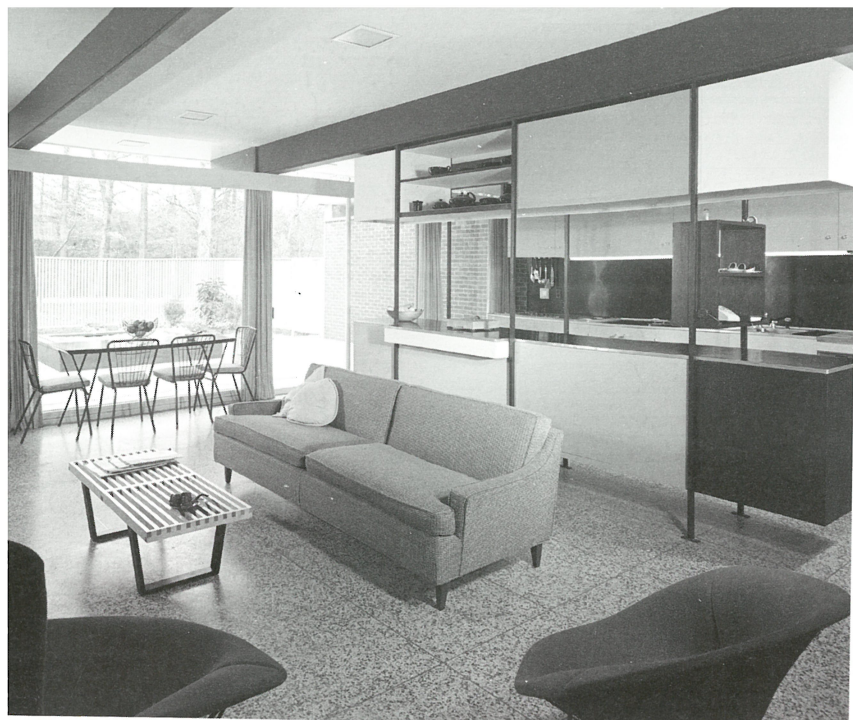




Life is a Glass House

The modernist ruin that Liz and Mike Felsen ambitiously took on and lovingly restored – featured on this year's Historic Home Tour for Preservation Greensboro – is bound to be a conversation starter. That's just the way the former and new owners want it

BY MARIA JOHNSON • PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMY FREEMAN



Embedded in her High French Regency home in Southern California, Liz Felsen was curious when her husband, Mike, called from Greensboro, where they were moving because of Mike's furniture business.

It was early summer 2013, and the couple was house hunting. That's why Mike was calling. He wanted Liz to look up an interesting house he'd seen for sale in the Hamilton Lakes neighborhood, near the home of his business partners, Ron and Kelly Hahn.

Liz hopped online and looked up the house, which lay in a bend of Henderson Road, right across from Lake Hamilton.

Built in 1955, the house was classic mid-century Modernist. Low. Boxy. Flat roof. One story. The wood siding was painted white.

The place was charming. And dilapidated.

"Home needs a lot of work," the listing warned. "To be sold as is."

Liz clicked around and found out that the house had been designed by a well-known North Carolina architect. She was intrigued, but she was too late.

The house, part of a court-ordered bankruptcy sale, was under contract.

She kept an eye on the listing.

By August, the Felsens and their two daughters had moved into a rental home in Greensboro's Sunset Hills, and the house on Henderson Road was back on the market. Liz and Mike made an appointment to see it. The real estate agent offered them dust masks at the door.

Liz passed on a mask. She stepped through the front door and around the coat closet that split the foyer. She liked what she saw. A dining room with exposed beams and, just beyond it, a living area anchored by a low and broad brick fireplace that was topped with bands of copper cladding and crowned with planter boxes. Light squeezed through dirty plate-glass and clerestory windows all around.

The place was tired and dingy, but Liz, who holds degrees in interior design and history, could feel the hand of architect Thomas Hayes, who had designed the home for his college roommate and fraternity brother Will Howard and his wife, Diane.

Just a few years out of N.C. State, Will Howard, a civil engineer who owned a water-and-sewer system construction company with his brothers, was doing well



in those baby-booming post-war days. His buddy Tom Hayes, an Army veteran who'd attended State on a football scholarship and graduated with a degree from the school's forward-thinking school of architecture, was thriving, too.

He'd worked briefly for Greensboro master Modernist architect Edward Loewenstein, who sent him to Southern Pines to work on three homes.

Soon, Hayes had his own firm, Hayes Marshall and Associates.

That's when Howard called on him.

Would Hayes design a lake view home for him and his family?

Hayes got busy on an H-shaped, 2,800-square-foot plan that was compact and open at the same time. As in most Modernist homes, the divide between indoors and outdoors would be minimized with lots of windows.

Visitors would enter the foyer, be drawn into a rather formal but cozy combination dining/living area, then step to the left into a great room with kitchen and family room.

Nearly sixty years later, Liz Felsen was following the path that Hayes had laid out. She was pulled into the dining and living area, which hooked her, then she stepped into the kitchen and family room.

Uh-oh.

Water pooled on the salt-and-pepper terrazzo floor. The water-stained ceiling was shedding plaster. The home's sixth owner had left behind pots, pans and other pieces of life. Golf clubs, paintings, an old sofa.

Liz pressed on. Beyond the great room, on a short hallway with four bedrooms, she peeked into the master.

One corner of the ceiling was caved in. Black mold covered the walls.

She reached for the protective mask and checked out the other three bedrooms down the hall.

Ugh, ugh and ugh.

Dark, dank, depressing.

I gotta have it, Liz thought. I gotta bring this house back.

"It's going to be done," she said.

Liz Felsen, willowy, sophisticated, forthright and happy, keeps repeating this.

"It's going to be done."

After a while, you realize she's preaching to herself. And to Benjamin Briggs, the executive director of Preservation Greensboro Inc.

Briggs went ahead and put the home — which is in the middle of a massive renovation — on the roster for an upcoming tour of historic homes and gardens in Hamilton Lakes. The tour, scheduled for May 16–17, will be the latest edition of the nonprofit's annual showcase that spotlights a Greensboro neighborhood. Liz Felsen promised Briggs that the house would be ready.

Every once in a while, Briggs rides by the house and calls her.

"Liiiiiz . . ." he says.

Just a few weeks ago, it was easy to see why Briggs was nervous.

It was a warm and radiant January day. The sky was blue. The leaves on the trees around Lake Hamilton were down, affording a great view of the winking water and the giant orange forklift atop the mud and gravel that was the Felsen's front yard.

Cardboard and scrap wood pathways led across the mud to the house, which was partially cloaked in thin white Tyvek, like someone who had just stepped from the shower and hastily wrapped herself in a towel.

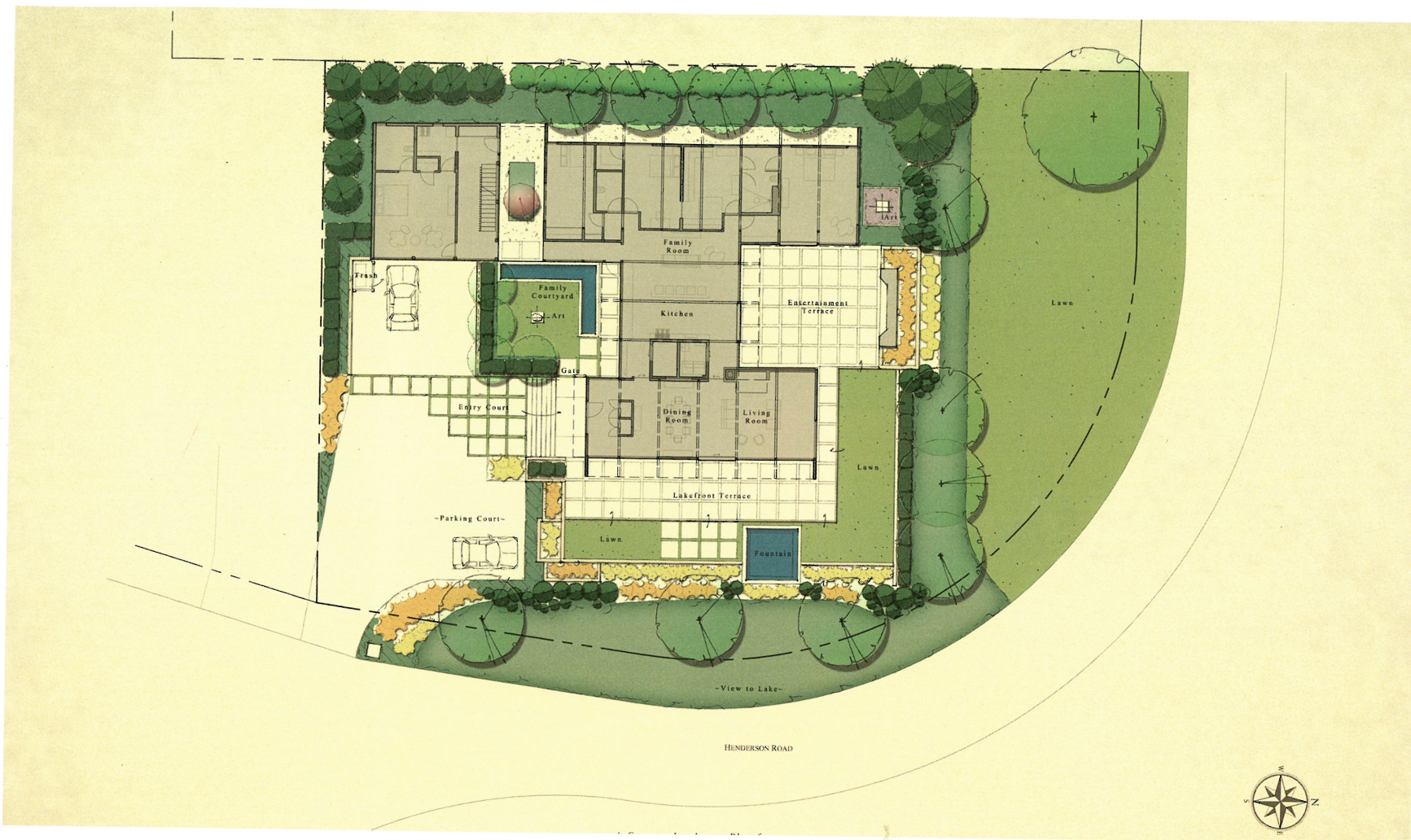
Inside, the house shivered in the shade. The walls were bare studs, wooden ribs on 16-inch centers. The ceilings were open to the rafters and snaked with new silver accordion air ducts, plastic coated wires and dull silver boxes that one day would glow with bright-eyed can lights.

Huge pieces of oriented strand board, with their pressed, variegated wood flakes, covered the gaps where windows would go.

Hammers banged. Top 40 radio played. A McDonald's cup held a worker's drink.

Mike Felsen walked around with a cup of Bruegger's coffee, conferring with general contractor Rick Burge, whose cousin Gary Jobe's construction company is doing the work.

"Does this door really have to be here?" Mike says to Liz, as he stands in one of two doorways leading to the bedroom hallway.



"Yes, it has to be there," Liz said. "For balance."

"It does?"

"Yes," she said. "The door will be there."

Mike shrugged and ambled on.

Believe it or not, this house is for him.

A native of the nation's capital, Mike Felsen has long been a fan of Modernist architecture.

"I've always felt the open plan was a better use of space," he says.

Still, he has never lived in a Modernist home before.

Not as a kid.

Not when he and Liz lived in D.C.

Or when they lived in California the first time.

Or in Tennessee.

Or in Mississippi.

Or in Maryland.

Or in California the second time.

The closest they got was drooling over Modernist homes while vacationing in Palm Springs.

Then came Greensboro.

Mike loved California, and Liz thought that finding a Modernist house here might make the transition easier.

Mike trusted her instincts on the Howard home.

"I don't have any ability to visualize space and what things are going to look like," he says. "I don't have any taste. But I married well. My wife has an immense amount of taste."

Two-thirty-five. That's what they laid down for the Howard house. Two-thirty-five for the opportunity to spend almost five times as much fixing a house that was riddled with asbestos, termites, water damage and mold.

When they stripped away everything that was rotten, all that remained were the studs of the interior walls.

They would rebuild from the floor up, preserving almost everything in the

original plan while indulging in some updates.

"Whatever we spend, we're never gonna get out, so you gotta love it," says Mike.

Liz tracked down the original plans from the architect who'd bought Tom Hayes' practice in Southern Pines. She shipped the plans to Mike's brother Martin, a Chicago architect who changed precious little.

He pitched the roof a little to shed water.

Liz wanted a new window at the front of the home.

She wanted to extend a hallway outside the bedrooms.

She wanted a two-story addition, with a ground-level apartment for her parents when they visit.

She wanted a bigger master bathroom for herself and Mike, and she wanted to turn the bedroom on the other side of the wall into a closet.

I know, she says. Very California.

She tracked down interior photos of the house taken in its prime.

In the kitchen, the Howards had a floating luncheon counter with shelves suspended overhead. It looked like something a kid of the '50s might have made with a Girder and Panel Building Set. The module had been ripped out at some point, but Liz wanted to recreate it.

Mike nixed the idea.

He wanted clear sight lines between the kitchen and family room.

A new island would go in that space.

"I lost that one," Liz says, with the ire of a golfer who has just shot a 65 instead of a 64.

It was a fun house.

That's what the Howards wanted when they built the house at 3905 Henderson Road. They had been living near downtown, in an apartment off Fisher Avenue, with their two young daughters, Thea and Paula. They wanted more room for their young family to blossom.

Hamilton Lakes of the 1950s fit the bill. Started in the 1920s, the neighborhood was a rural satellite of Greensboro for years, but the area experienced a



resurgence after the gap was filled in by the Starmount neighborhoods.

Among the Hamilton Lakes brick ranches and Colonials, many of them built as spec houses, a sprinkling of Modernist homes sprang up, some designed by local architects including Loewenstein, Jack Pickens Coble, Wesley Doggett, and Jaroslav Jan “JJ.” Kabatnik.

The Howard’s oldest child, Paula Kabelle of Fairhope, Alabama, says her parents gave Hayes a lot of leeway in designing their new home.

“They pretty much said, ‘Run with it,’ but knowing my mother, I’m sure she had to put her two cents’ worth in,” says Kabelle, now 64.

The daughter of a well-to-do family, Diane Howard had grown up in an eye-catching log cottage on White Oak Road in Raleigh.

“She was no stranger to unusual homes,” says Kabelle.

Her mother had attended art school and traveled. She loved fashion, design, textiles and being different.

The house on Henderson Road was the perfect canvas for her.

“She was so into the decorating,” says Kabelle, who was 5 years old when the family moved in. “That was her favorite part.”

Diane Howard grew orchids in a planter inside the front door. In the formal living area, where the children were not allowed, she put white sofas and chairs. A Japanese sword hung over the fireplace. A glass-and-iron coffee table provided a conversation piece. Under the table’s glass top was a clear dish that Diane Howard filled with water and fan-tailed goldfish.

Years later, she liked to tell the story of a visitor who, out of habit, went to put her pocketbook on the table and realized too late that the top was missing.

The Howards — both were tall, dark-haired and striking — entertained often. Sometimes, Diane sent invitations with a rendering of the house on front. Inside, she used a fountain pen to fill in blanks for time, date and occasion.

Their parties ran the gamut, from hot-dog-and-hamburger affairs to fancier *Mad Men*-style gatherings. The children were banished to the bedrooms with a babysitter as the house filled with men in dark suits and skinny ties, and women

in party dresses, pumps and cat-eye glasses.

They drank from highball and martini glasses. They noshed on molded pâté, veggies on toast points, meatballs and cocktail sausages skewered with Spanish olives.

Will Howard relished having his Sigma Chi fraternity brothers over, and the guys often broke into fraternity anthems.

Diane played the ukulele and sang.

“She couldn’t play or sing too well, but she enjoyed herself, and nobody seemed to mind,” says Kabelle.

One of Diane’s standbys involved Sally sitting by the seashore, sifting sand. If you think the song got interesting after a few drinks, you’re right.

“That was her point,” says the Howard’s second child, Thea Gardner of Apex.

An artistic free spirit, Diane Howard expressed herself at every turn. She knitted fashionable sweaters from exotic yarns. Some of her works are on permanent display at N.C. State. One year, she decided to build a model ship. Pieces of the *Cutty Sark*, a British clipper, covered the family dining room table for months.

“That’s how she was,” says Kabelle. “She’d get into something, and go to the top.”

The Howard children pursued their passions, too.

The four of them (a younger sister, Libby, and a brother, Bill, eventually joined Paula and Thea) roller-skated on the patio. They turned loose chameleons in the indoor planters. They swam in Lake Hamilton, which then included a small beach, bathhouse, diving platform and pier.

Sometimes, their mother, who liked to fish, took the kids across the street to the lake. When the youngest child, Bill, was little and prone to dashing off, Diane was known to tie one end of a rope around his waist and the other end to a tree. When daughter Paula found out that she could climb from a tree onto the flat roof of the Howard’s house, where she liked to roam around, her mother had this to say: “Be careful.”

"It was a different time," says Kabelle, laughing.

Once in a while, a stranger would knock on the orange-red front door and ask about the history of the house. Diane Howard greeted them cordially.

"She was glad to talk to people," says Kabelle. "She was a chatty person."

The Howards moved out in 1967, after a dozen years on Henderson Road. Space was tight with four children, and the girls had gotten into riding horses. The family moved to an existing split-level house off New Garden Road. They had a barn, a basement recreation room, pastures and a swimming pool. Kabelle says she never got the idea that her parents regretted leaving their first house.

When Will Howard died in 1996, Diane Howard rented half of N.C. State's Carter-Finley Stadium for a memorial service. Pork barbecue, fried chicken, beer and iced tea were served. At the end of the service, Will Howard's children walked the length of the football field, scattering his ashes as they went.

"We each got 25 yards," says Kabelle. "That was Diane's idea."

Diane Howard died in a Greensboro retirement community in 2009, at age 80.

Kabelle says her mother would be overjoyed at the Felsen's plans to restore the Henderson Road home to its former glory.

"She'd say, 'It's about time someone loved it as much as we did.' Then she'd be all up in their Kool-Aid to see what they were doing and definitely contribute her ideas and opinions. Kinda a good thing for the Felsens that she's not here. Yes, you can quote me."

If there's anything harder than living in a glass house, it's living in a glass house with no trees around, though not for the reasons you might think.

Mike and friends were walking around Lake Hamilton one day last year when they encountered a woman who was upset that Mike and Liz had cleared eight trees from their yard.

The woman gave Mike a piece of her mind. Later, someone planted "Save Our Canopy" signs in the front yard.

Liz responded to the gripes by taping the landscape plan to a window at the front of the house, so the curious could see what was coming.

"It's gonna be great," says Felsen.

The plan, by Greensboro designer Brent Skelton, shows a lot dotted with river birches and ginkgo trees, refashioned builtin planters, and a vanishing edge fountain between the house and the lake.

It also shows a detached two-story casita instead of an attached addition. The Felsens dropped the attached version to preserve the lake view for their neighbors.

The city quashed the Felsen's plans for an underground garage, so the couple will park their cars in a driveway flanked by a private courtyard, also original to the home.

Another nod to history: The renovated home will wear vertical wood siding painted white, and the trim will be dark, but the entrance will have a new look with wider concrete steps leading to an orange — "screaming orange" in Liz's words — front door.

Liz predicts that the neighbors will either love or hate the finished product. She's fine with that.

"If everything's the same, there's nothing to start a conversation, and that's the thing about this. We will start a conversation about what can be done, and what can be saved in Greensboro." **OH**

Maria Johnson, contributing editor of O.Henry, wants to paint her boring brown front door orange. She can be reached at maria@ohenrymag.com.



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