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Architect revives a midcentury home by 'Blonde Builder of Suburbs'

By DENNIS RODKIN | 

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The living room of the restored 1949 house

Architect Nate Kipnis had no intention of moving back to Highland Park, where he grew up, when he was downsizing with his wife, Fran, after raising their two children in **a sustainably built Evanston house that he designed.**

Then one day, on a whim, he dropped by a real estate agent's open house at a four-bedroom home built in 1949 on Sheridan Road in Highland Park. A crowd had come, and potential buyers were zipping through the space. "I just stood here on the threshold of the living room and took it all in and thought, 'Wow, everything in here was done so right,'" Kipnis says.



Photo by Nathan Kipnis

Low and somewhat blank and inscrutable on the street side, the house opens up inside to embrace its ravine-side setting. Two walls of full-height windows

open the story-and-a-half room to the leafy outdoors; the third wall is rough stone and contains a fireplace while the fourth is all wood.

"It's like you're already standing outside but you just walked in the front door," Kipnis said.

Designed in 1949 by Greta Lederer, the house is one of a row of three she built on a knoll at the edge of a deep ravine. Lederer, an architect and developer at a time when a woman doing either job was a rarity, built subdivisions in Highland Park, Glencoe and Northbrook.

Lederer had built \$10 million worth of North Shore homes by 1957, when the Chicago Tribune **dubbed her the "Blonde Builder of suburbs."**

According to that article, the former Miss Detroit got into building because she found the traditional-looking

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The kitchen was gutted and restored.

work of other North Shore builders "unimaginative."

On Sheridan Road at the end of the 1940s, "she was already doing the midcentury style that most people didn't pick up on until the 1950s," Kipnis says. The house is a trilevel, with the main living level on the ground, and stairs leading either half a flight up to the bedrooms or half a flight down to the family room, laundry and garage.

The roof sets this trilevel apart from the dozens of houses Kipnis grew up around on the other end of Highland Park. While the norm is to give a trilevel two roofs—one atop the upper floor and another, lower one atop the main floor—Lederer stretched one roof across both components, giving the living room a high ceiling.

"Then she opened up those tall walls below it with

windows, and that really does it," Kipnis said. "You're living with the ravine as part of your house."



The sunroom.

The natural materials of the other two walls underscore the connection, including stained birch panels on a wall separating the living and dining space from the kitchen.

The fireplace wall, lined with rough lannon stone, has the simple proportions of modernist design and an off-center fireplace that would have seemed radical to the post-war generation that grew up in Colonial and Victorian homes.

Six days after it came on the market, the house was under contract with the Kipnises, who bought it for \$513,000. Kipnis has since put it through extensive renovations, which he declined to put a number on. The kitchen got more windows and a 1950s-inspired tile backsplash. The tiny master bedroom closet grew

by eating up part of an adjacent bedroom. The garage got a charging station for the couple's electric car.



The living room

A longtime **proponent of green design**, Kipnis appreciates the home's passive-solar layout, with its mostly open sides on the south and west, where sun is most abundant.

He replaced virtually every window with better-insulated modern versions and laid a heavy blanket of insulation around the perimeter of the entire house behind a new rain-screen siding system clad with environmentally friendly cement board.

As for the interior wood and stone, "all they needed was to be cleaned up," Kipnis says. "I told myself these are things that Greta would do if she built it today."

Meet Greta, Blonde Builder of Suburbs

By Roslyn Rosen

EIGHT years ago Greta Lederer was a suburban housewife. Today she is something of a legend on Chicago's north shore. She has built \$10,000,000 worth of houses. I've lived in one five years and can testify she does a good job.

Greta is a tall, handsome blonde in her forties who was Miss Detroit of 1930, a model, a showgirl, and winner of a movie contract. But that's far behind her. Today she drives from job to job in a plush yellow auto and is known among bankers and real estate men as a sharp trader.

She's a serene looking woman who's far from serene, a demon for work and a mass of contradictions.

It all started with the first

home Greta had built for her family. A reputable north shore firm did a traditional job for her—expensive, luxurious French provincial. She never lived in it.

“Let's say I considered it unimaginative,” Greta explains. “About that time I answered an ad for a dining room set. I walked into a house that was truly French provincial. I knew this was the kind of house I wanted. I sold my new house, and bought an old one in Chestnut street in Waukegan, and found a carpenter to remodel the place.”

A few years and a few houses later, Greta went to Arizona for her daughter's health. The building bug had begun to bite. She built Ari-

zona's first modern design apartment house in Tu son.

She returned home and went to work in earnest. She built her first three homes on Bob-o-Link road in Highland Park, an area that had never trouble. The architect had some radical ideas, among them a conviction that the drain tile was not necessary around buildings.

During a heavy rain, all three houses were flooded and the floors ruined. Men worked all night and the next day to clean up the mess. While all this was going on, Greta said, “I was scared stiff. I stayed in my house and cried until it was over.”

Now Greta runs her business with confidence. She consistently builds houses worth up to \$75,000 for the open-

market, as well as custom built homes.

When she likes a plan she repeats it with variations. She favors split levels and “open” feeling. Her living rooms and kitchens often have double-height ceilings, balconies looking down into living rooms, living rooms into playrooms, kitchens with fireplaces opening into dining areas into patios.

Her houses unmistakably bear her stamp—multipaned high windows, a profusion of levels, breezeways, patios, soft feminine colors—beige, coffee, peach. Her houses have simple modern lines, yet are a bit modified.

She has built up entire communities—Strawberry Hill, Westwood Acres, and Skokie Ridge.

I spent some time on the job with her. In a field where our family took walks a few months ago, about a dozen houses were in various stages of construction. A suburb was being born.



Greta Lederer, north shore builder, checks a construction detail with her secretary, Lucretia De Berry.



Houses with a design that is distinctively her own form a backdrop for Mrs. Lederer as she steps into her car to check on another of her many building projects.

Greta looked very lady like on the job, with her beige coat, middle-high heels, and slim ankles that wobbled a bit as she walked plank into unfinished buildings. She is well-organized in her fashion, quietly giving orders, making notes, pushing the touches that will help to sell her homes.

Not long ago Greta stepped in a hole on the job and wrenched her back. She was rushed to the hospital, her arms and legs temporarily paralyzed. While prone on her back in the Highland Park hospital she sold homes to two doctors and a piece of land in Highland Park to 16 other doctors who have built a medical center on it.

Greta recently bought an island of land near Edens highway on which she plans to toss off a motel and a shopping center. It started out as a “little shopping center,” but Greta can't do things in a small way.

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A Chicago Tribune article about Greta Lederer.

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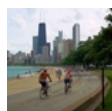
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