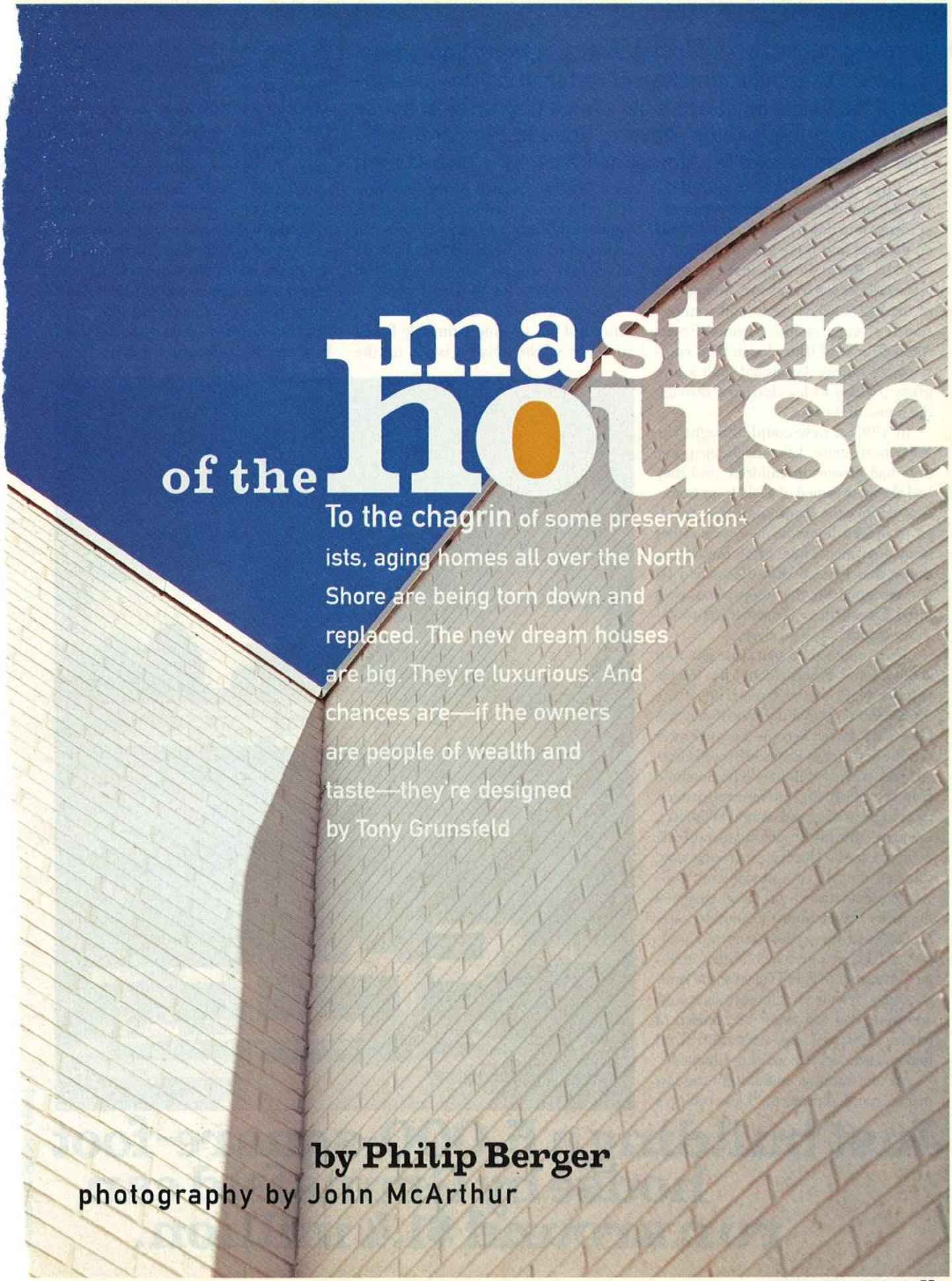


master of the house

To the chagrin of some preservationists, aging homes all over the North Shore are being torn down and replaced. The new dream houses are big. They're luxurious. And chances are—if the owners are people of wealth and taste—they're designed by Tony Grunsfeld

by Philip Berger

photography by John McArthur

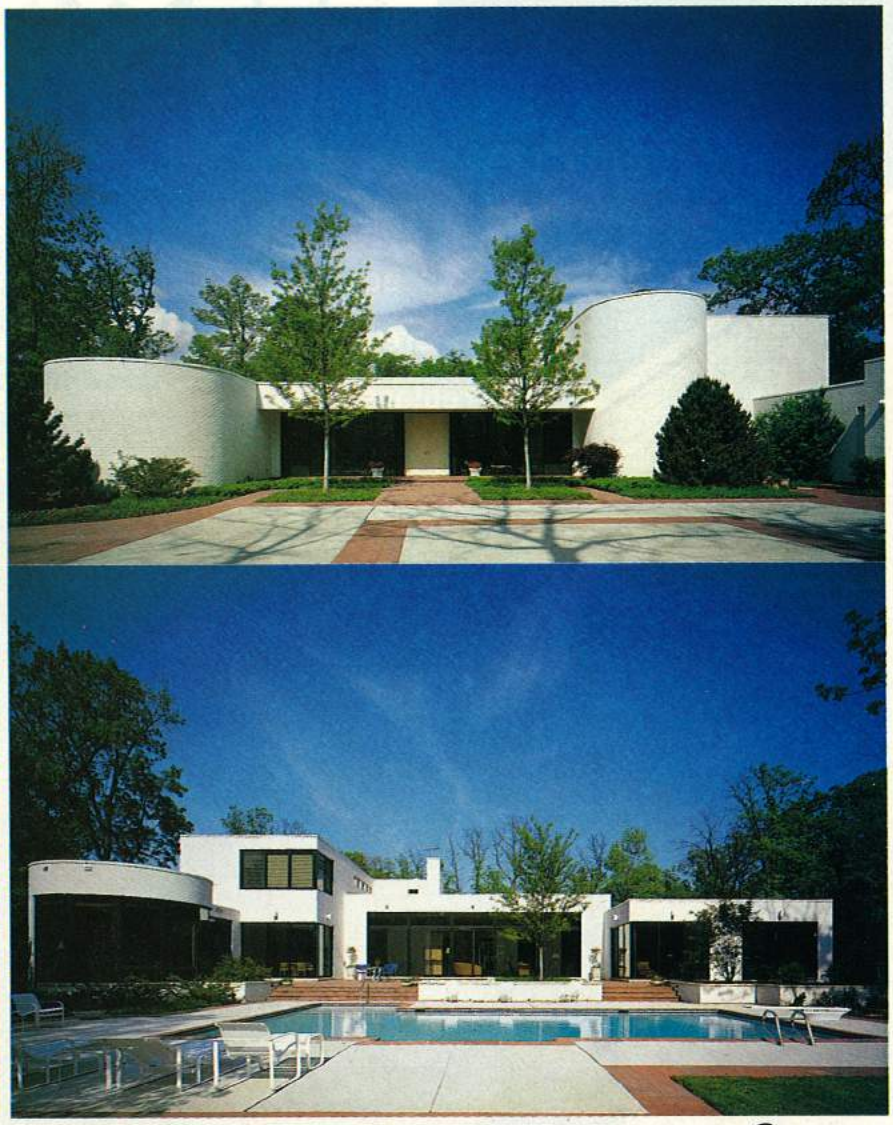
A few years before World War I, a North Shore family hired the architectural firm of Marshall & Fox—designers of the Drake hotel—to build a huge neoclassical house overlooking the lake on Waverly Road in Highland Park. The mansion stood for almost half a century, owned for a good part of that time by an heir of the Florsheim shoe family, before yet another owner tore down the house and divided the land into three lots. In 1958, Dr. and Mrs. Benjamin Rappaport, an older couple whose son was grown, bought one of the lots, 1403 Waverly, and commissioned a young architect named Ernest Alton Grunsfeld III to design their empty nester retreat. Grunsfeld built a low, glassy pavilion with a clear view through the house to the lake.

In 1997, a new couple bought the Rappaport house. Like the Rappaports, they had grown-up children, and they had always dreamed of a lakefront home. And also like the Rappaports, they decided to build a house of their own rather than buy one. Thus, after razing the house that Ernest Alton Grunsfeld III had designed for the Rappaports, they hired Ernest Alton Grunsfeld III to design a dream house for them.

That architectural spin cycle says a lot about "Tony" Grunsfeld and the unique role he plays in the landscape of the North Shore. In four decades of practice, Grunsfeld, 69, has become the area's most prolific designer of luxurious, sophisticated, and expensive houses. His portfolio features nearly 200 private residences, most of them scattered around Winnetka, Glencoe, Northfield, and Highland Park, many on scenic lakefront or ravine sites. Himself the son of a prominent, well-connected architect—his father designed the Adler Planetarium—Grunsfeld today has assumed the somewhat arcane position of Chicago's principal "society architect": designer of grand villas for the landed gentry. "When you choose him as your architect, you can never be accused of having bad taste," says a Sheridan Road homeowner. "It's like wearing Chanel."

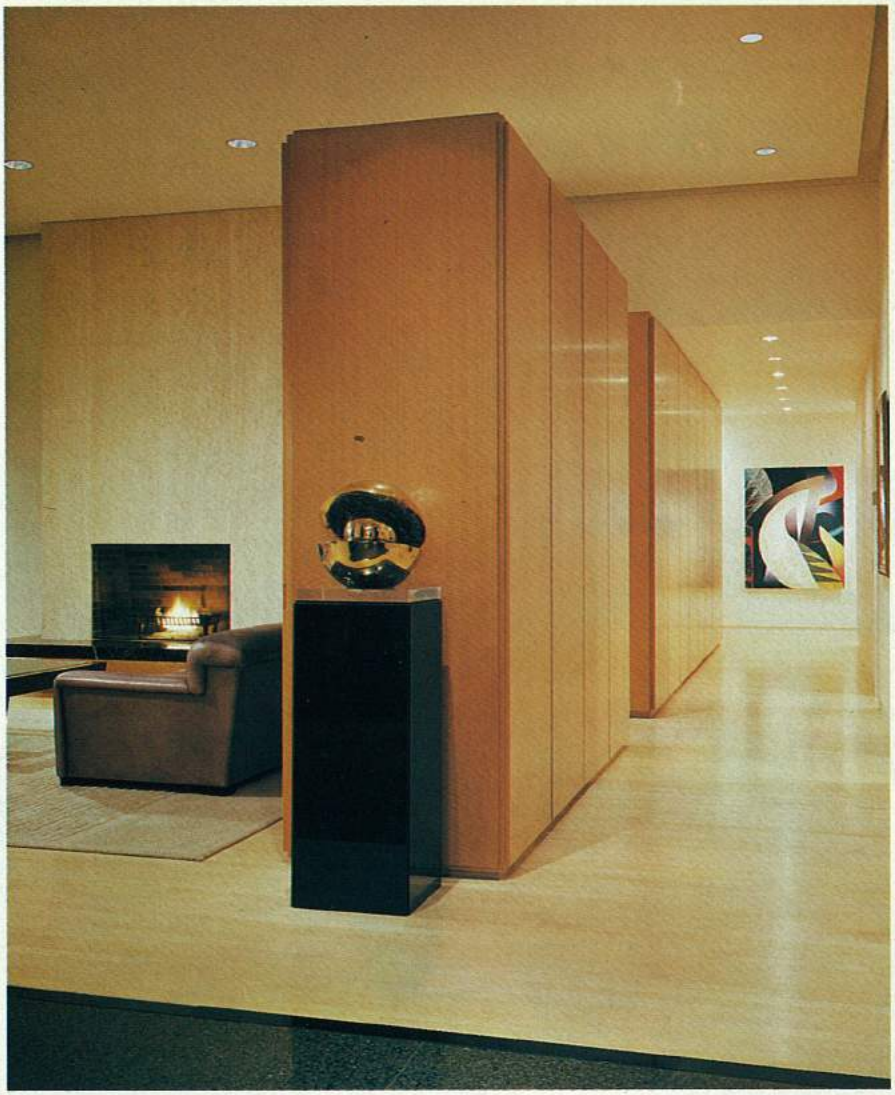
An unassuming, unfailingly modest man, Grunsfeld protests, "I lose out on a lot of jobs." But pushed, he suggests there is a measure of conformity behind his popularity. "Since I started [my career in architecture], I've been convinced that it's all faddish," he says. "I'm just lucky I've remained faddish for 40-some years."

Because of his success, though, Grunsfeld has become intimately linked with one of the noisiest issues on the North Shore—the fight over "teardowns," razing large old houses to build larger new ones. Though Grunsfeld and others argue that the houses coming down have little or no value—"Just because something's a hundred years old doesn't mean it's of great architectural interest," says Patricia Wyle, doyenne of North Shore real estate agents—preservationists worry that a vital texture of style, elegance, and history is being lost. "It isn't in the repertoire of people who made a lot of money in the eighties and nineties to have much respect for anything old," says Suzanne Carter Meldman, a Highland Park preservationist and landscape histo-



Just building a 5,000-square-foot house by Grunsfeld can run around $1.4 million.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GEORGE LAMBROS



rian. "They just want to build their own castles." Meldman lives a block from the lake and within a one-block radius of nine sites where houses have been torn down in the past decade. Five of them were replaced with buildings by Tony Grunsfeld.

A house by Ernest Alton

Grunsfeld III comes with a high price tag. Grunsfeld estimates typical construction costs at upwards of $175 per square foot; $275 per square foot, he says, would not be unheard of. Just building a 5,000-square-foot house, then, can run around $1.4 million, and some of Grunsfeld's houses are a lot larger. His fee is 15 percent of the construction costs up to $800,000, then 12 percent thereafter. None of this, of course, includes the price of acquiring the land.

Someone with that kind of budget for a new house has several options. A few North Shore folks have commissioned houses by post-postmodern, "high art" architects—internationally renowned practitioners like the firm of Arquitectonica (which has done a lakeshore house on Lakewood Drive in Glencoe), or locally based stars like Thomas Beeby (who is building a house on a teardown site on Mayflower Road in Lake Forest). As another high-priced alternative, several builder-architects in Chicago offer custom residences that try to duplicate the historic grandeur of the pre–World War II era—the art historian Franz Schulze describes them as "tract mansions."

Or the fortunate landowner can build something contem- *(continued on page 90)*

HALLMARKS OF THE GRUNSFELD STYLE: GEOMETRIC SHAPES AND A FOCUS ON THE PRIVATE REALM RATHER THAN THE PUBLIC FACADE. LEFT: FRONT AND BACK VIEWS OF A NORTH SHORE RESIDENCE FROM 1994. ABOVE: A TYPICAL INTERIOR, SUBDUED BUT LAVISH, FROM 1990

PHOTOGRAPHY: GEORGE LAMBROS

Home Wreck-onomics

Teardowns in the Chicago suburbs seem concentrated mostly along the lakeshore, but they are not restricted to the highest reaches of the real estate spectrum. It isn't the big places on the lake that are most endangered, but rather, the more vernacular housing that has served a less affluent populace for much of the 20th century.

A 1990s lifestyle that mandates storage for multiple vehicles, state-of-the-art media technology, and a whirlpool in every bath has a tough time thriving in houses built in the 1920s. Or the 1950s. In Winnetka, houses near the village center, priced in the mid-300s, are prime candidates to be torn down. Since 1990, 251 of them have been razed and replaced typically with structures many times bigger and more expensive.

Several North Shore communities have enacted historic or landmark preservation ordinances that are aimed at stemming this tide. But because landmark restrictions are primarily voluntary in most towns, the control official authorities can exert over the teardowns is largely advisory. Ellen Shubart, president of the Glencoe Historical Society and chairman of the Glencoe Historic Preservation Commission, says that statutory regulation is most effective in making owners consider whether tearing down is the best alternative.

Preservationists and municipalities have had to grapple with issues of landmark qualification. Age does not seem to be the only criterion; historical and architectural significance are also important. In Highland Park, which recently imposed a 30-day waiting period on demolitions, a fight is brewing over a local landmark built in 1961, a lakefront house designed by the visionary architects George and William Keck. To facilitate its sale, current owners are arguing for de-designation, which the city of Highland Park has not yet granted.

Perhaps such battles were inevitable in suburbia, where real estate is paramount. A chunk of property to call one's own—and do with as one pleases—is part of the allure of living there. An almost libertarian sense of the home as castle prevails, and there's a lot of talk about "homeowners' rights." Preservationists, however, warn that this approach is self-centered and noncivic. "You have to remember what drew you to this town originally," says Ellen Shubart. "It wasn't a bunch of boxes with garages facing the street." ■

Master of the House

continued from page 57

porary and stylish, though not too far out on the edge—a description that more often than not has come to mean a house designed by Tony Grunsfeld. The ubiquity of "GRUNSFELD & ASSOCIATES" signs at lakefront construction sites points to his remarkable dominance of the highest end of the high-end residential market.

Recently, sitting in his spare, light-filled office on East Ontario Street, Grunsfeld told me a story about a 1961 house for sale on the lake in Glencoe. Asking price: $5.2 million. He had been working with a pair of buyers who were negotiating to buy and demolish the house and subdivide the lot into two buildable ones, on which each would build a Grunsfeld house. (Grunsfeld, who is extraordinarily discreet about clients, would not name names.) That week, Grunsfeld had received a dispirited call from one of the buyers to say that he had been outbid. The next day, the winning buyer called Grunsfeld—he wanted to come in and discuss plans for the property.

The notion that Grunsfeld's popularity is simply a quirk of fashion, however, largely evaporates when you see his work and talk to its owners. Although real estate agents invariably call his houses "contemporary," Grunsfeld refers to himself as a modernist. And over the decades, he has firmly adhered to the modernist principles of simplicity, geometry, and integrity of materials. His lake and ravine houses of the 1950s and 1960s were notable as dramatic and innovative exercises in planning. In designing the Heller house, for example, built in 1964 at 1893 Crescent Court in Highland Park, Grunsfeld divided the space into three interconnected skylit pavilions, one for recreation, one for the kitchen, and one for sleeping.

Often, his houses were built in a manner that most communities would not permit today. For the 1961 Lebolt residence, next to the Rappaport house in Highland Park, the bedrooms were built directly into the bluff below, with windows capturing the lake view. Currently, some North Shore communities have bluff and ravine ordinances that prevent excavation of these sensitive sites (though Grunsfeld, who is very persuasive with the local building departments, guesses he would be able to design them in a way that would receive approval today).

Some people are unhappy with Grunsfeld's later work, arguing that it has become unimaginative, boxy, and inappropriately scaled—resembling nothing so much as a fortress. The big, gated brick mansion at 1869 Crescent Court in Highland Park is a prime example. Indeed, the typical Grunsfeld house doesn't reveal much of itself on the exterior. It may completely fill the allowable zoning envelope and often doesn't pay much deference to the street. But that may say as much about changes in society as about the architect's aesthetic. In contrast to the grand mansions of the 1920s, Grunsfeld's houses aren't about the face they show the public. They derive their power from a focus on exclusivity—what is beyond the front door, in the private realm, for the sole enjoyment of the owners and their guests.

Grunsfeld's clients tend to tell numbingly similar stories about how they ended up with their house: They had always wanted to live on—or at least near—the lake. They wanted a "contemporary" house. They looked for a lot for years, finally found one, and called Grunsfeld. Sometimes they called him before they even started looking for property. Many are empty nesters who have built what Grunsfeld himself calls "adult ranches"—single-story residences that are often bigger than the houses in which they raised their families. And it's not simply square footage that has grown; it's the sheer scale. Twelve-foot ceiling heights are typical in a Grunsfeld house, and nearly all the rooms have full-height expanses of glass. Finishes—such as fossil rock, French limestone, and veneers of exotic wood—are lavish but subdued. Master suites equipped like spas are standard. There is a dazzling play of natural and artificial lighting and a completely unstudied sense of graciousness and elegance. In Grunsfeld's version of modernism, less may be more, but there's a lot more of it.

"Why not?" asks the architect. "If you're on the lake or on a ravine, you get a grander view, a bigger post card, in 3-D and stereo."

To a person, the clients I interviewed loved their houses and sang Grunsfeld's praises. Although he works closely with them, they say he doesn't pressure them or impose his tastes. "He is stubborn," says one, "but if you go to Tony, you already know his houses and want his style."

Clients consistently acknowledge how adeptly he steers them through the process of creating a house. Robert Scadron, the president of Scadron Outdoor Advertising, who was to move into his new Grunsfeld-designed lakefront house in Highland Park this summer, says the architect has a personal stake in every house he designs, which is why "he'll fight you tooth and nail to try to prevent you from making a mistake."

"His biggest line was 'You don't want to do that,' which he said over and over, and he was always right," says Margaret Gordon, who grew up in a house designed by Grunfeld's father and hired Grunsfeld to build her Highland Park house. Ultimately, she says, "he gives you exactly what you want, whether you know it or not."

He is known for taking a hands-on approach to all his projects, although he says he is getting better about letting go. Some building contractors may resent the intrusion of the architect at the construction site, but they have to get used to Grunsfeld. He visits his jobs in progress every workday—and often on Saturdays, when the crews aren't there. The contractors and subcontractors tend to treat him deferentially, and with good reason—his practiced eye often catches potential errors.

Recently, I joined him on a visit to a ravine site at the end of a dead-end street in Highland Park, where he has designed a 6,000-square-foot house; even the basement has a ten-foot ceiling. During his inspection, he spotted a section of flashing that had not been attached correctly, and it was fixed immediately. Later that morning, at a house under construction on Highland Park's lakefront, he noticed a motion detector that had been installed off center. After some discussion, the security contractor was dispatched to center it. The city forester came by to check on a request to remove two failing trees that blocked the lake view. Grunsfeld argued for their removal—they were coniferous, not native to the lakeshore; the forester concurred. "You pay a lot for a house he designs," says one client, "but he knows how to get things done."

Like his houses, Grunsfeld doesn't reveal much on the exterior. In person, he is affable, but hardly loquacious. He keeps an extraordinarily low profile, maintaining no formal marketing effort whatsoever. And although many of his houses look as if they could jump out of the pages of *Architectural Digest* or *Elle Decor*, pictures of them have rarely been published. He scoffs at the notion that he

has shaped style or influenced taste. "I just know what I do," he says.

It may not be that simple, but there is no question Grunsfeld has the background for his calling. On his father's side, he is related to the Sears magnate and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald. His father, Ernest Grunsfeld, Jr., was a talented but mostly unheralded architect who designed public housing in Chicago, as well as several gracious manor houses in Highland Park and Glencoe during the 1920s and 1930s. Tony Grunsfeld grew up along with a sister on the Near North Side, graduated from the Francis Parker School, and in 1952 earned an architecture degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. By that time, his father had retired; Grunsfeld worked for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Bertrand Goldberg Associates, and Keck & Keck before sitting for his state registration exam, which he passed in 1956. He established his own practice that year and today maintains a small staff, including three associate architects, in a high-rise office overlooking the Arts Club of Chicago. He and his wife raised two children in Highland Park—his son, the father of two, is an astronaut stationed in Houston; his daughter has four children and lives on the North Shore. Today, the Grunsfelds still live in Highland Park, in a house on the lake.

Grunsfeld was lucky enough to score some plum commissions as a young architect. Winnetka Building Department records, for example, show that one of his earliest projects was a house for a rising young business executive named Jay Pritzker. (That house, at 1160 Laurel Avenue in Winnetka, is no longer owned by the Pritzkers.) Today Cindy Pritzker, Jay's wife, dismisses the notion that the wealthy couple's influence advanced Grunsfeld's career. "Tony's talent would have come out no matter who was the first to use him," she says.

During the sixties and seventies, Grunsfeld continued to design houses. But there wasn't much custom residential business, so his office focused on other things: restaurants (he did a lot of Magic Pans for Quaker Oats), and even a high-rise apartment building in Chicago—"The Conservatory," at 2314 North Lincoln Park West—which he doesn't like today. But starting with the Reagan era,

high-end residential work flourished again, with the new mansions often going up on property cleared of the past.

As archaeologists can attest the teardown cycle is virtually as old as the human race. What has ignited the issue on the North Shore is the recent—and relatively uncharacteristic, for Chicago—interest in preserving the area's history, combined with the picked-up pace of demolitions. The social landscape no doubt has something to do with it, too. Living on the lake is the most basic emblem of prestige and arrival, not simply in Chicago but throughout the Great Lakes region. During the economic boom from the 1890s through the early 1930s, much of the suburban Chicago lakefront—along with the ravine-moraine areas adjacent to it—was developed into sumptuous homesites for the affluent. It was the golden age of the society architect: such famous names as Howard Van Doren Shaw, David Adler, Benjamin Marshall, Ernest Mayo, and the Pond Brothers, as well as such lesser-known designers as Arthur Heun, Robert Seyfarth, Ralph Varney, and William Mann.

Arthur Miller, archivist at Lake Forest College, points out that the grand lakefront estates of the boom years were built by "old money" for the most part. The society architect's more typical clients came from families who had amassed large fortunes during the industrial explosion following the turn of the century. The grand, formal, lavishly detailed manses they built, with their reverence for both history and the great homes of Europe, determined the style, shape, and character of the North Shore.

During the Depression and World War II, in a phase repeated in affluent suburbs throughout America, many of these houses became white elephants—too large to heat and maintain, unsuitable for smaller families, hugely out of sync with the exigencies of the times. Many languished and deteriorated. But with prosperity on the increase after the war, the aspiration to live in one of the existing lakefront palaces by the great society architects of the Jazz Age became a reality to a new generation of gentry. Often, the larger properties were subdivided for additional homesites, but new owners would typically remodel and update the old houses. Fashion during the sixties and seventies dictated an appreciation of their charm and grace.

In real estate, as in apparel, however, fashion is subject to change, and few can attest to that as well as the real estate agent Patricia Wyle. During more than half a century of selling North Shore property, she has had the lion's share of top-drawer listings—and she has become perhaps the only person more deeply entrenched in the teardown arena than Grunsfeld, beginning with the original Rappaport transaction she handled in 1958. Three years ago, when she and her husband sold the house they had built in 1947 (on Highland Park ravine property her family had owned since the turn of the century), the new owners tore it down and built—what else?—a house designed by Grunsfeld & Associates.

Wyle takes a predictably pragmatic approach to the teardown issue. If the market dictates a change in taste, she thinks it's ridiculous to try to fight it. Besides, she says, most of what is being torn down is not what she would call distinguished architecture, but rather, in the patois of real estate salespeople, "dogs." "Whether it's hideous or worth saving," she says, "is all in the eye of the beholder." She adds, "Half the time these preservationists are bananas."

But the preservationists argue that the problem is really ego—rich people want to build monuments to themselves and are sacrificing the North Shore's heritage to do it.

Grunsfeld says that he doesn't feel responsible for teardowns—he just designs houses—and he professes not to worry that the demand for lakefront property will endanger the remaining great houses of the North Shore. Those being razed, he says, are primarily mediocre products of the 1950s and 1960s, often built on lots subdivided from the grand estate properties. Indeed, Grunsfeld himself hasn't built on any sites where a house one would be likely to call a landmark once stood.

The owners of the Rappaport property had already decided to tear down his 1958 house before they hired him to build a new one, but, characteristically, Grunsfeld is unsentimental about the outcome. "Houses are just things," he says. "They're not live, but they do have a useful life. At some point, it just doesn't make sense to keep them."

In his 1981 book From *Bauhaus to Our House*, Tom Wolfe saw ironies abounding when postwar corporate America adopted the modernist, International Style of architecture. Bauhaus modernism had its political roots in "worker housing," but by the sixties, what had been cutting-edge and politically progressive had become the Establishment design standard. A glance through the shelter magazines of the late 20th century indicates another, similar shift of taste in residential design.

It is a shift that is evident among Tony Grunsfeld's clients today. Like those who patronized the society architects of the 1920s, most of them did not grow up rich, but became enormously successful, often in securities, the professions, and real estate development. And like their earlier counterparts they are interested in residences that bespeak their success, their achievement, and their good taste. "For all these young people with a great deal of money, new is better now," says Patricia Wyle. "They want instant gratification and all the new amenities, and the old houses don't work for them."

Grunsfeld's houses apparently do, perhaps because he has taken the tenets of modernism beyond the ascetic minimalism of "worker housing" to create his own brand of resplendent simplicity that is almost ostentatious in its understatement. His rise coincides with the moment when the vocabulary of modernism has become the expression of power, money, and the Establishment at home. Indeed, the enormous popularity of Grunsfeld's style among the moneyed and powerful suggests that modernism has gone 180 degrees and become conservative.

Regardless of the label applied, though, a Grunsfeld house epitomizes comfort, success, and security, just as an extravagantly detailed David Adler mansion would have done in 1928. It is just expressed in a far subtler way. The signs of luxury and privilege are all there, but you have to be able to read them.

How long, though, will this remain the fashion? The original house on the Waverly Road site stood for almost half a century. Rappaport's was there for slightly less than 40 years. If the demand for lakefront property continues at the same fevered pitch, it is not inconceivable that some newly affluent Highland Parker of a few decades hence will buy the house designed in 1998 and replace it, perhaps with the work of the 21st century's favorite Chicago society architect. It isn't likely to be Tony Grunsfeld, but at today's pace, you never know. ■