

HEAVEN'S GATE Dresner's home in Birmingham, MI, designed by architect Steven Sivač. The entry court, accessed by the vertical slit at far right, is open to the sky.

Linda Dresner, whose Manhattan boutique became a showcase for avant-garde fashion in the '80s, built a minimalist concrete home in the Detroit suburbs where her singular aesthetic reigns supreme.

BY LYNN YAEGER PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAN GAUT

THE FORTRESS OF MODERNISM

I DIDN'T DO THIS to shock. I did it for how I want to live," says Linda Dresner, shaking her raven tresses—held back, today and every day, by a trademark navy bandanna. The shock she is referring to is the stunned, frankly furious reaction on the part of some of her neighbors in Birmingham, Michigan, when Dresner and her husband, Ed Levy, filed plans to level two houses on conjoining lots and erect Dresner's dream home, a 7,200-square-foot postmodern poured-concrete extravaganza that has nothing in common with the staid colonials and rarefied ranches surrounding it.

That was three and a half years ago. Now the neighbors in this leafy suburb 20 miles from Detroit, whose attempts at architectural NIMBY were spectacularly unsuccessful, can, if they so choose, bury the hatchet and knock on Dresner's front door—assuming they can locate the almost-impossible-to-spot portal. If the house looks to the untrained eye like an haute-intellectual fortress, and if the guy who drives you from the airport says, "I'm going to ask to pick you up tomorrow; I want to hear about what it's like inside this place!" (this happened), Dresner doesn't much care. She is impervious to the wide range of

reactions: "People can stick up their noses; it's all right," she says with a shrug.

It isn't the first time that Dresner, who has a throaty no-nonsense voice that puts one in mind of Cher, has been what might be called an aesthetic maverick. Her name is hallowed by generations of adventurous dressers. For 25 years, she owned an eponymous fashion boutique on Park Avenue in Manhattan, along with a shop in Michigan, still in operation not far from her home in Birmingham. Brands such as Dries Van Noten and Junya Watanabe are available in designer department stores all over the country today—not to mention on the Internet—but back when Dresner began in the business, in the late 1970s, she startled her Midwestern clientele with astonishing clothes by such designers, brought back from Milan and Paris. "I was one of the first to have Saint Laurent. I still have some of my original clients."

Dresner married young (at 17; Levy is her third husband), had children young and says that even back then she was always interested in film and beautiful things. She worked as a model but found she had an affinity for clothes, and also a sensitivity to what she calls "women's vulnerabilities. I still enjoy dressing women."

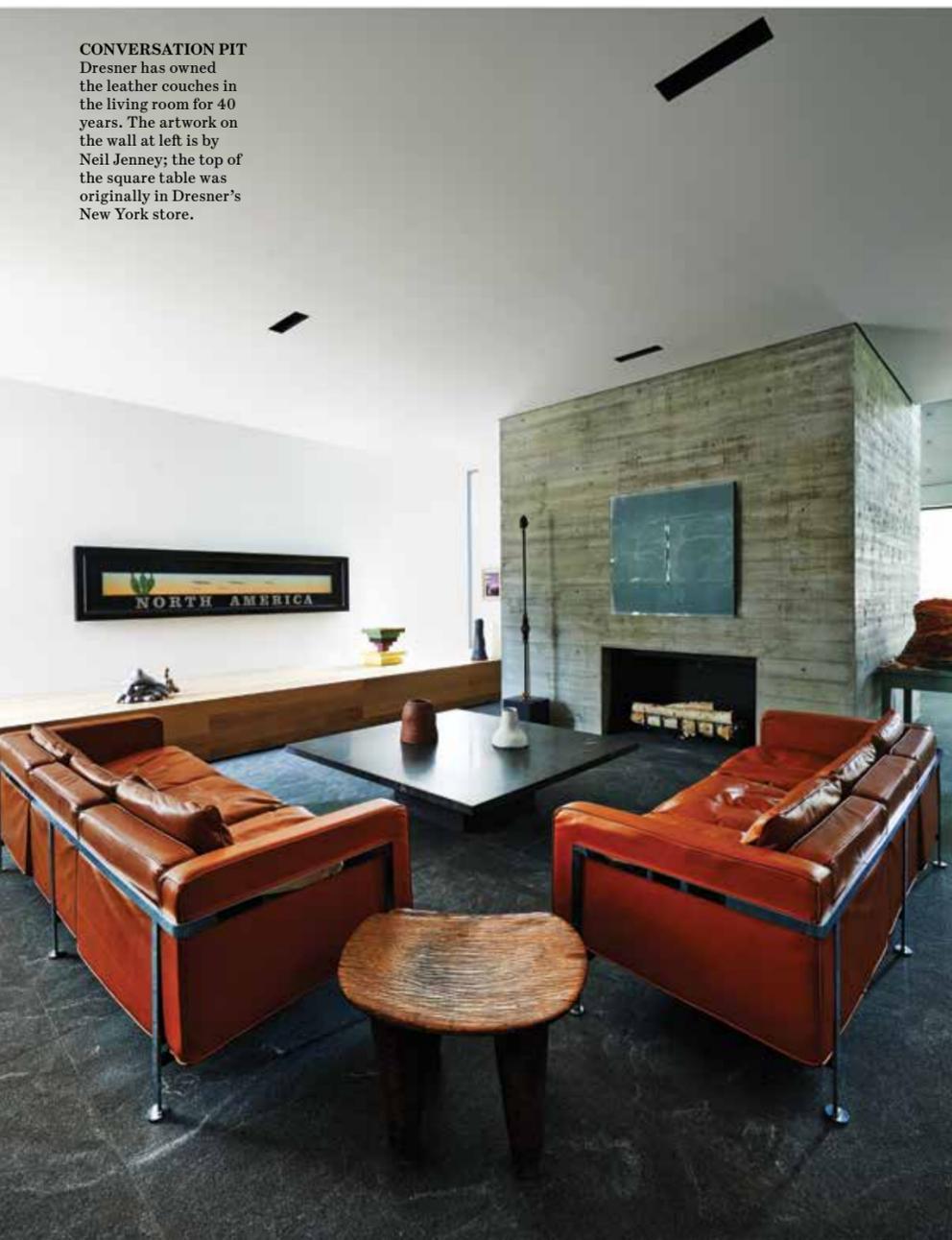
Her first store, opened in 1979, was a mere 700 square feet on the second floor of the Somerset mall in Troy, Michigan; in 1984 she launched the Manhattan shop, which featured avant-garde lines, obscure high-fashion labels and an entire Jil Sander store-in-store. "We were early with Dries Van Noten, Rick Owens, Galliano," Dresner recounts proudly. "We had Chloé when Karl Lagerfeld was the designer." She also stocked iconic labels of the British new wave: Jean Muir, Thea Porter and Zandra Rhodes. "I am still wearing some of those clothes," she says. In addition to being a place where you could find obscure designers and experience an extraordinary level of personal service, the boutique was such an oasis of calm that, Dresner says, Jackie Kennedy Onassis, in search of a quiet place to eat lunch away from prying eyes, used to come in and have her tuna sandwich in one of the fitting rooms.

The New York store, dramatically minimal and monochromatic, was designed by J.W. Fred Smith (and Michael Gabellini, who did the Sander store-in-store), from whom Dresner says she learned a "whole different way of looking at things." All of Manhattan's fashion elite mourned when the shop shuttered in the shaky-economy days of December 2008. "The lease was up," Dresner explains. "It seemed like the perfect time to exit." She may have closed her Manhattan outpost, but she didn't lose her touch: Her Michigan friend and customer Marsha Miro, a former arts writer for the *Detroit Free Press*, says that Dresner's secret is the way she gradually convinces you to be more adventurous in your fashion choices. "She nurtures her clients' eyes," Miro says, "and develops their tastes."

DRESNER MET THE ARCHITECT for the new house, Steven Sivak, whom she describes as "a young fella from Ann Arbor," years ago. "He's a modernist, and he loved our old house," she says. (The former residence was similarly stark, sort of a baby sister to the current abode.) "First we were going to redo it. It took two years to

CONVERSATION PIT

Dresner has owned the leather couches in the living room for 40 years. The artwork on the wall at left is by Neil Jenney; the top of the square table was originally in Dresner's New York store.



DRESSED TO THRILL
Top, from left: Dresner wearing her trademark bandanna; under the staircase, a Shaker bench and wood sculpture by Barbara Cooper; Dresner's closet.



DREAMSCAPE
Left: The master bedroom. Below: An Indian piece from Elliott & Elliott gallery in Harbor Springs, MI, hanging on a horn chair.



OBJETS D'ART
Bottom, from far left: The master bathroom features a Greystone marble tub and artwork by Gina Ferrari; a piece by Ettore Sottsass atop a built-in oak bench; a painted aluminum sculpture by Scott Reeder.

come to a decision, and he seemed to understand.”

At least part of the reason she built the current house was to have a fresh place for her and Levy, the president of a private construction materials company (they married nine years ago), where neither of them had lived with anyone else. “I thought the stone should have soul,” Dresner declares; lucky for her, Levy knows all about that sort of thing. “We used a self-consolidating concrete,” he explains. “Additional chemicals allow the concrete to flow against the form without any vibration. The result is a highly polished, very soft, glossy surface.” In other words, his wife says, “It’s strong, but it doesn’t make you feel overpowered.” Levy may have the technical mastery, but he readily admits that the vision was all Dresner’s. “It’s Linda’s house, her conception, her ideas. I just enjoy living here with her.”

The massive interior space still daunts a bit—Dresner confesses that she is in the process of making friends with the living room, preferring at this point to curl up on a Mission chair or read in bed rather than tackle one of the two humongous sofas. (For his part, Levy, who has a putative office on the second floor, can usually be found at the kitchen table.) Dresner told me the place would be warmed up when she staged her first party, a benefit for Detroit’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCAD), where she is on the board. “Curators love Detroit; they think it’s like early Berlin,” she says. Though she is very optimistic about the future of the city, she remembers

its better days. “I grew up in the city of Detroit. Back then I would go downtown on a bus by myself, even when I was quite young.”

If her new home is imposing in scale, it is paradoxically full of delightfully homey furniture, much of it vintage and collected by Dresner over the past several decades. You might not think that a Shaker bench, found in northern Michigan years ago, would be happy sitting beneath the cast-in-place open staircase, or that two tables from Africa that she found in a New York gallery would nestle contentedly next to a sofa Dresner has owned for 40 years, but it all blends quite congenially. A patchwork quilt is folded on the bed in the master bedroom; well-worn Shaker rugs, the more charming for their frayed condition, cheer up the granite floors; a collection of brightly hued Art Deco Clarice Cliff urns from the 1930s lines a high ledge in the kitchen. These items might be considered wildly discordant in such rigorously spare surroundings, but Dresner says, simply, “I like whatever talks to me.”

Which means that the hall outside her room-size closet boasts a stained-glass Tiffany-style lamp (it may not be signed Tiffany, Dresner concedes, but it talks to her) and a vast Arts and Crafts dresser. The wardrobe room itself offers a living history of fashion. Dresner is certainly no slave to this year’s models—in fact, she often prefers garments from back seasons. In any case, there is plenty to pick from. The racks mix greatest hits with current

favorites: vintage Comme des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto next to newer labels such as Haider Ackermann and Greg Lauren. “You can’t go wrong with Margiela,” she says, showing off a blazer from that most elusive of designers. “Stand back!” Dresner commands as she presses a button and the shoe shelves glide toward you, revealing a cavalcade of clutches, hobos and satchels.

The furnishings are only part of what makes the home so compelling. There is also the world-class art collection, an exquisite, highly personal assemblage that stirs a palpitation of jealousy in even the least envious heart. High above an Italian carbon-fiber dining room table that can seat 24 and is balanced on a mere four legs (“a feat of engineering,” Dresner says) is a spectacular Calder mobile. “I’ve had it for 45 years,” she recalls. “I remember when I bought it, I was nervous about the price! I feel lucky to have it. Art is very pleasurable in its way.”

The pleasure is everywhere apparent. One wall offers a haunting Joseph Cornell oil; near the kitchen is a poignant Alice Neel portrait; another corner features a surprisingly jaunty purple-and-green abstract Ad Reinhardt painting from his pre-black days. A huge picnic table sculpture laid vertically is by Forrest W. Myers; hanging above a built-in oak bench is



“I DIDN’T DO THIS TO SHOCK. I DID IT FOR HOW I WANT TO LIVE.”

—LINDA DRESNER

the living room is a panoramic work by Neil Jenney emblazoned with the words *North America*.

The artworks may overwhelm with impressive provenances, but a bit of sleight of hand has been employed when it comes to decorating the grounds. The imposing oxidized sculptures—inspired by the work of artist Chris Burden—were made by a local firm from Corten steel to give them an aged, rusty character.

Dresner worked closely with landscape architect Andrea Cochran to make the grounds “more sculptural, and edgy,” Cochran says. “We wanted to create a layer, or scrim, to allow the building walls to also be a dynamic surface that would reflect the shadow pattern of the river birch trees at various times of day. The trees are planted in a formal grid, which is in keeping with the geometry of the house—but not *too* formal, as you might find with *allées* of trees in a French garden,” she explains. “I prefer greenery to flowers,” Dresner adds. The garage is currently a gray box, but Dresner is looking forward to the day it will be covered with ivy, transforming it into “a green box.”

The design on the exterior facade looks a little like polka dots, and Dresner says, chuckling, “I pay attention to that sort of thing—I’m visual! Since Ed’s in the concrete business, I thought, why not?” Indeed, though her house may be a temple of neo-minimalism, Dresner refuses to be labeled, to be put in a box, green or otherwise. “Things can mix together, as long as you think they’re all beautiful. In the beginning I would ask myself, is this or that thing the right thing for the house? Now I don’t ask.” ●

HIGH TIMES

In the dining room, a mobile by Alexander Calder hangs above an Italian carbon-fiber table that seats 24. The painting on the wall at right is by Al Held. Opposite page: A table by Maria Pergay and sculpture by Barbara Cooper (top) and, in the living room (bottom), a painting by Jonathan Lasker, *World of Mutual Exclusion*.

