



# a fine reflection

A revitalized garden was precisely what this Summit Avenue mansion required.

"There was music from my neighbor's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens, men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars."

— From *"The Great Gatsby"* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

BY MOLLY MILLETT PHOTOS BY TROY THEIS

WHEN F. SCOTT FITZGERALD WROTE ABOUT THE GREAT Gatsby's blue gardens — with its whisperings and champagne and stars — it's easy to imagine him thinking of the grounds at 807 Summit Ave.

The great American writer socialized at this address, known as the Samuel and Madeline Dittenhofer House. A lifetime later, Joseph Tashjian and Kay Savik have restored the gardens behind the approximately 9,000-square-foot manse, and the estate now looks much as architect Clarence H. Johnston intended when he designed it more than 100 years ago.

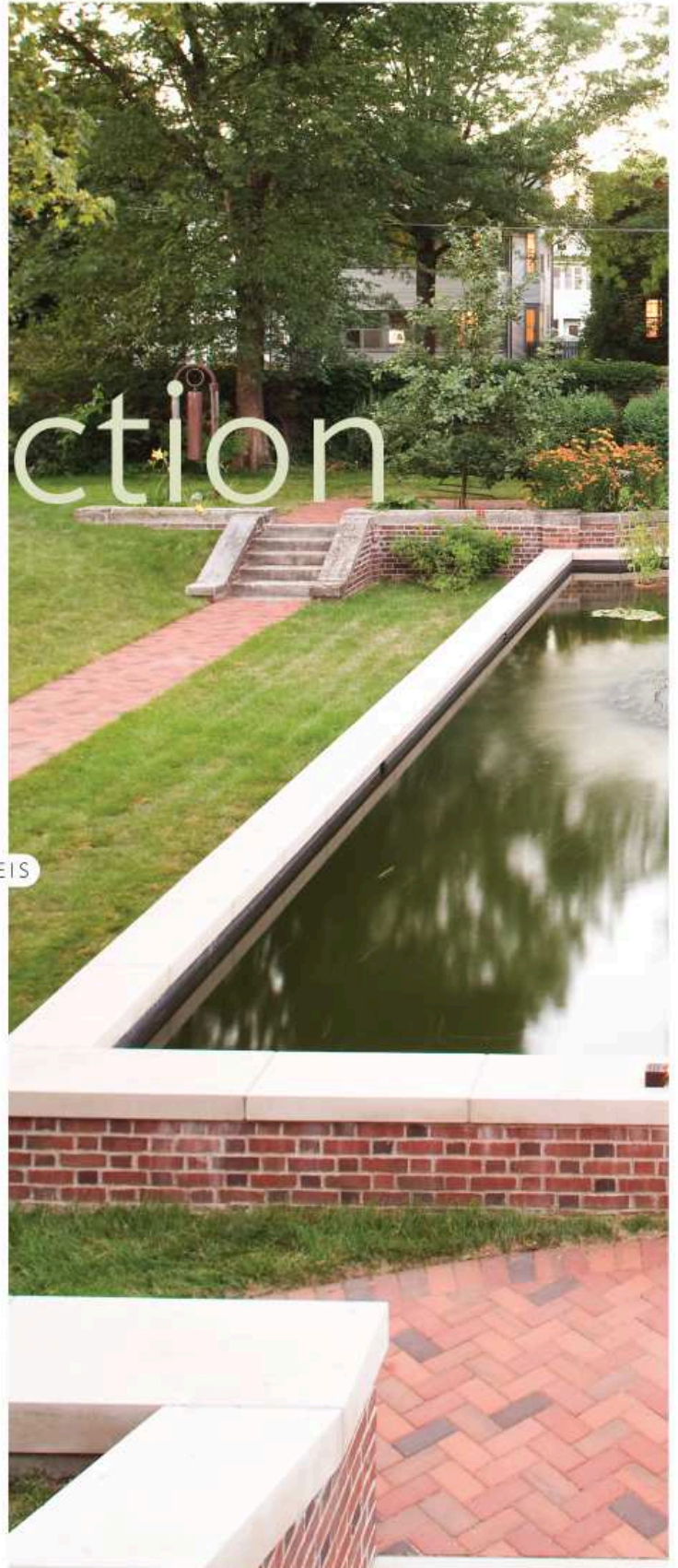
"The house was designed with the back yard in mind," says Tashjian.

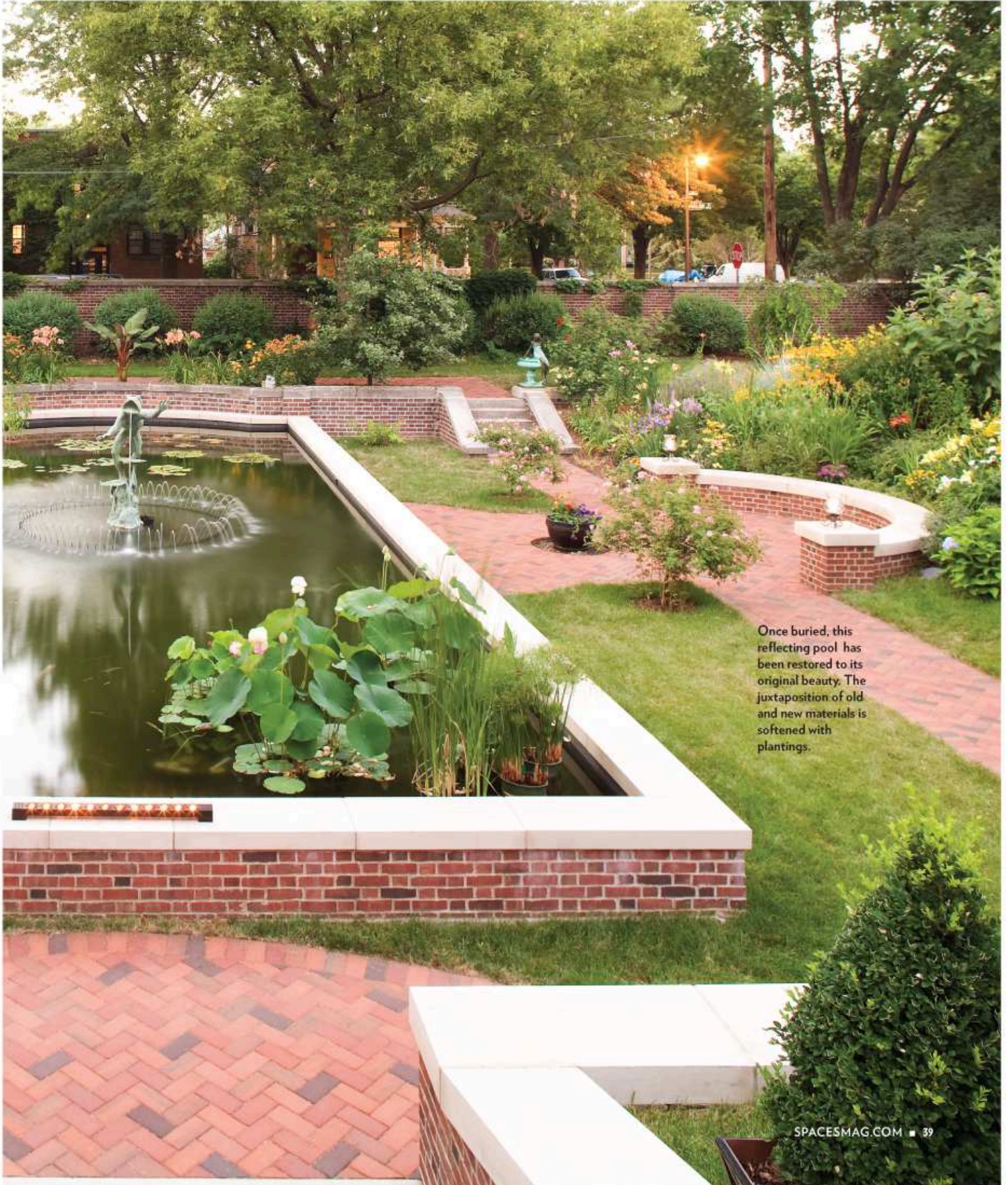
Specifically, the Jacobian mansion was meant to work in concert with a reflecting pool, as old photos from the 1906 home show.

"The pool was an integral part of the house; the two went together," Tashjian says. "So, bringing the pool back to its original form was important."

That took detective work.

"The reflecting pool had been covered up," says Tim





Once buried, this reflecting pool has been restored to its original beauty. The juxtaposition of old and new materials is softened with plantings.





## GARDEN GUIDE 2009

Johnson of Southview Design & Construction, who managed the landscape project. "We excavated it but couldn't use it. But we had the old photos to work with in trying to re-create it."

The new reflecting pool was created over the remains of the original, and now it has a fountain — a bubbling bronzed frog Tashjian found at an auction in Detroit.

### BLENDING OLD AND NEW

Because of the efforts to match materials used for the home's original exterior and brick privacy wall, Fitzgerald would once again look at home taking a stroll along the walkways and admiring the lily pads floating in the pool.

"The biggest challenge was trying to use today's materials and lifestyle considerations and yet make it look original," says Johnson. "This was not an everyday project. From working with all the different subcontractors to the historic preservation commission, a lot of work went into making everything look authentic."

Like the driveway — pavers were discovered underneath layers of asphalt.

"That was a surprise," says Johnson.

Unfortunately, they were not salvageable, but the clay pavers that replaced them were done in a custom color to match what was already there.

The overall effect is formal and European. "It looks old English manor to me," Savik says.

"When it was on a tour last fall, people were awestruck that there could be something like this in Minnesota, with our winter season and how original it looks," says Johnson. "Give it 10 years, and you really won't be able to tell the old from the new."

Tashjian, the green thumb in the family, has planted many new things on this oversized lot, like apple trees and rosebushes and tulips. But not everything is new.

"There are quite a few of the old plants left there, like bridal wreath, so it feels like the garden is a lot more established than it actually is," Savik says. "It's a very peaceful place; in the summer, it's a great place to go

and relax and read a book and listen to the water."

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When you live on Summit Avenue, the weight of history is always a consideration, even when deciding what to plant in the backyard.

"This house is clearly part of St. Paul history — Fitzgerald dined here," says Tashjian. "We know he had been in the home quite a few times, at garden parties in the back or dinners in the home," Savik says.

The home where Fitzgerald dined was a wedding gift to Samuel Dittenhofer and his 17-year-old bride, Madeline, from Dittenhofer's father, Jacob Dittenhofer, one of the owners of the Golden Rule Department Store. Johnston designed it at the same time he worked on Glensheen, the famous Duluth estate.

With such a glamorous home, it makes sense that the Dittenhofers, who had two children, drew in visitors like Fitzgerald. Madeline was a St. Paul socialite — and although Chicago debutante Ginevra King is considered the muse for the Gatsby character of Daisy Buchanan, perhaps there's a dash of Madeline, too ("Her voice was full of money").

"The story we've gotten, although we don't know how accurate it is, is that Madeline and other local socialites followed Fitzgerald to Europe in the 1930s," says Savik. "When it was obvious World War II would consume all of Europe, Samuel went over to get his wife and bring her home, but they got caught in Paris. They were Jewish, and although they were never put in a camp, the Germans wouldn't let them go. The American Jews were kept in a hotel in Paris and were not allowed to come and go. They were ministered to by the Christian Brothers.

"After the end of the war, they didn't come home — Samuel was quite ill and died about a year later," Savik says. "Madeline came home for a short time but then returned to Paris."

The grand house was boarded up from

the 1930s through 1966, when Madeline donated it to the Christian Brothers.

### MINOR REMODELING

"Because the home was boarded up for so long, with just a caretaker living there, it did get the reputation for being haunted," Savik says. "But my husband and I have decided if it is haunted, it is haunted by very friendly ghosts who have not bothered us at all.

"The monks used the house as a dormitory and office space," Savik says. "We bought it from them; it's our understanding they used the money to start an inner-city school in Chicago."

Tashjian, a radiologist, and Savik, a statistician, bought the home in 1999 because they wanted to live in a more urban environment.

"We decided we were really city people who were living in the suburbs," says Tashjian.

With the help of Kramer Restoration, the couple has done work on the property (including the construction of a garage and the laying of encaustic tile — a sort of custom mosaic — in a sunroom). But it was not a fixer-upper.

"We remodeled the 1960s-era kitchen, and we pulled up old shag carpeting and refinished the hardwood floors underneath and painted the walls, which were institutional white," Savik says. "Other than that, it was in beautiful shape; no one had ever even painted the woodwork."

The work on the grounds was completed in 2006, in time for the wedding reception of Savik and Tashjian's son and daughter-in-law. As in — just in time. "They were laying the last brick two hours before the wedding started," Tashjian says.

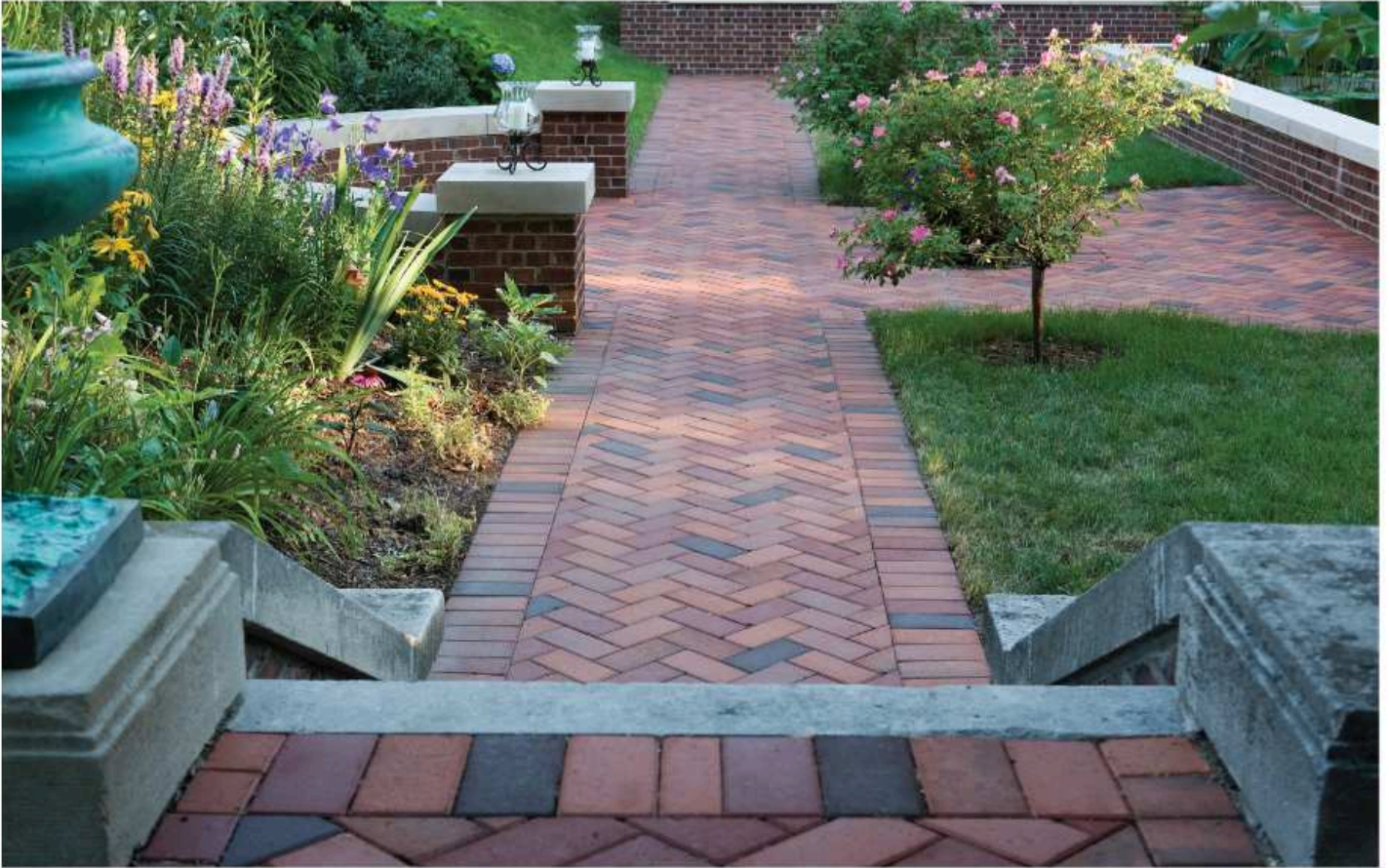
You can see a wedding reception taking place in such a regal spot — but what about a typical Minnesota backyard barbecue?

"Sure, we grill all the time in the summer," Tashjian says.

Now, what would Fitz think of that? ♦

*Molly Millett is a reporter at the St. Paul Pioneer Press and a frequent contributor to Spaces. She can be reached at 651-228-5505.*





The original walkway pavers were replaced with new pavers done in a custom color to match and laid in the same herring-bone pattern. Original limestone caps run along the stairs while new limestone caps top off the pool edges and seating-area walls.



A frog fountain the owners bought at an auction is now the focal point of the reflecting pool. The seating area is surrounded by lush plantings old and new.



The limestone caps were difficult to acquire, but a necessity for restoration and complying with the Minnesota Historical Society.

