

We ♥ Haertling

Joel Haertling, son and de facto archivist of the late architect Charles A. Haertling, faxed over a single page written by his father. Titled "Thoughts on Architecture," it's a blurry, typewritten list. Charles Haertling succumbed to a brain tumor in 1984, but the text is immediate and cuts across the years: 21 enumerated glimpses into a creative mind. Someone has circled point number 14: "Design is always a tortuous, grueling, almost maddening, though heavenly sweet, task." The line is as familiar as it is revealing. Look at Haertling's houses with their radically pitched roofs, daring cantilevers, and mushrooming facades—products of a career spent building in the Boulder, Colorado, area—and you can see both his pleasure and his pain.

Haertling's work might be categorized as "organic architecture," a genre

that draws inspiration from natural forms and materials, interpreting leaves, trees, and rocky outcroppings in wood, glass, and stone. Frank Lloyd Wright and Bruce Goff are the best-known practitioners of the style and their influence on Haertling is clear. "You could hardly grow up in America and not be influenced by Wright," explains his widow, Viola Haertling. But with the exception of an afternoon spent visiting with Goff on a family trip to Missouri, he never studied with the masters. His development was iconoclastic—a reaction to the Colorado environment and an expression of futuristic ideals.

Fresh out of Washington University, Haertling arrived in Boulder in 1953 and began teaching at the University of Colorado, where he also worked as a designer for architect Jim Hunter ▶



Story by Mimi Zeiger

Organic architecture typically draws from earthly sources. With the Brenton House (1969), Haertling looked to the sky, creating cloudlike forms out of polyurethane foam.

Photos throughout courtesy Joel Haertling



and protégé of Marcel Breuer Tician Papachristou. It is difficult to pinpoint when Haertling began his formal experimentation. When he received his degree in 1952, architecture training followed modernist credos: flat roofs, glass facades, and boxy volumes. By the time he built the Noble House in 1958, an early commission for his solo office, the signature elements were already in place. Described as a "wig-wam" by Haertling, each of the two octagonal folded roofs are topped by a metal spike. As the eaves lift, the interior is flooded with light. Though the project was published in the Italian architecture magazine *Casabella*, the *Denver Post* headline is telling: "Space Craft Home Draws Traffic in Boulder."

As Haertling's designs became more complex, his career was peppered with equal parts praise and controversy. Located in west Boulder, the Volsky House (1964), a family home for psychology professor Theodore Volsky, was organized around a circular floor plan; the bedrooms and the kitchen radiate out from an interior garden. The prow-like living room offers a panoramic 360-degree view of the mountains on one side and the plains on the other. During construction, outraged neighbors circulated a petition against its odd profile.

It took a special client to brush aside not-in-my-backyard judgment and invest in a chancy Haertling design. The architect would interview potential clients at length before accepting a commission, occasionally sending them on to more conservative firms. "He was the only one in town who was doing experimental things, and we knew we didn't want a ranch house," says Kenneth Kahn, who still lives in his Haertling-designed home.

A doctor engaged in innovative research, Kahn wanted an equally forward-thinking architect, so he hired Haertling to build a house for his family along a steep road overlooking Boulder. The timber, stucco, and glass design cantilevers over the hillside. "The main thing is the view," explains Diana Kahn. "Chuck liked the idea of it blending with the outside. The ledge is straw-colored and so is the living



Set on a steep site, the shipshape Volsky House (top) in west Boulder juts out over the landscape, taking advantage of its 360-degree view of the surrounding

mountains and plains. In contrast, the house's interiors (bottom) look inward. Petal-like volumes ring a circular plan, and at its center, an interior garden brings

light and greenery to the ground floor. Despite opposition from more traditional-leaning neighbors, Haertling and the Volskys persevered with the original design.



room, so the exterior flows in. We didn't call it 'organic' in those days—in 1969 there was no such word—but it incorporates the surroundings."

Haertling completed only a handful of nonresidential buildings in his career, including the Boulder Eye Clinic (1968) and, notably, the Flying Nun-like St. Stephen's Church (1964) in Northglenn, a Denver suburb. (Based around a catenary arch, the church's concrete roof structure has a diagonal span of 155 feet.) Yet the bubbly Brenton House in Boulder (1969) is perhaps the architect's best-known design. There, Haertling sprayed polyurethane foam over rebar formwork to create five pods that simultaneously resemble mushrooms and clouds.

Though the "wacky" house brought national attention to his work, Haertling's legacy is more

understated: He served on Boulder's city council from 1967 to 1973, as deputy mayor in 1970 and 1971, and on the landmarks board in the early 1980s. He presaged some of the downsides of rampant development: As a councilman he expressed his environmental interests as resolutions to preserve historic Boulder (which led to the establishment of the open-air Pearl Street Mall), restrict building heights, and maintain a green belt around the city, which today buffers Boulder against encroaching sprawl. "The architect must lead the way of the daring" reads the second point of Haertling's "Thoughts on Architecture." Though the dictum clearly applies to his organic structures, it is also an expression of his political vision, one that Haertling wove into his houses and Boulder's urban fabric. ▶

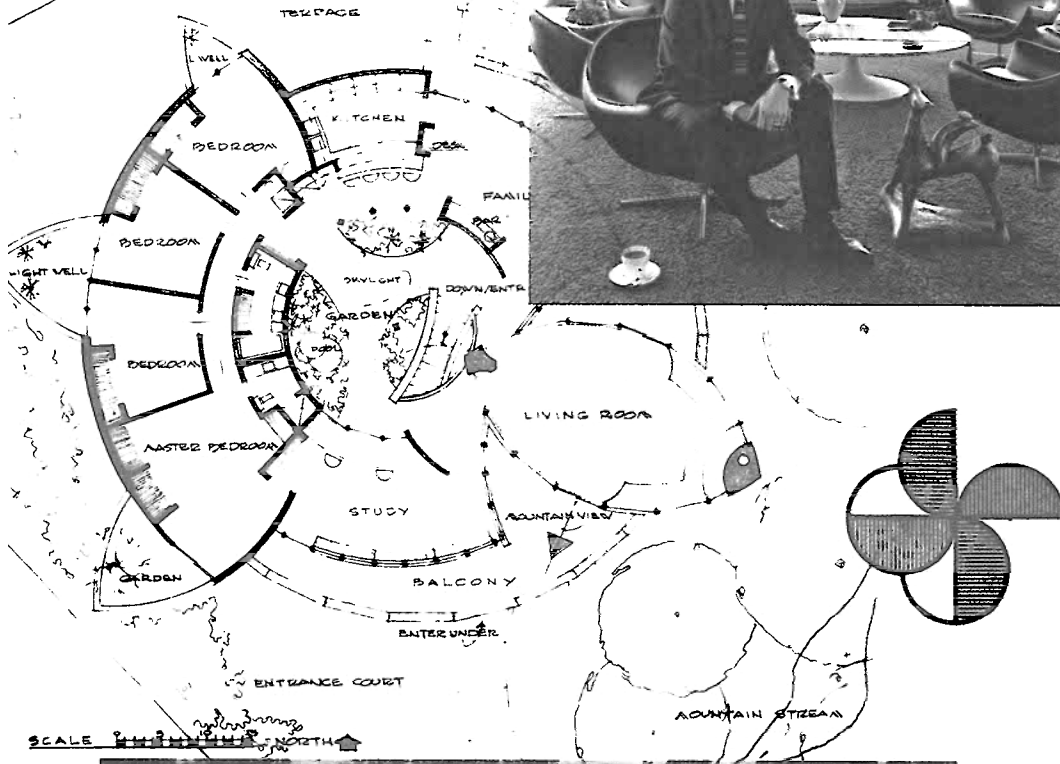
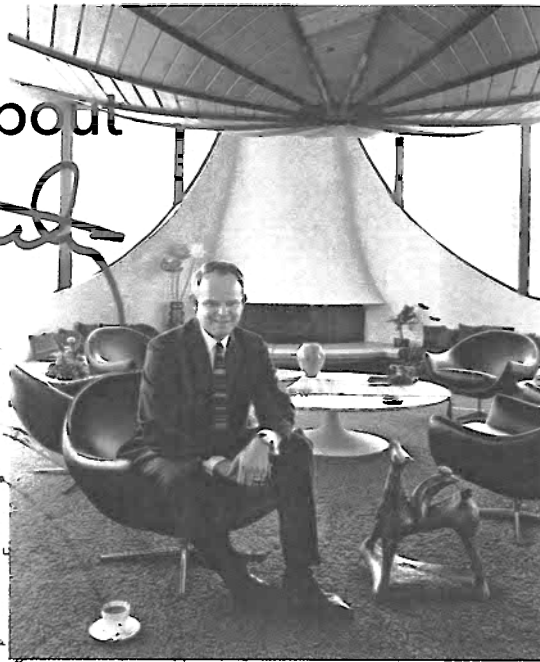


The Brenton House (top) is Haertling's most famous work. Kenneth and Diana Kahn hired Haertling to create a house (bottom) that would integrate into the landscape.

The living and dining rooms cantilever out over the slope; straw-colored eaves and ledges match the interior paint, emphasizing the flow between inside and outside.

10 things you should know about

Charles A. Haertling



Though Haertling—in the Volsky living room (top)—faced criticism for his far-out designs, his residential interiors are human-scaled and warm. More than aesthetic embellish-

ment, the odd forms protruding from the side of the Boulder Eye Clinic (bottom) actually have a purpose: Eye charts for exams hang at the far end of each alcove.

1. In 1952 Haertling met Viola Brase, his future wife, in the basement of Grace Lutheran Church. A religious man, he was proud to remodel the church sanctuary 18 years later.

2. Handsome and boyish, Haertling was often mistaken for Marlon Brando.

3. A terrible storm struck while the Noble House (1958) was under construction. A city council member took one look at its tilted walls and hurriedly called Haertling to (mistakenly) report that the house had collapsed.

4. Haertling was constantly designing, even when out to dinner with the family. At the Pizza Oven he would sketch little details from the room on a napkin, then challenge his kids to locate them before the pizza arrived.

5. One of the neighbors who petitioned against the "sheer grossness" of the space-age Volsky House (1964) was George Gamow, the physicist and cosmologist who helped develop the Big Bang theory.

6. A 1966 issue of *Life* magazine featured an "Ideas in Houses" spread on the Volsky House, while the *National Enquirer* highlighted the Brenton House in its "Weird Houses" column.

7. The Brenton House appears briefly in Woody Allen's 1973 film *Sleeper*.

8. Haertling got his preteen sons to climb the Brenton House's jungle gym-like rebar and hold non-tear paper in place as foam was blown on the surface.

9. After the Wilson House (1968) caught fire in 1972, it was abandoned by its owners. Six months later Haertling moved his family in and set about on its restoration. Viola Haertling still lives in the house.

10. Barbara Brenton, a piano teacher, still lives in her Haertling-designed home. Her curved, acoustically sweet living room has hosted a number of celebrity musicians in concert. ■■■