

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Architect Glen Coben's 'Brady Bunch' Challenge

A 1950s ranch house in Harrison, N.Y., has been evolving into a brighter, roomier home since its purchase in 1997



Nancy Keates
The Wall Street Journal
March 31, 2016 10:27 a.m. ET

Amid the imposing Colonials and Tudors in the wealthy town of Harrison, N.Y., this home was an outlier: a long, skinny, 1950s ranch house that vaguely recalled “The Brady Bunch.” Inside, the floors were stained brown and the interior had a dank, cramped feel.

It was an unlikely choice for architect Glen Coben, whose designs include some of [New York's most upscale restaurants and hotels](#). But in 1997, he and his wife, Caren Low, a mortgage banker, brushed aside the concerns of some friends and family members and bought the house, for \$625,000.

“People said, ‘How will you ever sell it?’” recalls Mr. Coben.

The house, he adds, did have some positives: a low roof line, floor-to-ceiling glass in the back and more than an acre of land.

Mr. Coben and Ms. Low, now both 53, lived in the house, about 22 miles northeast of Manhattan, for three years without changing anything structural, just painting the walls white and getting rid of the brown stain on the floors. Then, after their daughter Maya, now 16, was born, they [set out on a renovation](#) that they say is still unfinished.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

To date, they estimate they've spent \$284,000. "There's always more to do. Where do you stop?" asks Mr. Coben.

First, they cut down about 30 trees in their yard to let in more light. Then, in 2000, they spent about \$20,000 redoing all 4½ bathrooms. Mr. Coben did the drawings and acted as the general contractor, hiring subcontractors to do much of the work and getting materials at cost from his contacts on previous projects.

Six years later, they tackled the kitchen, which was small and dark. They made the old kitchen a dining room and transformed their large, screened-in porch into the new kitchen, creating an open space with windows facing the yard. For maximum light, they added floor-to-ceiling glass walls and put almost all the cabinets below the counter line.

The most important goal was to have an area where people could "hang out," says Mr. Coben. To that end, they put a long stainless-steel island with a Carrara marble top in the middle of the new kitchen. A breakfast area, delineated by a stone floor and a round table, went next to a two-sided desk that Mr. Coben designed.

They also opened up the bedroom spaces. Previously, there were six bedrooms squeezed into the 4,500-square-foot home; now there are five.

Mr. Coben designed much of the furniture in the house, often as prototypes for his professional projects. An upstairs den has a velvet-covered ottoman—an early version of the ones he created for the lobby of the Edison Ballroom, an event space in New York's Times Square that Mr. Coben renovated in 2008. In a downstairs den, a Le Corbusier chaise longue with cowhide sits near a carpet that the architect designed for the Time Hotel, featuring skulls in a traditional-style Persian motif.

After graduating from Cornell's architecture school in 1985, Mr. Coben did a five-year stint at the nonprofit SITE Projects Inc., a public artworks design group. In 1992, he and Ms. Low moved to Portland, Ore., where they worked for NIKE, Ms. Low as a director of merchandise planning in the retail division and Mr. Coben overseeing the design of Niketown retail stores. Missing family and friends, they returned to New York four years later, and Mr. Coben went to work as a Principal for the Rockwell Group, an architecture and design firm.

Mr. Coben started his own firm, Glen & Company, in 2000. Its projects include Manhattan restaurants Gabriel Kreuther, Dovetail, Batard, Carbone, Brother Jimmy's, Rare Bar and Grill and Mario Batali's Del Posto. He also is the designer behind such varied projects as a penthouse on Front Street, Zini Boutique in Greenwich Village, the Archer Hotel, EVEN Times Square South—all in Manhattan—plus the new Time hotel in Nyack, N.Y.

Mr. Coben says he tries to tell a story through design. For the restaurant Gabriel Kreuther, for example, he evoked the town squares found in Mr. Kreuther's hometown near Strasbourg, using pathways to divide the bar and dining room, and installing reclaimed beams similar to those used in old Alsatian homes.

While he has worked on a few residential projects, he says he stays away from them because they are more psychologically complicated. "There's no opening day," he says.

Still, Mr. Coben has found that the narrative of his own house helps him convince commercial clients that he won't spend a lot of money imposing his aesthetic on their projects. "I show them a picture of my kitchen and say, 'This is how I live.' I tell them I'll spend their money as if it is my own."