

TIM NIGHSWANDER

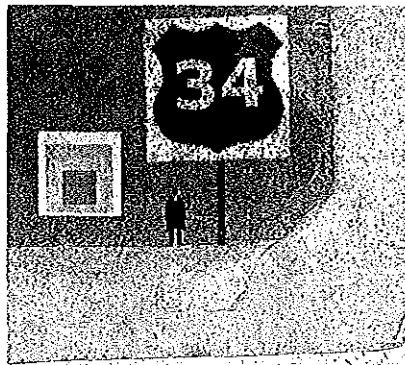
# Albers Home

B y N i c h o l a s F o x W e b e r

I had long loved the West Hartford reservoir and the trails at Sleeping Giant in Hamden, North Street in Litchfield and the bridges over the Merritt Parkway, the dining room of Farmington's Hill-Stead and the balconies of art around the Wadsworth Atheneum's Avery Court in Hartford: the Connecticut of travel guides and the wonders we expect of it. But in 1971, I entered a setting that was home to a creativity and vitality—and an ardor about visual beauty—I had never before known firsthand, and had not dared think existed in my own time or on our side of the Atlantic. From that moment on, my favorite place in the state was a quirky, awkward, raised-ranch house just off Route 34 in Orange.

Its concrete foundation was bare of plants, and the front lawn was generally soggy. Its shingles were the flat beige of Band-Aids. The graceless garage doors with their windows painted out (I would later discover this was to hide a treasure trove of paintings) was what met one first. But inside, more genius and courage were palpable than within any place I had ever been before.

I was first taken to the house of Josef and Anni Albers when I was a graduate student at Yale. From the moment I entered, it was different from any place I'd ever visited. The nearly living room and so-called dining area had only a few pieces of lean furniture and a complete absence of personal objects. The walls were blank save for four paintings by Josef. It was like a minimal Modern stage set. But the Alberses gave the scene Shakespearean magnitude. This couple in their white and khaki clothing spoke with a flare and clarity, and an intensity about the making of art, that were unparalleled.



If Le Corbusier said a house could be "a machine for living," the Alberses' was a machine for art. As the actor Maximilian Schell said during one of his frequent visits, it was "*nicht gemütlich*" (not cozy). Anni was considered the foremost textile designer of the century, but her own simple 1950s sofas were covered in white Naugahyde rather than one of her own marvelous upholstery materials. There were Venetian blinds on the living-room window and white rolling shades—cheap ones—in

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the other rooms—ironic, given that Anni's own draperies have been sold for years by Knoll International and other high-end purveyors of fabrics. The living-room rug was industrial, probably a left-over square that was marked down on the Post Road. The cabinets in the bedroom were metal office furniture meant for stationery storage.

Yet what a hotbed of creation this monastic dwelling was! The basement was Josef's studio. Here, with his simple plywood work tables on saw horses and his industrial shelving packed with paint tubes, under fluorescent lights he had positioned carefully, he would create the luminous "Homages to the Square"—his renowned "platters to serve color"—that graced the walls of museums worldwide. (One became the basis of a U.S. postage stamp that bore the motto "Learning Never Ends.") In a room upstairs, Anni worked on her innovative abstract prints and stored the weavings that were the reason she was the first textile artist to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. The rest of the house existed for the necessities of life that made their work possible.

Bauhaus North, as I thought of 808 Birchwood Drive, has had its moments of glamour. Henri Cartier-Bresson and Lord Snowden entered its modest rooms to take photographs. Collectors and other artists and museum directors—some of the best-known in the world—would visit, and wax rhapsodic over the strudel Anni had purchased at the Entenmann's outlet store. (By the time I knew them, the Alberses had ample funds, thanks to the booming art market of the 1960s, but lived frugally anyway.)

In the 1980s, a few years after Josef died, John Cage would sometimes come for lunch. He and Anni had once swapped works—he gave her an original musical composition, and she gave him a weaving—and in ways it seems that what he did with sound was like what she did with thread. John would arrive with a wicker basket full of macrobiotic food—the peanut butter and rice cakes essential to his diet—and Anni, who relished everything from steak tartare to smoked eel, was fascinated. The dialogue sparkled; they were in a world of their own.

Then there was the visit of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, who arrived after a day of antiquing with my wife. Anni Albers was waiting in her wheelchair. Jackie, in an old sweater and corduroys, her hair slightly disheveled, looked like a

young (and ravishing) art student. Anni asked her if she knew what the Bauhaus was, and Jackie fairly gushed, saying that Anni could not imagine her excitement at meeting someone who had actually taught there. Then Jackie cast her fantastic wide-set eyes into the living room with Josef's four paintings and said, "Just like the Matisse Chapel at Vence. All the white and then the color." The association could not have been more apt, or truer testimony to Jackie's unique pow-

ers of observation.

This was a house for people who really cared, who knew the difference. The effect of its honesty, of the integrity and verve that filled it, was inestimable.

*Cultural historian Nicholas Fox Weber, a Bethany resident, is the author of Patron Saints (Knopf/Yale University Press) and Cleve Gray (Harry N. Abrams Inc.). His most recent book is Balthus: A Biography (Knopf).*

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