties.

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Several pieces of midcentury furniture and artwork from various artist friends are found inside. Only one of Ms. Apfelbaum's own works is displayed: a black-and-white rug woven in Mexico. Overhead bookshelves form a kind of colorful cornice.

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The office.

square pavilion, about 25 feet on each side. The downstairs was devoted to bedrooms and bathrooms; the upstairs, to a living room and kitchen under a pyramidal ceiling. A deck clung to the outside of the pavilion on all four sides, below a roof of rustic wood shingles. Ms. Apfelbaum describes the style as “funky modern.”

Over the years, the owners added a bedroom wing, which introduced 45-degree angles into the plan, and enclosed a bridge to the adjacent carport, now a garage (which supports a large roof deck). Perhaps because Mr. Ford (now 76 and still practicing in Princeton) was the architect of both additions, the central room remained gloriously intact.

Mr. Allen, the dean of the Princeton University School of Architecture, was intrigued by many of the house's details, including a bookshelf that runs above the living room's sliding glass doors. The original owner had asked Mr. Ford for expanses of glass and lots of space for books — seemingly irreconcilable requests. The architect hit on the idea of the overhead shelves; the books form a kind of colorful cornice. “We took our books out of boxes and put them up, and the whole room came together,” Mr. Allen said.

The house's big eaves shade it in summer, when the sun is high in the sky, but allow the light to get deep into the living room in winter, when the sun is low. “It's like Architecture 101,” Mr. Allen said.

For Mr. Ford, it was “very cool” learning that the dean of his alma mater was buying the house. “It was like getting a really good grade in architecture school,” he said.

Mr. Allen and Ms. Apfelbaum admired the way Mr. Ford had placed the house on its one-and-a-half-acre site: far enough back so that it seems private, but not so far that it feels remote. The grounds have a moss garden (which requires less maintenance than grass), a

free-form swimming pool and a gazebo.

But the house (which cost around \$500,000 when the couple bought it in 2002) needed a lot of work, including the replacement of all the decks. Mr. Allen supervised the updates while avoiding major changes to the design. “I didn’t feel the need to put my own mark on the house,” he said.

Mr. Allen and Ms. Apfelbaum, both in their early 50s, sound like newlyweds showing off their first house, “which, in a funny way, it is,” Mr. Allen said.

In 1977, Mr. Allen, then a student at [Brown University](#), and Ms. Apfelbaum, a student at the Tyler School of Art at [Temple University](#), met while both were taking classes in Rome. Back in New York, they moved into a loft in [Manhattan](#)’s South Street Seaport. They installed everything — from heating to plumbing — themselves. For 30 years, the loft (which they still have) was their home and Ms. Apfelbaum’s studio.

But after Mr. Allen, who had taught at [Columbia University](#) for more than a decade, got the Princeton job in 2002, they decided to buy in [New Jersey](#).

For a couple accustomed to living in a single large room, getting used to the house took time. “We were like kids in a candy store,” Mr. Allen said. “We had never even had a closet.”

The couple’s life requires logistical precision. Besides the Manhattan loft, they own a building in upstate New York (a former gun club) that they occasionally use as a weekend house. And Mr. Allen’s firm is in Dumbo, [Brooklyn](#).

He spends most of the week in Princeton, and Ms. Apfelbaum stays in the loft, joining him when she can. Several times a year, they invite students and colleagues to parties on the deck. The couple’s bull terrier, Wills, moves around with them.

Ms. Apfelbaum is an artist whose intriguing installations, often involving fabric swatches or rolls of crepe paper, has been called a “little bit pop, a little bit poetic” in *The New York Times*. (One of her pieces will be on view at the [Brooklyn Museum](#) at the end of this month.)

The Princeton house displays only one of her works — a black-and-white rug woven in Mexico from her design. Otherwise, she decided not to display her art, as a favor to her

husband. “He really lived in my studio all these years, and I felt bad for him,” she said. Instead, she hung pieces obtained by bartering with other artists.

For furniture, the two often turn to the Rago Arts and Auction Center in Lambertville, N.J., for midcentury pieces. Their finds include “eyeball” lamps, from Lightolier, and pieces by Alvar Aalto, [Isamu Noguchi](#), and Charles and [Ray Eames](#).

Ms. Apfelbaum’s only complaint is that having the house draws her away from [New York City](#), and, therefore, her work. “Maybe,” she said, “we should have found a house that wasn’t so nice.”