

ATHOME

On the surface, Phyllis and Joe Satin were like any other couple coming of age in the 1960s. They met in college (University of Bridgeport), they started their marriage working in New York City and then moving to Connecticut to pursue their twin interests (Phyllis ended up in retail and Joe is an engineer with an architectural bent).

Soon after they came to Connecticut they had two children: son Joshua and daughter Heather. Like millions of other

young families, Phyllis and Joe realized that growing children need a “permanent” home to grow up in. In 1975 they settled on a property in Orange (Joe’s engineering office is in Shelton). This “normal” move crystallized an artful outlook toward domestic expression.

For most families, a “forever home” is intended to be safe, soft and nurturing. Its furnishings are all about comfort, durability and an easy “fit” with that home.

The Satin family turned that comfort imperative on its head. Rather than play it safe with a nice center-hall Colonial on an acre or two of land in the ‘burbs, the Satins opted for an architectural gem. They fell in love with architect Marcel Breuer’s Clark House, built in 1949 for scions of the Asgrow Seed Co. Since they acquired the property, Satins have become the home’s longest-tenured — and most dedicated — occupants.

As you might expect, the purchase of this

The Art of Living

An unusual Marcel Breuer house and the unusual couple who have made it home

By DUO DICKINSON

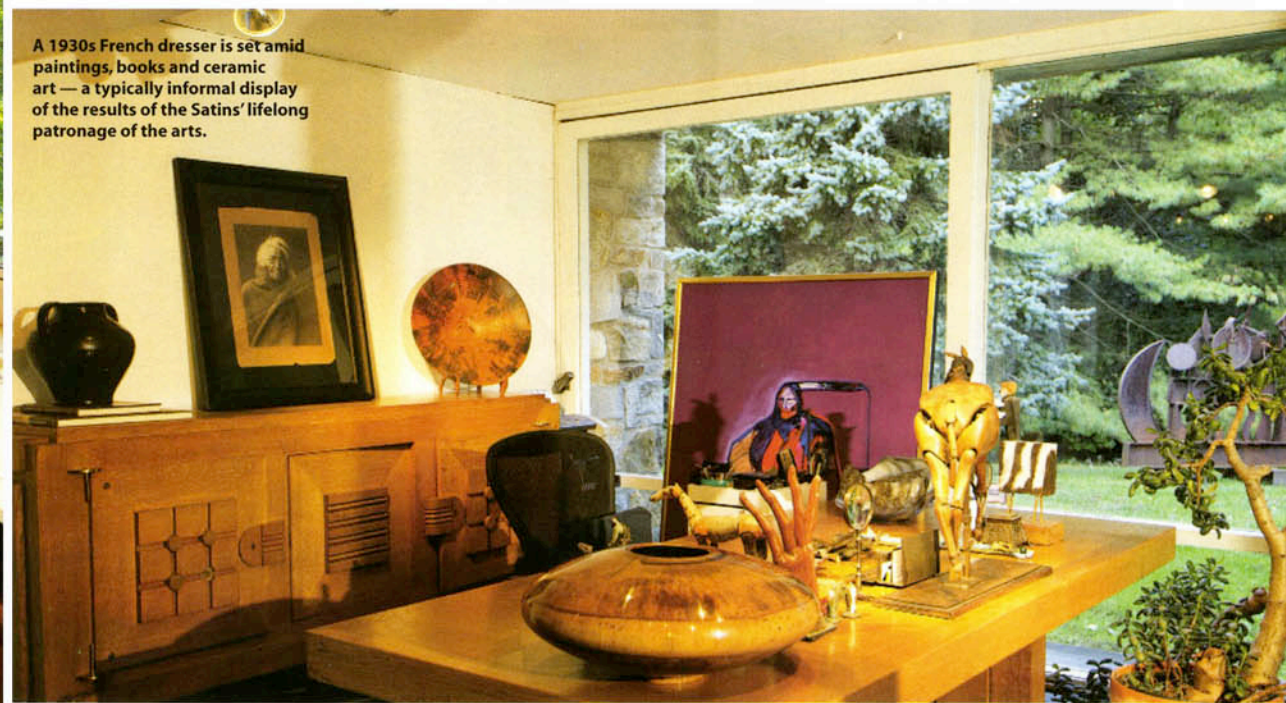


New free-standing cabinets address a sweeping view of the front yard (right) with wall-hugging cabinets left to ‘take care of business’ (left). The natural wood ceiling was renewed in a recent renovation.

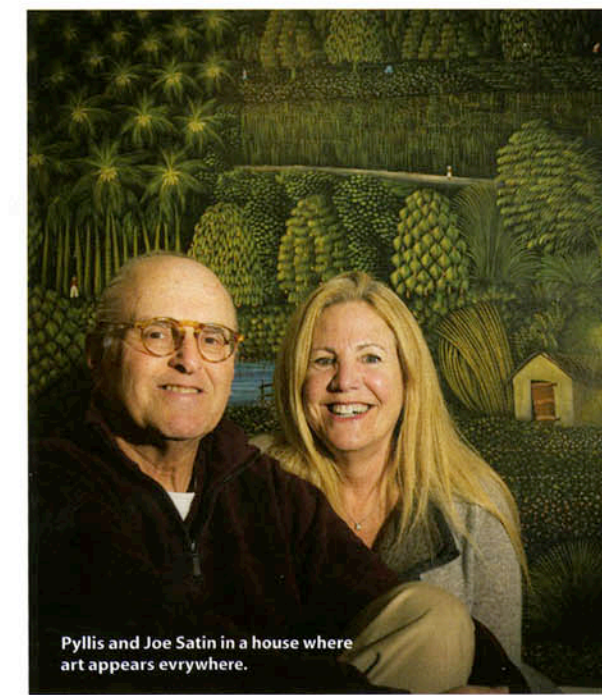
PHOTOS: ANTHONY DECARLO



A linear expression of materials creates recesses for entry (left) and the kitchen window (right).



A 1930s French dresser is set amid paintings, books and ceramic art — a typically informal display of the results of the Satins’ lifelong patronage of the arts.



Phyllis and Joe Satin in a house where art appears evrywhere.



The sole vertical space in a sea of horizontality, added mirror and a skylight balances the light from the full glass entry (right) and open access to a courtyard opposite the front door

Modernist icon was just the beginning of this family's interactive inhabitation of a very powerful building.

Initially the farmland site was quite spare in its foliage — something that time has helped to heal. The initial sense when you drive onto this six-acre parcel is that it is more park than residence. Very large trees and evocative sculptures draw attention and beckon and lead to a long line of a house peek-a-booming with the trees and ultimately focusing on a glowing void amidships — the recessed entry.

The subsequent growth of the flora and installation of sculptures (by the likes of John Landino and Eric Snowden as well as a Satin relative, Paul Jefferies) complement a building that was intended by Breuer to provide a counterpoint to the rolling Connecticut landscape. Breuer was the architect of the famed lofted Pirelli Tire Co. building on Sargent Drive in New Haven that lost its manufacturing plant "tail" as part of the property's acquisition by big-box retailer Ikea.

In his book *Sun and Shadow*, Breuer grouped this house with several other rural commissions, all with very similar approaches to the landscape. These starkly linear, flat-roofed homes are clearly Modern, but have a rich materiality

(fieldstone slabs/walls counterpointed by panelized wood structure, with plate glass infill set for maximum interplay between the solid parts. Breuer's explicit intention was to contrast the bright sunshine and the cast shadow created by the interaction of the voids, lines and shapes that his designs provided.

Breuer noted in the book that "Transparency is definitely one of our objectives. But transparency also needs solidity. Not only for aesthetic reasons but also because total transparency leaves out such considerations as privacy, reflecting surfaces, transition from disorder to order, furnishings, a background for you, for your everyday life. Transparency becomes more so next to solidity — and solidity makes it work."

In these mid-century homes created by Breuer, his secondary intention was to use them also as small museums for his extraordinary furniture designs. But when the Satins bought the house, it had been completely stripped of Breuer furniture. In a sense this freed up the Satins to rethink the entire interior of the home. As envisioned by Breuer, the house was cleaved in two: an upper level set to a raised grade for entry and a floor that was completely given over to the original

occupants, the Clark family, and the social areas (entry, living, dining, study and eat-in kitchen) of the house using planes, voids, and long axes — the kind of Modernist aesthetic that feels as much an example of sculpture as architecture.

The downstairs took care of business — the storage of two commodities: children and automobiles. As such it had a very different sensibility. The central stair void down to that level was clearly meant as the descending vertical counterpoint to this horizontal stretch of a house. Both floors were marvelously integrated to exterior spaces — patios, decks and courtyards with huge custom sliding glass windows and doors, defined with painted trellis work — a High Modernist aesthetic that fleshed out an abstracted and universal approach to architecture.

Despite these high-minded intentions, homes are uniquely interwoven with the fabric of a specific family — unlike Breuer's Pirelli building, which intentionally grabbed attention from the zooming cars that sped by it on I-95 to provide a corporate identity. A similarly bold presence is Breuer's other New Haven building: the Becton Center on the Yale campus.

But a home is a place of intimate

accommodation, and the Satins set out almost immediately to make the home their own. They completely reversed the intended occupancy of the architect cleaning out the downstairs so they could have dominion over it, creating a master suite and office and ultimately taking over the garage to create an exercise area to battle the bodily ravages of time. The upstairs bedroom area was then given over to children where a master suite became one child's domain, while a pair of bedrooms became the other's.

The kitchen has been renovated three times, most recently just a couple of years ago. Additionally there has been an extraordinary amount of resurfacing, mostly mirroring ("It was the 1970s," Joe Satin notes wistfully).

Besides the trees, the sculpture and the functional changes they imposed upon the house, the next great evolution of the home's character ended up dovetailing wonderfully with Phyllis Satin's ultimate career choice. Always interested in both art and retail, Phyllis has given those two life forces a mission: to provide beautiful objects and interesting accoutrements at accessible prices to a devoted clientele of her Wave Gallery in downtown New Haven. The 25-year-old store has had several offshoots, including most recently a second-generation store run by Phyllis' daughter Heather in New Canaan.

Joe and Phyllis have imbued the house with their effervescent eclecticism. A slab of stone is virtually used as a painting, nooks, shelves and built-ins wonderfully accommodate the many pieces that Phyllis purchased to sell at Wave but then decided she couldn't bear to part with. "The things I like the best are not always the best sellers," she acknowledges.

The Satins are clearly multi-focused in all things residential. They have had two houses in Rhode Island, antiques that were heavily renovated and served as a perfect conceptual counterpoint to this High Modern art piece.

All this construction experience allows for a positive perspective on the ongoing maintenance necessitated by an experimental design residing in the fairly destructive New England climate. The flat roof has been redone three times, huge trees that overgrew the house had to be removed before they endangered it, and air conditioning was retrofitted as the hoped-

for ventilation provided by the gigantic sliding glass doors/windows proved to be ineffective.

The heating plant has been updated, bathrooms have been renovated, a skylight insinuated into the entryway and many of the recent accommodations have actually brought the expanded family into play as son-in-law Robert Roland, an architect, ended up renovating this classic with minimal noticeable interruption.

Having interior walls of Masonite and ceilings of cypress may not be exactly conventional, but this home perfectly reflects its owners' desire to be completely surrounded by fine art and the craft of the human hand.

This home has been a place where two children grew up to appreciate the things their parents lived for, but it has also become the architectural focal point of two very busy, independent careers. As Joe Satin notes, "This is the perfect house for me." To which Phyllis quickly adds, "You are inside but you are always outside." Sentiments any successful marriage of house and family experience made all the richer by three and a half decades of life together.