

# thanks for the view, mr. mies: lafayette park, detroit

*Edited and with text by  
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/ Placement*



*The photographs on the cover and the preceding pages were taken by residents of, and visitors to, Lafayette Park: Danielle Aubert, Cordelia Brown, Lana Cavar, John Comazzi, Megan Deal, Bill Dickens, Matt Elliott, Geoff Hoffman, Andy Kem, Kathryn Lindbergh, Richard Oosterom, Vasco Roma, Jamie Schafer, an unidentified Pavilion resident, Christian Unverzagt and Michele Unverzagt. We have also included a few family photos that Fritz Klaetke shared with us. See p. 285 for details.*

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# contents

15	<i>PREFACE</i>	86	Open House	140	Birdwatchers <u>KAREN TONSO AND PAUL ELLIMAN</u>	236	<i>PHOTO ESSAY</i> The Pavilion <u>KARIN JOBST</u>
18	<i>INTRODUCTION</i> Yesterday's Future Today	90	Authentic and Original	146	Birds and Plate Glass	249	<i>INTERVIEW</i> "Mies is a little too contempo- rary for me. I am more of an eclectic person." <u>JACQUELINE NEAL</u>
26	<b><u>THE TOWNHOUSES</u></b>	96	<i>INTERVIEW</i> "We'll fight about the height of the hedges, but generally every- body agrees." <u>BARBARA MATESA</u>	158	Animal Encounters	251	<i>INTERVIEW</i> "I don't like to be status quo, and this is a one-of-a-kind kind of place." <u>STEPHEN POWELL</u>
28	<i>PHOTO ESSAY</i> Living with Mies: The Townhouses <u>CORINE VERMEULEN</u>	102	<i>INTERVIEW</i> "I like to respect what was done." <u>BOB HAFEL</u>	166	Celebrities Rumored to Have Lived in Lafayette Park	255	<i>INTERVIEW</i> "It was known all over the country — Lafayette Park, Detroit, Michigan!" <u>MATTIE CUNNINGHAM</u>
45	<i>ESSAY</i> Hidden in Plain Sight: The "Invisibility" of Mies van der Rohe in Detroit <u>MARSHA MUSIC</u>	107	<i>ESSAY</i> Bustle in the Hedgerow: Urban Living in the Prairie Landscape <u>NOAH RESNICK</u>	168	Four One-Mile Walks	257	<i>INTERVIEW</i> "I don't care how fine the furniture is, you still need decorations." <u>TOYSIA BROOKS</u>
52	<i>INTERVIEW</i> "I'm just getting used to the new ambiance." <u>WESLEY STEELE</u>	113	<i>ESSAY</i> The Big Thing About Little Trees <u>HILARY ROBIE</u>	174	Selling the Modern	261	<i>ESSAY</i> Aesthetic Mismanagement of the Lafayette Towers <u>JOE POSCH</u>
57	<i>INTERVIEW AND TOUR</i> "There are many, many really cool things about the house." <u>NEIL MCEACHERN</u>	119	<i>ESSAY</i> Living in Ordered Exhibition <u>MELISSA DITTMER</u>	184	<b><u>THE HIGH-RISES</u></b>	267	<i>ESSAY AND PHOTOS</i> The Lafayette Towers: Looking Back <u>JANINE DEBANNÉ</u>
65	<i>ESSAY</i> Living in Lafayette Park <u>TOBY BARLOW</u>	126	<b><u>THE NEIGHBORHOOD</u></b>	186	<i>PHOTO ESSAY</i> Living with Mies: The High-Rises <u>CORINE VERMEULEN AND LANA CAVAR</u>	277	<i>FACTS ABOUT</i> LAFAYETTE PARK
70	<i>INTERVIEW AND TOUR</i> "I don't think the <i>Taxus</i> plants belong here." <u>BILL DICKENS</u>	128	<i>PHOTO ESSAY</i> Spring in Lafayette Park 1977/2009 <u>CORINE VERMEULEN AND CORDELIA BROWN</u>	218	<i>INTERVIEWS</i> "My favorite thing about living here is that they have donuts on Fridays in the lobby." <u>VARIOUS HIGH-RISE TENANTS</u>	282	<i>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</i>
76	<i>ARCHIVE</i> "I'm just a saver. If it's about Lafayette Park I put it in a box." <u>CORDELIA BROWN</u>			223	<i>INTERVIEW</i> "My main selling point would be, you're going to get a beautiful view." <u>JIM ADAMS</u>	284	<i>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</i>
				233	A Record of Nine Days Spent Keeping the Climate Under Control in a Corner Apartment		

## preface

This book is about present-day life in Lafayette Park, Detroit, a neighborhood we came to know when one of us, Danielle, moved into the West Tower of the Lafayette Towers, and a few years later into a townhouse. We are graphic designers, now based in Detroit, Zagreb and Brooklyn, interested in the way that places are represented and experienced. All three of us had spent varying amounts of time in Lafayette Park, and we were each struck by the way that the casual, open and friendly atmosphere contrasted with our expectation that a development of minimalist, modernist homes would be full of people leading private lives in spare, well-designed interiors. Instead, while those who live in Lafayette Park do tend to be proud of their homes, they are also happy to speak with visitors. The area is accessible — there are no barriers, besides trees, that separate it from the city. The relatively compact townhouses look like they could have been transplanted from the Netherlands or Switzerland, and are not what one expects to see in downtown Detroit or even in the United States, for that matter.

The residents of Lafayette Park display a fairly wide spectrum of design sensibilities, from those who put very little energy into their interiors, to others who invest tens of thousands of dollars in renovations. Among the latter those with “modern” interiors tend to be showcased more often when the neighborhood is profiled in books, magazines and online. There are, to be sure, many residents who live in beautifully designed homes that follow a modernist design aesthetic. But there are many more who were attracted to the neighborhood for its convenience to downtown, its lush landscaping or the spectacular views. Those residents adapt Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s plain white boxes to fit different styles. For example, Beverly Gibson and Richard Worobec have turned their home into a kind of gallery for their collection of African art. Jacqueline Neal, an interior designer who lives in the Pavilion and has a self-described “eclectic” aesthetic, told us that while she appreciates Mies’s furniture, she sees it as more of a status symbol, suitable for a business lobby rather than a home.

In 2009 *Dwell* magazine profiled the home of residents Keira Alexandra and Toby Barlow (both are included in this book). The feature was very positive and garnered a lot of publicity for the neighborhood, but it prompted us to consider the ways that Lafayette Park and, more broadly, modernist architecture are represented in the media. So often interiors are designed to match a home’s exterior. But in the case of Lafayette Park there is a vibrant, diverse community of people who live, for instance, with all kinds of furniture or none at all. Some homes are clean, some are messy. Some are full of kids, or pets or cardboard boxes. A lot of the success of the neighborhood takes place outside of the residences in interstitial spaces — at the playground, in the lobbies of the high-rises, in e-mail groups, in the park. We decided to make a book about Lafayette Park that did not focus specifically on Ludwig Hilberseimer’s planning, Mies’s architecture and Alfred

Caldwell's landscape design, but rather took the perspective of the people who live here.

We spent nearly three years researching Lafayette Park through its residents and our own experience of the neighborhood. We solicited essays from current and past residents, conducted dozens of interviews and took note of the neighborhood's idiosyncracies (for example, the neighborhood bagpiper or the problem of birds flying into plate glass). We were very lucky to be able to work with two local photographers, Corine Vermeulen and Vasco Roma, to portray residents in their homes. Corine spent months with us photographing residents for the series of images that appear at the start of the townhouse and high-rise sections. Vasco, a Lafayette Park resident, photographed essay authors in their front rooms and took many of the smaller shots that appear on the following pages. A number of the pieces in this book happened organically as a result of spending time here. One resident, Betty Brown, gave us access to her personal archive of Lafayette Park ephemera. When we talked to people about Lafayette Park, many would name celebrities who had lived here at some point. We often hadn't heard of them but as we researched them we saw that these celebrities mapped out a kind of interesting micro-history of Detroit culture and politics. (They appear in "Celebrities Rumored to Have Lived in Lafayette Park.")

We called this book *Thanks for the View, Mr. Mies* in order to acknowledge the spectacular views provided by all of the Mies residences; nearly everybody we spoke to cited these as their favorite feature in their homes. But the window walls that afford these views are not always easy to live with. High-rise residents in apartments that face south and west spend the summer months battling oppressive heat from the sun. When Lana and Natasha spent a month in an amazing and mostly comfortable apartment in the Pavilion, they found themselves constantly opening and closing windows and turning the heat on and off. (They documented their experience in "A Record of Nine Days Spent Keeping the Climate Under Control in a Corner Apartment.") Meanwhile, several longtime townhouse residents told us about problems they had in the early years with water condensing on the windows and dripping down to the floor (the windows have since been replaced with double-paned glass). A newsletter from 1961 recommends that residents install decorative rock gardens in troughs along the base of the windows to collect water.<sup>1</sup> When one resident told us about this period, he apologized jokingly to "Mr. Mies" for his decision to remove the original window coverings in favor of something more practical. This is how we came to refer to Mies as "Mr. Mies."

<sup>1</sup> "The John Kelly's, 1363 Joliet, have solved their window condensation problem to the extent, at least, that water does not seep over the floor. They've made a sort of trough at the base of the dining-room

window, and filled it with white stones and plants which, presumably, will require little care during the winter months!" *The Lafayette Sporadic*, October 1961.

The book is organized into three sections that correlate somewhat to the experience of Lafayette Park: the townhouses, the neighborhood and the high-rises. The townhouses section covers life in the area of the single- and two-story row houses, which are cooperatively owned. The neighborhood section looks at the outside and public spaces and some of the community-wide activities. The high-rises section describes life in the three apartment buildings — the twin Lafayette Towers and the Pavilion. The Lafayette Towers and the Pavilion are owned by two different companies. While we were researching Lafayette Park, the Lafayette Towers became increasingly inaccessible to us, and as of 2012 they are in foreclosure. The Pavilion, by contrast, is a well-managed building with a friendly resident community.

We found that architects and fans of modernist design play an important part in the community — many of them are dedicated to preserving the structures, ensuring that they are well maintained, and promoting the neighborhood. Neil McEachern, Christian Unverzagt, Bill Dickens and Noah Resnick regularly lead guided tours of the neighborhood. Christian maintains a website, [miesdetroit.org](http://miesdetroit.org), which features a wealth of information about Lafayette Park. Several years ago then-resident Sarah Evans led the successful effort to have the Mies buildings added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places.

It seems possible to us, however, that one reason the neighborhood works so well is that so many of the people who have been attracted to it over the years are *not* people who, first and foremost, want to live in a house designed by Mies van der Rohe. They may have come across the neighborhood while looking for someplace relatively safe and convenient to downtown Detroit. While some visitors think the whole area looks like an office park and wonder why anyone would want to live in a glass house in the middle of a city, there are others who see the windows, the trees, the neighbors and think it would be a great place to live. They appreciate the architecture, the landscaping and the planning without having preconceived notions about the failures or successes of modernist housing. Lafayette Park's continued capacity to attract new residents is perhaps the greatest testament to the vision of the neighborhood's original planners.

— Danielle Aubert, Lana Cavar and Natasha Chandani  
Detroit, Zagreb and Brooklyn  
May 2012

# introduction: yesterday's future today

DANIELLE AUBERT, LANA CAVAR, NATASHA CHANDANI

There are many ways in which Lafayette Park fails to conform to expectations about what it should be. It is one of very few modernist urban renewal projects initiated in the United States in the 1940s that could be deemed successful today. It doesn't correspond to the prevalent media image of Detroit as an underpopulated, postindustrial city. And despite the fact that it is one of Ludwig Hilberseimer's most significant planning commissions, and represents the largest collection of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe buildings in the world, it maintains a relatively low profile.

Also, the people who live in Lafayette Park contradict assumptions one might have about who lives in modernist "designer" housing. Developments like this one are often shown from the outside or written about from afar, and these representations become the defining texts that tell the story of urban modernism. But we found that the complex relationship that Lafayette Park residents have with the architecture and the city is perhaps the most interesting aspect of this residential community. In order to articulate this relationship, we attempt to show Lafayette Park from the inside out — from the point of view of the people who live here.

Lafayette Park was built on land that was once a densely settled, working-class, African-American neighborhood called Black Bottom.<sup>1</sup> Classified as a "slum" by the city of Detroit in the 1940s, Black Bottom was razed and left vacant until the mid-1950s, when a citizens' group led by labor activist Walter Reuther succeeded in attracting Chicago developer Herbert Greenwald to the project. Greenwald brought in Mies van der Rohe to serve as architect, and Mies in turn brought his colleagues urban planner Ludwig

<sup>1</sup> Black Bottom was named after the marshy bottom at the source of the Savoyard River, which was buried when Detroit was settled.

<sup>2</sup> The circumstances that led to the creation of Lafayette Park have been documented in greater detail than we can provide here. See the selected bibliography on p. 282 for notes on some useful texts. A site plan of Lafayette Park is on p. 278.

<sup>3</sup> During discussions that took place on the

occasion of the exhibition *Inside Lafayette Park* in April 2012, Lafayette Park resident Marsha Cusic Philpot (a.k.a. writer Marsha Music) emphasized that the impact that the razing of Black Bottom had on the city's fabric — the forced removal of people, many of them African-Americans who had emigrated from the South to make new lives for themselves in Detroit — demonstrated a profound disregard for a huge group of people

who were targeted for their class and race. Many have grimly dubbed the "urban renewal" of Black Bottom a "Negro People Removal" project.

Hilberseimer and landscape architect Alfred Caldwell on board. Hilberseimer's plan for the area called for rerouting or blocking off some of the streets to create a superblock, on which would be built housing, a large park, an elementary school, playgrounds and space for retail.<sup>2</sup> By the early 1960s many elements of this plan had been completed: the Lafayette Plaisance (the park); 24 single-story courthouses and 162 two-story townhouses, situated at the southwest corner of the park; the Pavilion, a high-rise, located just north of the townhouses; and the two Lafayette Towers, sited on the east side of the park. But Greenwald had died suddenly in 1959, and without him Hilberseimer and Mies's original plan was not fully executed. Different architects were brought in to design the other buildings around the park — the Cherboneau, Chateaufort and Parc Lafayette housing developments, the Windsor Terrace apartments, the school and the shopping center. While the name Lafayette Park generally refers to the overall superblock, which includes the park and all the high- and low-rise structures that surround it, this book focuses on life in the buildings that Mies designed.

When Lafayette Park was completed it corresponded to a modernist utopian fantasy of democratic leveling through urban renewal — people of mixed incomes and ethnic groups would coexist, share a park and send their children to the same school. The past was literally buried underground when Black Bottom was bulldozed, and futuristic housing structures were erected in its place.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the freestanding wood-frame houses of Black Bottom, the glass-and-steel homes of Lafayette Park were transparent, fireproof and connected in rows. One imagines that people moving into the newly built structures had a sense of buying into the future. The landscape and the houses looked different than the rest of the city. The windows were bigger, the doorways went all the way to the ceiling, the living rooms and dining rooms were connected. The townhouses had Jetsons-like pull-down stovetops in the kitchen. Families with young children were attracted to the proximity of the residences to Chrysler Elementary School, which could be accessed without crossing any streets. Residents took pride in their decision to move into this progressive housing development and sought to identify the kind of person it should attract. An early promotional brochure for the townhouses reads: "Lafayette Park Community is the sort of place where people read both the *New Yorker* and the *Wall Street Journal* — and books." A 1961 newsletter proclaims that Lafayette Park residents are not the types to read *Reader's Digest*.

Early on Lafayette Park was promoted as a "suburb within the city" — a tagline presumably intended to conjure visions of a "safe" neighborhood populated by whites. Yet other parts of Detroit are more suburban in appearance, with freestanding houses and fenced-in yards. And many early residents of Lafayette Park claim that they were drawn to it specifically because it was *not* an all-white enclave. An *Architectural Forum* article from 1960 quotes new resident Walter Blucher explaining that he and his family "came here because we believed in this kind of housing, and we wanted to be a part of a truly interracial community — and we were tired of keeping a big yard." In important contrast to the image of Lafayette Park as a suburb,

the neighborhood is described in this article as a “city-within-a-city” of “hybrid dwelling[s] developed specifically for city living.”<sup>4</sup>

Since the early 1960s the city of Detroit has undergone enormous shifts. Once-abundant manufacturing jobs in the auto industry disappeared as factories moved abroad. In 1967 major riots took place in which a disproportionate number of blacks were beaten or killed; these events still weigh heavily on the city.<sup>5</sup> Race relations between whites and blacks in Detroit had, historically, been strained, but over the second half of the twentieth century the area became increasingly segregated as whites moved to the suburbs and the city’s population became majority African-American.<sup>6</sup> The population of Detroit, which peaked in the 1940s at around 1.8 million residents, has dropped to nearly 700,000. According to the 2010 census the only city to lose more residents was New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina struck. But while Detroit’s population has, on balance, fallen, one demographic group that has grown is that of young, college-educated people, and Lafayette Park is one of the neighborhoods that has attracted some of these new Detroiters. The appeal of Lafayette Park has as much, if not more, to do with its long-standing profile as a multigenerational, racially mixed, economically stable, tight-knit community as it does with the architecture.

Unlike so many other failed modernist urban renewal projects, this one has, for the most part, succeeded. This fact is perhaps all the more surprising given the number of people who have left Detroit. Out of 186 townhouse and courthouse units, there is usually just a handful on the market. Residents represent a mix of professions — there are, of course, architects but also teachers, lawyers, firefighters, university professors, doctors and many retirees. Recently, the number of young children living

<sup>4</sup> “A Tower Plus Row Houses in Detroit,” *Architectural Forum*, May 1960.

<sup>5</sup> Some have drawn connections between the razing of Black Bottom, the subsequent displacement of its population to overcrowded areas on the city’s west side, and the riots that erupted two decades later.

<sup>6</sup> The urban renewal initiative that produced Lafayette Park was part of a larger plan to stem the flow of middle- and upper-middle-class residents to the suburbs that had begun in the 1940s.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, “The Rust Belt Revival: What’s Happening in Detroit, Michigan,” *Details*, April 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Waldheim, ed., *Case: Hilberseimer/ Mies van der Rohe Lafayette Park, Detroit*, New York: Prestel, 2004.

This book was very useful to us in thinking about Lafayette Park. It includes essays by Jerry Herron, who lives in the neighborhood, and Janine Debanné, who lived in the Lafayette Towers.

<sup>9</sup> It’s possible that Lafayette Park is better known in Europe than in the United States. It was, for example, the subject of intensive research by faculty at the Milan Politecnico. Their work resulted in an exhibition, *La Forma dell’insediamento*. The show was brought to the U.S. in 2012 as *The*

*Settlement Shape* thanks to the efforts of Lafayette Park resident Noah Resnick.

<sup>10</sup> The *Mies van der Rohe Centennial Exhibition* took place in 1986 and was described as “the most comprehensive exhibition ever devoted to Mies van der Rohe.”

in the townhouses has reached the double digits, which is many more than there had been in the 1990s and early 2000s. The co-ops’ self-governance through the boards helps integrate new residents into the fabric of the community. Compared to those in the townhouses, residents of the high-rises tend to be more transient. Many are retired or divorced people looking to scale down or young people who aren’t yet settled — students or single professionals saving to buy a home. That said, there is a solid contingent of long-term renters who have been there for 15 years or more.

One reason that Lafayette Park remains so little known may have to do with the fact that it doesn’t fit the popular national image of Detroit as a crime-ridden, cash-strapped city struggling to fulfill basic services. More recent media representations of Detroit portray it as a haven for artists, where run-down, partially abandoned blocks that have returned to nature are being transformed into urban farms and communal gardens, and disused factories are reclaimed as “incubators” for “creative professionals.”<sup>7</sup> These versions of Detroit are not necessarily inaccurate, but they don’t account for the many neighborhoods, Lafayette Park among them, that are populated and safe to live in.

Even within Detroit, Lafayette Park doesn’t quite fit into the city’s self-image. One artist friend who at the time lived on the city’s east side observed that Lafayette Park “isn’t really Detroit.” High-rise and row-house living is unusual here, perhaps in part because the city is sparsely populated and hasn’t needed to economize on space. Although there are large apartment buildings along the Detroit River and in midtown, a more common housing type is the single-family wood-frame or brick home, found throughout the city. For the most part Detroiters expect to shovel snow, mow their own lawns and rehab their own houses. Many people are put off by the idea of paying a monthly maintenance fee to a co-op and having to seek board approval to plant a vegetable garden. The landscaped and manicured grounds are at odds with what is going on in the rest of the city.

One question that came up for us while working on this project was why, given its success and the considerable fame of its architect, is Lafayette Park one of Mies van der Rohe’s less well-known projects? This is not to say that it has not received media attention. Lafayette Park, especially the townhouses, is frequently profiled in magazine and newspaper articles; it is also the subject of the important book *Case: Hilberseimer/Mies van der Rohe Lafayette Park, Detroit*, edited by Charles Waldheim.<sup>8</sup> But even there Detlef Martins describes Lafayette Park as a “little-known jewel of modern urbanism.”<sup>9</sup> It has been overlooked in certain key places. One resident recalls visiting a Mies van der Rohe show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1986 and seeing a model of the neighborhood on display with a caption that described Lafayette Park as a suburb of Detroit.<sup>10</sup> Residents who attended the 2001 exhibition *Mies in America* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, did not see any mention of Lafayette Park. A 2006 *New York Times* story about the Miami home of architect John Bennett and Terence Riley, former chief curator of architecture and design at MoMA, makes reference to Mies’s drawings for “court houses.” The article states that these houses



were “known as the court houses” and “none of them were ever built.” An angry courthouse owner sent a letter to the *Times* informing them that there were in fact 24 courthouses in Lafayette Park, Detroit, but no one at the newspaper responded.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike some of Mies’s other residential structures, the homes in Lafayette Park are not luxury housing.<sup>12</sup> The high-rises in Lafayette Park have more in common with Mies’s Colonnade and Pavilion apartments in Newark, New Jersey — buildings one doesn’t hear about that often either — than they do with the Lake Shore Drive high-rises in Chicago.<sup>13</sup> It begins to seem as if Mies is not as well known for the buildings he made for middle- and working-class people. Marsha Music makes reference to Ralph Ellison in the title of her essay, “Hidden in Plain Sight: The ‘Invisibility’ of Mies van der Rohe in Detroit.” She articulates the effect of race in causing Lafayette Park to be overlooked or simply not seen. We suspect that those who have, over the years, contributed to the narrative on modernism have not spent much time in downtown Detroit. It somehow doesn’t compute — unless you’re here and you see it — that a development of modernist, minimal glass houses could be at home in this predominantly African-American city, birthplace of Motown, techno and the American automobile industry. We created this book to tell the stories of the people who live in Lafayette Park, Detroit.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Nobel, “House Proud: Mies in Miami,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2006. The Lafayette Park courthouses do differ somewhat from Mies’s 1930s drawings for courthouses, which is probably what Bennett and Riley were referring to, but it is still inaccurate to say that courthouses were never built. Peter Carter, in *Mies van der Rohe at Work* (New York: Praeger, 1974), profiles the one-story units at Lafayette Park as examples of courthouses. Incidentally, “court house” is spelled as two words in the article, and in Mies’s drawings and earliest documents for Lafayette Park “court house” and “town house” are spelled as two words. When the co-ops incorporated they changed the spellings to “courthouse” and “townhouse.”

<sup>12</sup> Townhouse units sell today for as little as \$69,000, up to around

\$120,000, depending on their condition. Courthouses tend to sell for more. Monthly maintenance fees of \$641 to \$1,194 must be factored into the cost of living in Lafayette Park.

<sup>13</sup> It could also be argued that there are finer examples of Mies’s high-rise building design than the ones in Detroit. Musician David Byrne observed after a bike ride through Lafayette Park that the high-rises were “models for an evil architectural meme that has yet to be stamped out.” <http://journal.davidbyrne.com/2010/09/092310-dont-forget-the-motor-city.html>.

## lp sporadic: upkeep

*The windows throughout Lafayette Park are washed several times a year. It can take a week to wash one of the high-rise building’s windows. Everybody gets a notice that it’s happening so they can be sure to make themselves presentable. But it can still be jarring to suddenly see a man suspended outside one’s window. This photo was taken by Jamie Schafer in the Pavilion.*

