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Architects buy once-threatened midcentury Keck design in Lake Forest

Three years after an architect saved a 1948 passive solar house designed by pioneering modernists Keck & Keck, he's sold it mid-rehab to a couple who will complete the job.

DENNIS RODKIN



Dennis Rodkin

Sarah Neville and John Benoit, who last week bought the passive solar house designed in 1948 by Keck & Keck.

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Three years after an architect bought a noteworthy midcentury house in western Lake Forest to save it from demolition, he has sold it to a pair of architects who will continue the rehab he began.

Chris Enck, who in February 2019 [bought the dilapidated home](#), designed by noted modernist architects Keck & Keck, sold the house on Devonshire Lane to BE Architects.

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BE's Sarah Neville and John Benoit paid \$1.185 million for the four-bedroom, roughly 4,300-square-foot house on 2.7 acres on March 31. Both married and professional partners at BE Architects, the couple previously restored [a Gunderson home in Oak Park](#). Neville said they were looking for another historical home to revive when the Devonshire Lane popped up as a non-public listing.

“I was smitten immediately,” Neville said. It’s “an important house” because of the Kecks’ leading-edge role in both modern architecture and passive solar methods.

The centerpiece of the interior is a large stone fireplace beneath a ceiling with a clerestory band running around it to add daylight to the space. Two long wings extend from there, one for bedrooms and one for kitchen, family room, laundry room and others.



Flanking large picture windows throughout the house are panels of louvers, a Keck concept that allowed occupants to open them to let in cooling breezes at a time before air conditioning, because the fixed picture windows don't allow air circulation. Originally, the roof held a shallow pond that helped modulate the interior temperatures. It was "slightly misguided, but still an interesting concept," Benoit said.

Keck & Keck designed the house of limestone, wood and glass in 1948 for Abel and Mildred Fagen, [who dubbed it and the 92-acre parcel it stood on "Dream Farm."](#) Long, low-slung and made of natural materials, the house blended into the flat, wooded landscape.

Its long side, mostly glass, faces south, southeast and southwest and has deep overhangs, an example of the passive solar style [the Kecks pioneered in the Midwest.](#) On the north side, facing the street, the house is almost entirely stone, providing privacy but also manifesting the passive solar notion that the sunless north side of a house need not be an energy loser.



Jameson Sotheby's International Real Estate

The south-facing portion of the house is mostly glass, for solar gain inside.

The Fagens—he was a textile dealer and she was an arts patron whose portrait was done by Salvador Dali—added a pool and pool house several years later. Most of the "Dream Farm" acreage was eventually sold off, until the house stood on 2.7 acres at the edge of a subdivision of mostly conventional but large, late-20th century suburban houses.

Two Lake Forest preservationists [wrote in 2015](#) that the Fagen house is "arguably one of Lake Forest's most architecturally significant examples of midcentury modern design."

By 2016, the Fagen house had sat empty for at least nine years, owned by a man who bought it in 2007 with plans to renovate but was interrupted by a health setback. Unable to find a buyer in more than a year, that owner [began the process of getting demolition approved by Lake Forest officials](#).

A little more than two years later, Enck paid \$500,000 for the house, which was less than half what the previous owner paid in 2007.

Enck, a preservation architect who has also restored [a Prairie-style house by John Van Bergen](#) after moving it from Wilmette to Evanston and [a historical house in Champaign](#), completed major tasks on the Lake Forest house, including replacing a decrepit roof and updating the utilities, Neville and Benoit said.

Enck told Crain's in an email that he put it on the market in late 2021 because, with the kitchen and baths yet to be done, "we thought someone might want to choose their own options."



Dennis Rodkin

Panels of louvers beside the plate-glass windows allow for natural ventilation that fixed-in-place panels of glass don't.

Benoit and Neville, who plan to live in the house, said they plan to restore the pool, which has likely not been operational for two decades. In the floor of the pool house, the Fagens wrote their names, and both signatures are intact, the new owners said.

The property was represented by Eileen Campbell of Jameson Sotheby's International Realty. Cindy Weinreb of Redfin represented the buyers.

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The front of the house, largely made of stone, faces north.

Inline Play

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