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Tour de Force

Simon and Ruth Jacobsen, George and Frederica Valanos, and Mario Buatta discuss their design aesthetics, the global appeal of the city, and their roles in the Georgetown House Tour 2008.

BY SHERRY MOELLER



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Simon and Ruth Jacobsen

SIMON JACOBSEN IS NO STRANGER TO GEORGETOWN; he grew up there, and his father, Hugh Newell Jacobsen, designed a good many homes in the neighborhood. His wife, Ruth, is from Seattle, Washington. Now living on the opposite coast, Ruth loves her life in the District.

While in architectural school in Chicago in 1994, Jacobsen decided to return to Georgetown to work at his father's firm, Hugh Newell Jacobsen, Architect, and to buy the rowhouse across the street from his parents' home. "I was weighing my options, as young men do: be a poet-architect in New York, become a thinking man's architect in Chicago, or build dams for the indigenous people of South America," Jacobsen says. "Then there was this other issue, too—my father, the architect, was pulling on my straps about joining his practice. This wasn't just another job offer; there was something serious and meaningful about it."

Jacobsen is no stranger to house tours, either. The home he purchased in 1994 was on the Georgetown House Tour the following year. Having bought the adjoining rowhouse in 2002, which they combined with their original dwelling, the couple is once again sharing the details of their house's history, design, and renovation with tour patrons.

CAPITOL FILE: Are you ready to have a home on the tour again?

SIMON JACOBSEN: It was a lot of fun having it on the tour in 1995, but I highly recommend not being in the house when the tour is on; the comments can be brutal. I always say there are two ways to get your house in order: have your in-laws over or [put] it on the house tour.

CF: Over the years, what have you learned about living in Georgetown and in your home?

SJ: The history, the scale, and the architecture of the place—the redbrick Federals are a snapshot of the difficulty and the urgency of American life at the time. The trip to the corner store to buy pasta is the same route taken by British and Confederate spies to buy secrets. I believe the house was divided in two during its construction because of the possibility of a Confederate government and the insecurity of a post-Civil War Washington. Also, with the recent excavation of the yard, we exposed thousands of oyster shells.... It was hard living, and the residents were shucking shellfish for local hotels year round.

CF: What were some of the challenges of reconnecting the houses?

SJ: First, the design of the ground-level kitchen was made difficult by a 20-ton chimney separating the two kitchens. Using a great deal of steel, we now have a 33-foot kitchen counter and minimalist custom cabinets and millwork. Next, we clearly defined rooms' uses. Closets, a bar, music equipment, and storage are encompassed in a hidden core that unifies the two houses. A large main-floor room with basically nothing in it transforms into a formal entertaining space that we call the treaty room. In the end, the mantra turned out to be "expand and reduce."

CF: What's your favorite room, and why?

SJ: The library is where we go to put ourselves back together. My wife and I play records on our Victrola and sit by the fire. We read for hours together, only once in a while looking up to share fascinating bits of facts. The stainless steel desk and coffee table are my designs—they reflect the same disciplined lines of the period.

CF: Whom would you ask to redo your home if you weren't in the business?

SJ: Richard Meier, Santiago Calatrava, Renzo Piano, Arata Isozaki, Rem Koolhaas, Mario Botta—Hugh Jacobsen isn't so bad either.

CF: Tell us something about Georgetown and the international flavor for which it's known.

SJ: Before the automobile, street widths were established so that carts could turn around. The brick sidewalks and cobblestone streets are a reminder of our European heritage. One of the formulas of a wellproportioned street is that the buildings are as tall as the street is wide. Georgetown excels in the number of streets that meet this criterion.

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