

Postmodern Son: Nicholas S. G. Stern Steps Out on His Own

By [William Alden](#)

August 25, 2010 | 7:53 a.m.

On the master floor of Nicholas S. G. Stern's West Village townhouse, the bed comforter was wrinkled. "Sorry—bachelor existence," he said, immediately neatening the already neat bedclothes. "My wife would be—well, my father would be mortified. My wife would understand."

Mr. Stern's father, the renowned architect and Yale School of Architecture dean Robert A. M. Stern, whose recent credits in the city include 15 Central Park West and the Brompton at 205 East 85th, designed the house. Seen through glass panels from the leafy backyard, the grand room, with its wide staircase and 21.5-foot ceiling, is, as Mr. Stern said, "dramatic."

His wife, Courtney, who on this July evening was at the family's East Hampton beach house with their three children, is the West Village house's interior designer. Mr. Stern oversaw the project as the contractor, or, as he would say, the builder. Work didn't always go smoothly.

"By all accounts, we should all be dead in some sort of triple homicide that you read about," Mr. Stern said. "You know, site meeting goes horribly awry, wife kills builder husband as he's killing daughter—some sort of Marvin Gaye-type thing. But it was fun."

Mr. Stern, 42, tanned, energetic and slightly graying, was dressed sharply in a gray suit, striped tie, white pocket square and gold cuff links. Before becoming a builder in 2002, he worked for 10 years in the entertainment business, and he carries himself like an old-fashioned Broadway showman. "Hold on," he said, stopping to adjust the lighting before climbing the stairs to the master floor. "I'll turn the light on, get you the full dramatic effect." And when the mood was perfect: "It's what we do—we make dreams," he said, adding, "I promise I'm not trying to date you."

MR. STERN HAD invited *The Observer* over to talk about his new boutique construction firm that specializes in high-end Manhattan residential projects. He and his small group of trusted colleagues, many of whom he has worked with for almost a decade, are "living the dream" at Stern Projects LLC, he said. "This is the thing that is mine, that I wanted to do all along, and I suppose, yes, I had to do it," he said. "I'm happier than ever."

But it hasn't always been that way.

On March 3 of this year, Mr. Stern resigned from his post as executive vice president of Taconic Builders, the tony development concern. He made some phone calls, and within hours, several of his colleagues had also resigned. In one fell swoop, Taconic lost, in addition to Mr. Stern, vice president Alexander Carey, project manager John Huthwaite, site supervisor Joseph Huthwaite (John's brother), site supervisor Nick Banks, site supervisor Gerald Garry and assistant project manager Kathleen Brosnan.

Taconic responded swiftly. Reeling from what it perceived as an effort "to take over existing Taconic projects," the company filed a



His friends call him Nick.

lawsuit, accusing Stern et al. of a "calculated surreptitious effort" to sabotage Taconic's business, in alleged violation of noncompete agreements that it said the defendants had signed. The former employees walked out with "trade secrets," Taconic said, after they allegedly deleted emails from Taconic computers and stole valuable clients. Taconic sought restraining orders on the defendants' construction projects, in an attempt to shut down the lead defector and his crew. "Let's say we got divorced and I got the kids," Mr. Stern said, referring to his colleagues. "I guess that makes me Dad or something."

For the previous two months, Mr. Stern had spent nights and weekends setting up a new company that would become Stern Projects. After resigning, all the former employees immediately began work at Mr. Stern's new company. ("They wanted to go camping with me," Mr. Stern said, continuing the divorce analogy.) To Taconic, it looked like a massive suicide pact—some sort of conspiracy. But Mr. Stern denied that there was any such pact. He said he had only mentioned the new company to his close friends Mr. Carey and John Huthwaite. Mr. Stern called the two men "my right and left hand."

"When Nick came to me a few months prior to his departure and said he was leaving to start his own company, I think he got about four words out before I said, 'I'm going with you no matter what,'" Mr. Carey said. "I don't want to say I follow the guy anywhere, but when it comes to business, I needed to follow him."

The group that resigned, Mr. Huthwaite said, was "essentially a company within the company"—not officially, but that's how they behaved.

Mr. Stern said Taconic's lawyer, Richard Menaker, seized innocuous details and turned them into exaggerated allegations. Taconic has a videotape of Mr. Stern packing up "eight years of memorabilia and personal furniture" from his corner office, which Mr. Stern said was the basis of Taconic's claim that he stole, as he called it, "the secret sauce." Mr. Carey and Mr. Stern said that "trade secrets," as the lawsuit calls them, don't exist in construction, since every project is unique.

"We're not coming up with the formula for Coca-Cola here," Mr. Stern said. "Do you know what the trade secret is in construction? Be honest."

Vince Tyer, the president of Taconic, declined comment. In response to the defendants' claim that the lawsuit was based on false premises, Mr. Menaker, the lawyer, said, "If the folks on the other side are making irresponsible remarks, it would be unfortunate."

On June 17, the parties settled. "I don't have time, money or the interest in sidelining the business [Stern Projects] to get into a year and a half of appeals to prove that they are wrong on every count," Mr. Stern said.

He wouldn't disclose how expensive the lawsuit ended up being, saying only that it was "more than our drinks tab here." The drinks were water.

MR. STERN'S UPBRINGING in New York City was, in his words, "very fortunate." His father, now 71, was devoted to his firm, Robert A. M. Stern Architects, and Nick Stern picked up that discipline. "That compulsive commitment to whatever the task is I got from him," Mr. Stern said. "I think a lot of the lessons I learned I learned by osmosis, and so young I didn't even know I was learning them."

But being the son of Robert Stern also has had more practical advantages. Mr. Stern grew up surrounded by architects and artists. His mother, Lynn Stern, is a photographer, and her husband (Nick Stern's parents divorced when he was a child) is the architect Jeremy Lang. For his current profession, that exposure was an inadvertent but immensely valuable networking opportunity.

Some of the architects Mr. Stern works with (he estimated between 10 and 20 percent) are former students of his father's. He said he has known these architects for 35 years—he grew up around them. And even if they aren't his father's former students, the top architects in the business, Mr. Stern said, have likely met his father at some point, or have at least heard of him. "Everybody I deal with knows of Bob Stern," he said.

"There's probably close to a hundred people out there who remember me as Bob Stern's son making them martinis at age 7 at some

fairly boisterous office parties," he said. "This was a type of person that I was just around my whole life."

"In architecture, it's a small world," he added. "Especially the kind of architecture I deal with."

But such an environment also put pressure on the young Mr. Stern. After graduating from Columbia in 1990 with a bachelor's in architecture, he worked for a year in Hollywood before enrolling in the Yale School of Architecture. Even though he said he naturally "can't start something and not finish it," he dropped out of graduate school during his first semester. The school refunded his tuition, a concession that, Mr. Stern said, to this day makes his father, who became dean in 1998, "furious."

"I dropped out because I was 22, an only child and going, 'My God, I finish this program in three years, my father is an internationally known architect, I'm not a wall flower of my own, what do I do?'" Mr. Stern said. "I couldn't figure out that I'd get into general construction, that I had this special skill set, and I'd just shift a little left—which is what I ultimately did."

Mr. Stern said he has more work now "than I've looked at literally in years." The advantage of his new firm's being "small and sort of lithe and lean and mean," he said, is that it can work on a diverse variety of projects. In addition to an Upper West Side "extremely traditional" duplex apartment, he's also working on a "very minimalist, modern" West Village landmarked townhouse renovation.

"It's a stunning design. It's quite large, lots of stone, lots of minimal use of stained wood," he said. "It's similar to mine except the aesthetic is totally different."

Other renovation projects in the works include two Park Avenue apartments (roughly 4,000 and 5,000 square feet, respectively) and three downtown lofts, two of which are in the same building.

As for Taconic, it's a relief to be free.

"I do it my way, which is just exactly my way," Mr. Stern said. "Like Frank Sinatra."

walden@observer.com