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Landscape Architecture 101
Reinventing the Garden

“So, tell me about your relationship with your father” does not typically count as small talk. But the children of famous architects pictured here know why we might be interested: Because they co-opted their fathers’ buildings as playgrounds and were dragged on endless architectural pilgrimages, they’ve acquired a heightened psychological relationship with architecture—a near instinctual sense for the way it orders our experience.

*Nathaniel Kahn recalls in his Oscar-nominated film *My Architect* that his father, Louis Kahn, “left no physical evidence that he’d ever been in our house, not even a bow tie hanging in the closet.” The same can’t be said for this group; the houses they grew up in often epitomized their fathers’ work. And yet they all would certainly relate to Nathaniel’s quest to better understand his father—and perhaps himself—through*

his father’s architecture. While none of them are architects now (a key criterion for this admittedly haphazard sampling), all recognize architecture as a consistent subtext in their lives.

And yet that doesn’t mean their homes are genteel modern showplaces furnished with hand-me-down Barcelona chairs and failed project models. On the contrary, this group exhibits a low-grade restlessness with the spaces of their lives, a calculated introspection about their domestic environments. Having been immersed from an early age in ceaseless architectural searching, they find it a tough habit to break. As a result, the portraits that follow catch their subjects where they are—in the midst of moves, renovations, and domestic sabbaticals. What materializes is a different sort of modernism, not of furniture and line but of vision and personality.

My Father, The Architect

Nicholas Stern says the Central Park West apartment he grew up in never failed to catch the notice of visitors, even teenagers on their way to the kitchen to steal a beer. The 1967 renovation by his father, Robert A. M. Stern, dean of the Yale School of Architecture and eminent historicist architect, was an early expression of the postmodernism just then being defined. “It explores elements of classicism,” says Nicholas, “but deconstructs them,” with playful shifts in space and plan. His parents divorced, but his mother—who long ago married another architect—still lives there, and its lessons remain with Nicholas. “I learned my theory of architecture from my father, and I agree with it, whether through osmosis or genetics or just plain good taste.”

Work is nearing completion on the renovation of a townhouse—designed, of course, by his dad—on a curving street in Greenwich Village for Nicholas and his wife,

Courtney, an interior designer at the architectural firm of inveterate modernist Deborah Berke. Nicholas, who is a vice president at Taconic Builders, a high-end contractor, never even considered hiring any other architect, “not in my wildest dreams.” While the project is primarily a restoration—“I can only imagine Page Six of the *New York Post*: Historic preservationist Robert A. M. Stern guts 1847 Greek Revival townhouse for his son, the builder,” Nicholas jokes—that hasn’t prohibited a few big gestures, like a flowing staircase in the double-height dining room. He only wishes for a larger budget: “Then we could let Bob be Bob and go to the moon.”

Nicholas adds: “I am one of my father’s biggest admirers—if not the biggest.” He was even going to follow in his footsteps, going so far as to enroll at the Yale School of Architecture, although years before his father became dean there. He lasted only two weeks. ▶





“My dad is not somebody who really engages in any conversation on any level that’s more than three steps removed from architecture.” —Nicholas Stern