

Jean Wiersema Wehrheim Lemont 1960

Ruth Koier and Laurence Sjoblom House



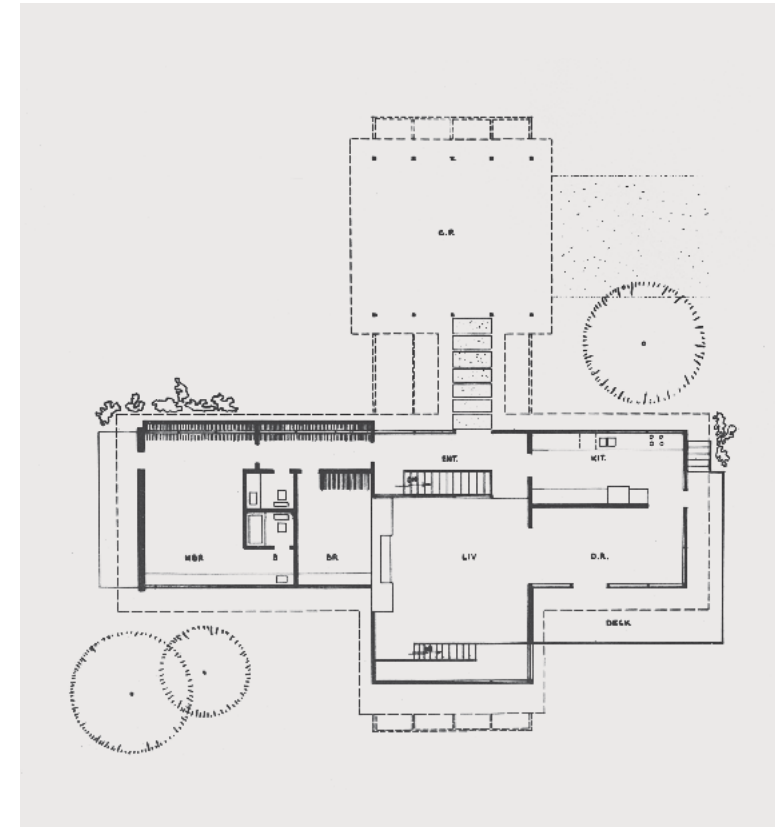
The Sjoblom House perches on the edge of a ravine on ten wooded acres, a modern home of wood, brick, and glass designed in 1960 by Jean Wehrheim, a woman who happens also to have been a very talented modernist architect. Vertical board and batten grey cedar boards and floor-to-ceiling window mullions echo the tall, slender trees of the property, creating a pleasant organic harmony with nature.

Ruth Augusta Columbia Koier Sjoblom, a chemist at Argonne National Laboratory, and Laurence Richard Sjoblom, a mathematics professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle Campus, sought a house that would accommodate their needs as they reached retirement.¹ The middle-aged Sjobloms, known as “Patti” and “Larry,”

Exterior showing glazed conservatory next to living room and balcony surrounding dining room and kitchen.

would be moving from a huge Victorian house. They were not entirely certain that a modern design would suit them. The Sjobloms engaged Jean and John Wehrheim who were practicing together; however, Jean Wehrheim handled the firm’s residential work.²

Both in its intimate relationship with the surrounding landscape and its economy, the Sjoblom House recalls Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonian houses. Like Wright, Jean Wehrheim also viewed a house as a place where space flows naturally between exterior and interior rather than as a box with holes punched for windows. The Sjoblom House has a subtle cruciform plan, with the living room, dining room,



Floorplan.

Living room fireplace with adjacent floor-to-ceiling window.

Living room with glass wall view into plant conservatory.



kitchen, master bedroom and garage all extending out to the landscape from a central fireplace. Wood decks and flat roofs with broad overhangs supported by exposed brackets further relate the house to the landscape.

The decks accessed from the dining room, kitchen, and master bedroom allow for extended living space with bucolic views. Broad floor-to-ceiling windows bring the outdoors in—almost sixty percent of the exterior walls are glass. The Sjobloms’ niece Jennifer Sjoblom describes the house as a “magical oasis” because “it was a private sanctuary in the suburbs. Every detail and angle of the house was built with the intention of maximizing the connectedness to nature.”³

All the major living spaces and master bedroom share the main floor, with a large recreation room and guest suite opening out on grade from the lower level; a two-car garage is connected to the house by a breezeway.



In the interior, a broad stacked-brick fireplace dominates the surrounding major living areas thus creating an informal open plan. Original furnishings were minimal so as not to detract from the architecture of the house or exterior views. Walls and ceiling are cedar. In some sections the flooring is brick laid in a basketweave pattern, and in others wide pine boards. Composed entirely of natural materials, with no painted surface treatments or stylistic references, all of the woodwork was stained and hand-rubbed by Larry Sjöblom. From the beginning the architect-client relationship was collaborative. Larry acted as general contractor. Wehrheim focused on keeping costs down: the proportions of the house were all based on multiples of six and building materials were all stock sizes.

Front entrance, across from staircase to lower level.

Two car garage under kitchen and dining room.



The Sjöblom House received public recognition a dozen years after it was built, when, in January 1972, the house was featured in a *Chicago Tribune* article “Great Home is a Bargain,” noting that it was built for \$40,000. The author describes how the couple was attracted to the easy maintenance, convenience, and comfort this modern home provided.⁴

In 1977, more than a decade after the Sjöblom House was built, the *New York Times* published an article entitled, “The Last Profession to be Liberated by Women.” Highly respected critic Ada Louise Huxtable expressed outrage: “Professionally speaking, women architects have yet to get out of the kitchen. They are chained, tied, and condemned to the house—to house design and house interiors in the name of design efficiency, *gemütlichkeit*, and the family.”⁵

In the 1960s, designing houses was just fine with Jean Wiersema Wehrheim. Encouraging women to pursue architectural careers, she was quoted in a 1966 *Chicago Tribune* article, “We have a natural inclination for homes . . . Men seem to prefer big projects, like offices and public buildings, but I know what I am doing when it comes to designing a kitchen.”⁶ More recently, Chicago architect Cynthia Weese, FAIA, founding partner of Weese, Langley, Weese, and Dean Emerita, School of Architecture, Washington University in St. Louis, reaffirmed that doing residential work is “wonderfully satisfying, deeply personal.”⁷

Following her graduation with a degree in architectural engineering in 1948 from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Jean began with the architectural firm of Keck & Keck (where she met her spouse, John Wehrheim, also an architectural engineer) and received her license the next year. In the early 1950s the Wehrheims joined the York Center Community Cooperative, a residential subdivision in Lombard where they built their own home and established a professional office. He branched out to concentrate on commercial and industrial projects.

She established a successful independent residential practice in 1954, with her first commissions to design eight of the 80 houses built within the 85-acre co-op community. In the early years, she was also a general contractor on homes that she had designed.⁸ A prolific architect, Wehrheim designed over 150 houses over her career, mostly in Chicago's western suburbs. She continued to work out of their Lombard home after John's death in 1962, which enabled her to care for their two young adopted children and permitted a flexible schedule.

In the late 1960s Wehrheim taught a course at the College of DuPage incorporating topics that included the interplay of space, functional yet artistic architectural principles, kitchen and bathroom planning, and solar orientation of a house on its lot.⁹ Her own house and several others she designed incorporated passive solar energy, which she learned during her stint at Keck & Keck.

Jean Wehrheim enjoyed success in her chosen field of residential architecture, yet she often felt that she wasn't taken seriously by contractors and was frustrated at her inability to command the same fee as a man.¹⁰

The number of women architects in practice was still at a low ebb in 1960, with an estimated 260 in practice in the United States.¹¹ Prior to that time, there were but a handful of Chicago women that enjoyed recognition. Marion Mahony Griffin, who worked for Frank Lloyd Wright from 1895 until 1909 (when he left for Germany) and produced elegant renderings for the 1910 Wasmuth Portfolio, was Chicago's most distinguished, joining a cadre of nationally accomplished women architects including Julia Morgan, Mary Colter, Louise Bethune, Theodate Pope Riddle, and others. Chicago's women architects included Elizabeth Martini, who initiated Chicago's Women's Architectural Club and the publication of its small journal *The Architrave*, and Mary Ann Crawford, who received acclaim for her beautiful Beaux-Arts drawings. After receiving her bachelor's and master's degrees from MIT, Crawford paved the way for women at the firm of Perkins, Fellows & Hamilton in the early 1930s but found it difficult to find work during the Depression and later accepted a full time job in social work.¹²

During the watershed decade for women's rights, eight Chicago women who had already begun to enjoy success in the field founded Chicago Women in Architecture (CWA) in 1974; they were Gertrude Lempp Kerbis, FAIA (Jean Wiersema Wehrheim's roommate at the University of Illinois), Carol Ross Barney, FAIA, Cynthia Weese, FAIA, Nancy Abshire, AIA, Gunduz Dagdelen (Ast), Natalie de Blois, Laura Fisher, FAIA, and Jane M. Jacobsen. No women, however, were represented among the at least forty-five men in the *Chicago Architects* exhibition of 1976 that was installed to pay tribute to the many architects who had been passed over by historians of modern architecture.¹³ In 1977–78, Chicago hosted two exhibitions and a series of panels focused on women in architecture. The venerable Architectural League of New York's 1977 exhibition "Women in American Architecture: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective" traveled to Chicago.¹⁴ At the same time, Chicago Women in Architecture organized an exhibition "Chicago Women Architects: Contemporary Directions: Chicago Women in Architecture" at Artemisia Gallery, January 1978 that focused entirely on Chicago women architects who were largely

Door from balcony into kitchen and dining room.



unknown and not-yet-nationally known.¹⁵ Jean Wiersema Wehrheim's 1960 residence for the Sjobloms was featured in the exhibition.

Despite its importance, when the house came on the market in 2017, its modern design was misunderstood—as these houses frequently are—and the listing agent marketed the house as a "teardown." Jennifer Sjoblom, was appalled at the prospect of the demolition of the historic house and took over the listing, refusing to sell to someone who would demolish it. In 2011 the house was sold to a couple that appreciates modern homes. —SSB