

GEORGE NAKASHIMA WOODWORKER, GEORGE NAKASHIMA  
HOUSE  
1847 Aquetong Road  
New Hope  
Bucks County  
Pennsylvania

HABS PA-6783-A  
*HABS PA-6783-A*

PHOTOGRAPHS

PAPER COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

ADDENDUM TO:  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### GEORGE NAKASHIMA WOODWORKER, GEORGE NAKASHIMA HOUSE

HABS No. PA-6783-A

- Location: 1847 Aquetong Road, Solebury Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, 18938.
- Owner: The property is owned by Mira Nakashima Yarnall, and Kevin Nakashima. Kevin Nakashima currently resides in the George Nakashima House.
- Present Use: George Nakashima House is currently being used as the residence of his son, Kevin Nakashima.
- Significance: The house is significant as the home of George Nakashima during most of his productive career as a furniture designer and woodworker, as well as that of his wife, Marion, and their children, Mira and Kevin Nakashima. The house was the second structure erected on site in 1946, preceded only by the woodworking shop. The house was designed by George Nakashima and erected under his supervision. It was designed in the international style combined with elements of traditional Japanese architecture, thus combining the concrete forms that Nakashima admired in the work of pioneers such as Le Corbusier and former employer Antonin Raymond with the traditional Japanese craftsmanship that he observed while living in Japan. The latter included a deep appreciation for wood as a building material and the ability of Japanese carpenters to capture its intrinsic beauty, the lack of the need for symmetry, ideals such as “wabi-sabi” or rustic simplicity and minimalism as manifested by the Japanese “Sukiya” style. The house exhibits the economy of form and design characteristic of Japanese architecture, including elements such as simple exposed framing and use of trim with an emphasis on joinery rather than ornament, as well as detail features such as shoji screens, naka bashira or unhewn log posts or supports (also referred to as parent or mother posts), and built-ins and storage elements such as the open shelves (tsuri-dana) and low storage compartments (ji-bukuro). Sliding glass door panels, decks and other features help blend the house with the natural environment, and the low overhanging eaves mimic the deep thatched overhangs common in traditional Japanese architecture to protect the house from frequent rain.
- Description: The George Nakashima house is a 55’ x 15’ asymmetrical, single-story structure with a low overhanging roof constructed of stucco, stone, and wood. The walls of the front of the house are mostly of native stone to the height of the raised windows where the walls are of concrete. The exception is the section to the east end where the entry protrudes to allow for the main entrance to the west side of the projection and for a covered entry porch with a stone patio. The door, made of large, unornamented slabs of wood is offset both literally and figuratively but the corresponding section of white wall with a glass box inset to hold a light. The

windows along the front included pairs of sliding casements flanking a transom-like fixed light above a concrete panel. The house is set at the top of a ridge and the rear looks out over the hillside. To the eastern end of the rear elevation is a set of sliding glass doors flanked by full-height glass panels. These doors exit onto a plain deck void of railings and ornamented only by mortise joints. Adjacent to it is a tripartite window with sliders to each end and a stained glass panel between. The doors and windows include interior shoji screens. A small addition was made to the western end of the rear elevation to accommodate another bedroom. The roof is covered by wood shingles, which replaced the original handmade pre-cast concrete tiles due to problems with leakage. The roof includes an overhang with exposed rafters, the ends of which are highlighted by white paint. Intentional lack of symmetry is also exhibited by the roof line, which extends further towards the front of the house, and by the varying treatment of the gable ends; the east end is covered by wide, flush wood side and has an protruding, square window to the center, while the west end is concrete and has a paired window to the north end of the wall. While the house is without overt ornament, its beauty is in the subtle, understated details such as the joinery and exposed building elements and the blending of the stone with the wood and concrete.

The house, as with the other buildings within the Nakashima complex, blends well with its environment. As mentioned, it sits atop a south facing ridge and is slightly banked into it so that the entry area is set down from the ground level by a stone retaining wall and stone steps. The roof extends over the entry area, held at the corner by a naka bashira or log parent post, and the ceiling joints are exposed and carefully joined. A stone retaining wall is also located to the rear house, beyond the deck, and between them are stepping stones—referred to as a roji path in Japanese culture—and gravel. The deck is mounted from the gravel area by a stair of large stones of progressive size.

The interior includes a combination living and dining room at the western end of the house, offset by exposed beam and parent post. There is a fireplace at the far end of the west wall. The kitchen is located to the front of the house, behind the dining area, and adjoining them, offset by paneled storage areas and sliding wood screens. The bathroom adjoins the kitchen, located behind sliding panels, and includes a wooden Japanese style tub heated by a customized wood-burning stove. There is a bedroom adjacent to the bathroom at the front of the house and the master bedroom is at the end of the hall. A third bedroom was added to the south in 1954. The ceilings are of wood with exposed framing elements and detailed joinery. The walls are plaster, although the eastern wall of the living room is covered by wide, flush wood panels. The floors are also wood, with the exception of the bathroom which has a stone floor. A storage area was added to the exterior of the house, against the eastern wall of the entryway.

History: George Nakashima and his wife Marion and young daughter Mira lived in a tent on the property while the house was under construction. The woodshop was erected first with the house to follow soon afterwards, although according to Mira it remained a work-in-progress for many years. George Nakashima next turned to building a house, which he did largely on his own using both traditional and/or indigenous and experimental materials. According to daughter Mira,

The house was of stone, with oak framing, and some experimental materials such as concrete roof tiles. I remember watching my father hand-pouring and setting the concrete tiles on the roof, and we used to pick up fieldstone along the highway and put them in the car if they looked to be the right size and shape for the wall he was constructing. Dad would often send me to the rock-pile to find small stones to fit into a particular spot; it was my first lesson in architecture.<sup>1</sup>

In the tradition of the International Style, the George Nakashima House combines natural materials including local stone, white stucco walls, and simple wood trim to create an asymmetrical design that also features exposed framing, ribbon windows, glass walls in the living area, and an open floor plan. Elements indicative of Japanese architecture include rice paper Shoji screens used as dividers, and rafters and support posts (or parent posts) consisting of un-milled trees simply stripped of their bark. An addition was made in 1952 to create another bedroom to accommodate their new-born son, Kevin.

See George Nakashima Woodworker Complex, HABS No. PA-6783 for more information about the historical and architectural context.

Sources: James A. Michener Art Museum, *George Nakashima and the Modernist Movement* (essays by Steven Beyer and Matilda McQuaid). Doylestown, Pennsylvania: James A. Michener Art Museum, 2001.

Nakashima, Mira. *Nature, Form & Spirit: the Life and Legacy of George Nakashima*. New York: Abrams, 2003.

Nehta, Geeta, and Kimie Tada. *Japan Style*. North Clarendon, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2005.

Historian: Catherine C. Lavoie, HABS, 2012

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<sup>1</sup> Mira Nakashima, *Nature, Form and Spirit*, 46.