

ARCHITECT CHRISTIAN

ZAPATKA

by Georgia Shallcross

"I've adored my houses more than my friends(or husbands)."

— Nancy Lancaster

From Brideshead Revisited to the Brady Bunch, there wouldn't have been the story without the house. Indeed great epochs in history can be recalled almost entirely in the form of architecture. What child isn't captivated by the pyramids and ancient Egyptian civilization?

"For me it was seeing the boulevards of Paris when I was a little boy- I was hooked," said Washington native Christian Zapatka of his decision to become an architect.

Although, as a child Zapatka found Washington uninspiring, today he compares the city to "Rome at the beginning of the Renaissance" "It is fabulous to be back."

His talent and enthusiasm have produced tangible results; in the last eight years Zapatka has completed nearly 80 projects of varying scales.

Raised in Washington, Zapatka graduated from Gonzaga High School and Georgetown University, earning a degree in American History. He then attended the the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York where architecture luminaries including Philip Johnson, Michael Graves, Richard Meier and Rem Koolhaas have instructed. Thereafter Zapatka received a Masters in Architecture from Princeton (He was accepted at Harvard, Yale and Columbia), largely because of the emphasis on architectural history and theory, as well as design. Zapatka flourished at Princeton, winning the top design prize in his class, as well as having the opportunity to apprentice for Michael Graves.

Graves, who recognized Zapatka's gift, encouraged the young architect to compete for the illustrious Rome Prize(Awarded by the American Academy in Rome). "Micheal suggested that I compete for the Rome Prize, and I had the good fortune to win." The highly coveted prize, which is awarded to two architects annually, allows the recipients to live in Rome for one year and complete a project of their choice.

Upon returning from Italy, Zapatka received a fellowship from the SOM (Skidmore, Owings and Merrill) Foundation in Chicago. At the conclusion of the fellowship

he was invited to teach at Princeton and at Columbia University. After seven years as a scholar (Zapatka has published several books and numerous journal articles), Christian Zapatka Architect, LLC was established in Washington DC. "I received a commission to design a house in Great Falls, and that was the beginning," recalls Zapatka of his decision to open his own practice. The house, a stunning 5000 square foot modern courtyard house was influenced by Mies Van der Rohe's Tugendat House in the Czech Republic.

Another modernist commission which Zapatka designed is a striking house on Potomac Street overlooking the river. Recalling The

Tristan Tzara house in Paris, designed by Adolph Loos, the structure is comprised of a two story angled wall of glass and a third story porch. The side walls frame the structure like "a giant picture frame."

Zapatka has also completed dozens of projects in Georgetown including a glorious restoration of one of "The Evermay Houses". The site of a spring garden party for Rose Park, the guests were captivated by the elegant interior. "This is heavenly!" quipped one guest as she peered into the garden through the casement of french doors. "My part is modern neoclassical, with Tuscan columns, by the way," states Zapatka of the stately house on 28th Street.

With countless "jobs" underway including a commission which resulted from being one of the winners of the AIA "Rowhouse of the Future" competition, Zapatka has more than doubled his practice. "Everyone loves Christian, he's refreshing and light, and he's a classicist!" notes Frank Randolph of Zapatka's appeal. To be sure, it is the client that makes Zapatka's job worthwhile. "Some of my clients have seemed more like patrons," reveals Zapatka, "now I know how Bernini must have felt, and I'm not even living in Rome!"

Continued page 18

GTWN: When did you read *The Fountainhead*?

CZ: I've never read *The Fountainhead*. My father was a professor of Literature so I grew up reading Dickens and Austin. The first architecture-related work that I read was Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York*. I loved his cinematic description of the evolution of a city.

GTWN: You lived in New York and in Rome, how do they differ from Washington other than that the people are far better dressed?

CZ: The people are certainly far better dressed and there are far more people. The dense population is part of the character of the city. New York is a European city, I actually hated growing up in Washington. It felt so small and provincial. Everyone should live in New York at some point in their lives or they are missing something. This is not a cosmopolitan city.

GTWN: You worked with Micheal Graves, an icon of American architecture. What is he like?

CZ: Let me quote an adage from my high school greek teacher, "A good teacher instructs, a great teacher inspires." Micheal inspires. He is my mentor. I went to Princeton because I knew that he was there.

GTWN: Although, the work was initially novel, and no doubt groundbreaking, the Gehry phenomenon eludes me; the repetitive nature of the projects, the impracticality (Scalding sidewalks in LA). How much undulation can one take?

CZ: I have never fallen under the Gehry spell. They seized upon the popular collective conscious. People need to be able to latch onto icons. The work is sculptural at best. As you said, it was novel at first, but it has become repetitive. The saying that "Every great architect does his worst building in Washington" would have applied had they built the Gehry addition to the Corcoran.

GTWN: Let's go back a few centuries. Why do I love Palladio?

CZ: It represents a glorious balance clarity of form.

GTWN: And Robert Adam?

CZ: Because you're so elegant! The Adams brothers brought a degree of elegance and style to the strict rules of classicism. They made it more palatable and personal.

GTWN: Thank you. Do you have a favorite order? Doric, Ionic Corinthian?

CZ: Tuscan, actually.



O'Brien Residence:
Above and right.



28th Street House Interior.

GTWN: Do you have a favorite house in Georgetown?

CZ: Yes, The new House of Sweden.

GTWN: Other buildings in Washington that you love?

CZ: I love John Russell Pope. The National Archives which is somber and strong and the Brazilian embassy, as well as the starved classicism of Paul Philippe Cret and the Folger Shakespeare library.

GTWN: While the ideal celebrity client would certainly not be Prince Charles, whom would it be?

CZ: Brad Pitt because he has expressed an interest in architecture.

GTWN: If you could have lived the life of one architect in history, whom would you name?

CZ: Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini. Absolutely. He had so much fun. The Popes were his patrons. Being at the papal court and building glorious buildings would have been amazing.

GTWN: I was recently reread Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher*. Do you believe in haunted houses?

CZ: Absolutely. I photographed one in Princeton, New Jersey before it was destroyed. I was confident that it was haunted. I embrace them.

GTWN: You have such a cheerful, agreeable demeanor. Do your clients end up wanting to keep you with the house?

CZ: Oh, I love my clients and many have become good friends. There is a sense of loss when a project is completed.

GTWN: Are you involved in any community or civic outreach?

CZ: I am a board member of a charter school, and I am also designing the schoolhouse. I was also elected as a member of the Committee of One Hundred of the federal City. I would like to become more involved with many aspects of urban design and planning.

GTWN: How have you dealt with your meteoric success?

CZ: Actually, I'm so self-critical that I feel like the Woody Allen of architecture. I'm pretty malleable and I rely on clients and their direction. Great design is a collaboration.

GTWN: Thank you.



All above: 28th Street House.

P Street Addition



Great Falls House



9th and Q Street Condos

By Robert Higginbotham

“Christian’s architecture shows a quality which is rare, such that there is both a boldness of ideas and delicacy of detail in his work. I have always been proud to know him; first as a student of mine at Princeton University, then as a colleague at the American Academy in Rome.”

- Michael Graves

It may not look quite two-and-a-half centuries old—but it’s pretty damn close. Thanks to organizations like the D.C. Historic Preservation Office and a handful of really great designers, D.C. landmarks like Georgetown—places up to their neck in history and lore—haven’t strayed too far from their roots. A unique taste for the aesthetics of preservation mixed with modern seems to draw to the area. Georgetown has become an enclave of risky, upscale trend mixed in with the old brick and mortar from centuries past—a curious blend of Versace-esque style and Victorian stucco.

We stroll down the streets everyday taking advantage of a place fought so hard to create, and just as hard to preserve. Whether it’s a conscious or subconscious process, you’ve admired Georgetown. You’ve admired the rowhouses that stack up through the alphabet as you walk the old brick sidewalks. The toe paths of the old C & O Canal, and the worn facades of K Street’s frequented establishments. Whether you know it or not, the Georgetown appeal has made you smile, and it’s about time we offer what is deserved of those who have given so much to the foundational structure of such a great town. We at the Georgetowner have decided it’s time to launch a new architectural/design column to dedicate what we feel is the necessary space for those that so effectively build, design and preserve ours.

Luckily for Georgetown, and us—and you; Georgetown is filled to the brim with architects

full of the types of stories, insights, experiences and projects that are worthy of ink. Take a quick peek at some of our planned features:

Hugh Newell Jacobsen, F.A.I.A. Architect PLLC
2529 P Street NW

Washington, D.C. 20007
—As an architecture graduate from Yale University Jacobsen began practicing in Georgetown under his own name and firm in 1958. From residencies to commercial buildings to large museums, to the U.S. Capitol Building; Jacobsen has laid hands on almost every nook of

the D.C. metropolitan area. Likewise, Jacobsen has branched out to 28 states and 11 different countries throughout his years. “I smell of jet fuel,” says the fired up veteran of the business. Jacobsen’s firm has earned over 120 awards for architecture and design, and continues to saturate Georgetown neighborhoods.

George Stavropoulos, AIA
1055 Thomas Jefferson Street NW
Suite 410
Washington D.C. 20007

—After completing his architectural/engineering studies in Greece, where he is from, Stavropoulos taught architecture full-time at Temple University from 1968 until 1973, when he started his own practice in Philadelphia. Stavropoulos relocated to D.C. in 1980 and immediately began his involvement with residential projects and historic preservation. Stavropoulos has lived in Georgetown for the last 15 years where he plans to live as long as he is in practice. “Georgetown architecture is fascinating because you have examples of all traditional architectural periods and styles. The history is very rich and I respect the challenges that the neighborhood advisory committee, the Historic Preservation, and the Fine Arts have to maintain the historical character, beautiful building scale, and neighborhood environment.”

Merle Thorpe Architects, PLLC
3121 South Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20007

— With a Masters in Architecture from the University of Pennsylvania, Thorpe has been in practice for 27 years specializing in high-end, custom residential architecture, and has projects spanning from Washington D.C. to Wyoming. He has a knack for adapting client taste to the contextual surroundings of a given project, and is said to “exude a sense of timeless authenticity” throughout all of his work.