



Tree House

On a wooded preserve three miles from downtown Atlanta, Scogin Elam and Bray designed a linear house where a fallen tree had made a clearing.

*Chmar House
Atlanta, Georgia
Scogin Elam and Bray Architects*



Designing buildings that defer to nature without becoming completely subservient to it is one of architecture's greatest challenges. Mack Scogin, Merrill Elam, and Lloyd Bray achieved this in the 4,000-square-foot house they recently completed for Tod and Linda Chmar. Their feat owes as much to the skill of the three architects as the merits of the Chmars' property—2 3/4 wooded acres next to a nature preserve, just three miles from downtown Atlanta. And in what may seem like a bit of divine intervention, space for the house was made nature's way, by a fallen tree.

The fortuitous clearing was not lost on the architects, whose assignment for their first residential commission was to provide an open living room, dining room, and kitchen, the usual assortment of bedrooms, and accommodations for visiting parents, and, at the same time, to disturb the site as little as possible. The architects responded by raising the volume of the main house into the foliage on concrete foundation walls that step down to the north, leaving the hillside otherwise untouched.

Nearly perpendicular to the main house is a semidetached guest wing that spans the driveway, creating a sheltered entrance and carport. In plan, the house resembles an open switchblade (page 81), its sharp edge a master-bedroom balcony poking into the woods. In elevation, the house is a visual sleight of hand: from a distance, the wood-framed structure, coated in a hybrid cementitious stucco finish the color of army camouflage, disappears, leaving redwood window frames as the only remaining traces of its presence among surrounding oaks.

In organizing the interiors of the main house, which is 130 feet long and bulges to 20 feet wide in the living room, Scogin looked to the spirit, if not the exact form, of the architecture of Japan, where the Chmars themselves find daily inspiration. Indeed, the clients' practice of Japanese rituals touches not only the removal of shoes after entering the front door (where the architect actually built a low bench and shoe rack), but also includes the daily "giving and receiving of light" in a Goshinden room, which houses an ancestral altar.

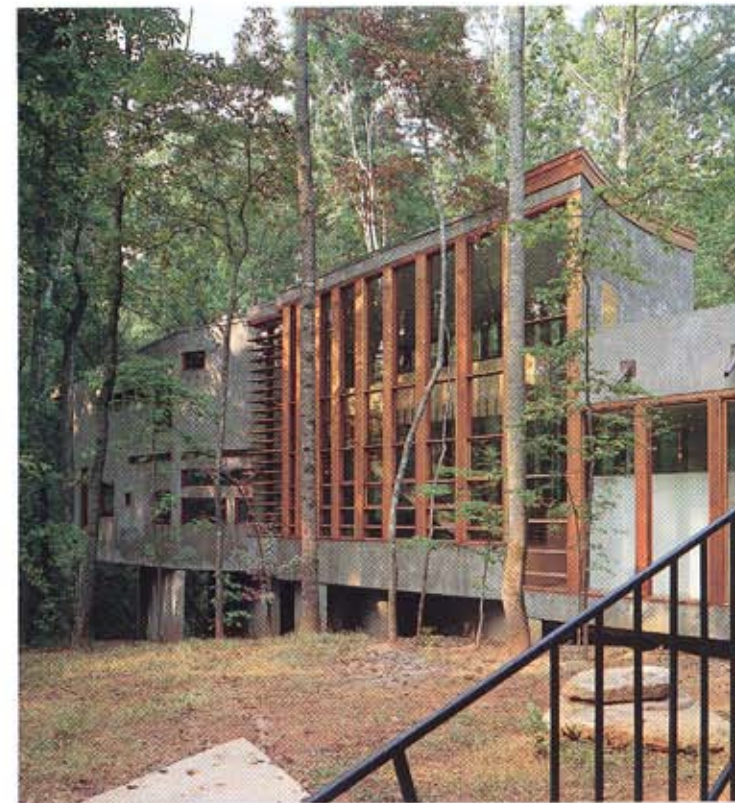
Scogin arranged the rooms according to ceremonial use and meaning: the long staircase to the Goshinden room, immediately visible upon entry (pages 82-83), cannot be reached until one passes down the hallway and up steps into the "heart" of the house, where it hovers above the living-room seating area as a birch and glass shell. Opposite the Goshinden room staircase is the hallway to the master bedroom, lit by a rib cage of windows swelling out into the woods, creating a forced perspective toward the sharp prow of the master-bedroom balcony. Another staircase leading to second-floor bedrooms, current domain of baby Ian, is hung from ceiling joists by steel rods and is framed by birch and plywood panels that resemble pressed flower petals.

The architects adeptly blurred the transition between inside and outside by specifying a variety of window sizes and shapes, which frame views of massive tree shafts as well as adjacent parts of the house. Daylighting is generous throughout the house and often used to dramatic effect. For example, skylights bathe the back wall of the Goshinden room, and holes in a nearby glass-encased wood door transmit an otherworldly glow from outside (page 84 top left). The ground plane of the house sweeps out into the woods in a triangular deck off the kitchen, punctuated by five 60-foot-high leaning telephone poles, which, like the house itself, are both firmly planted and freely soaring. *Karen D. Stein*



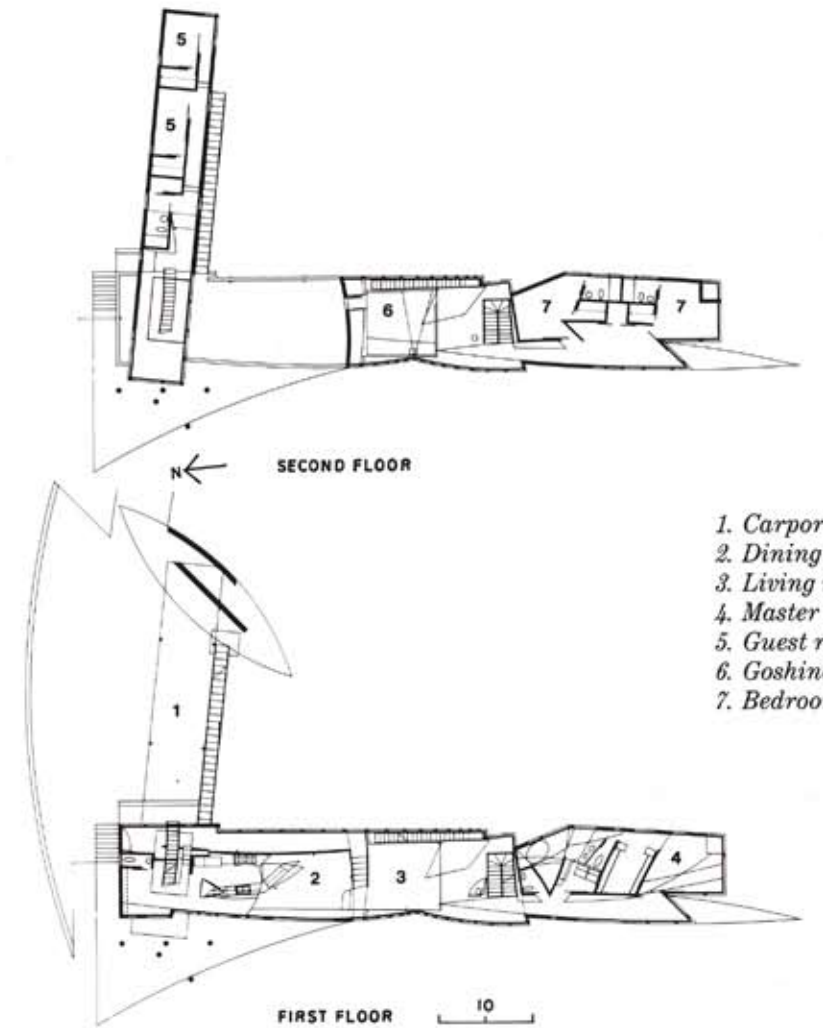
© Timothy Hursley/The Arkansas Office

The entrance to the house (above) is beneath the stepped guest wing (opposite top), which also serves as a carport. The wing is supported by concrete foundation walls and steel building jacks, which the architects used as slim, bonelike columns. Standard industrial metal steps on inclined steel beams form a staircase to the roof terrace. Redwood window frames and copper scuppers contrast with the gray-olive concrete-stucco finish (opposite bottom right). A cantilevered deck and roof, both shaped like the blade of a Swiss army knife, jut out into the woods (opposite bottom left).

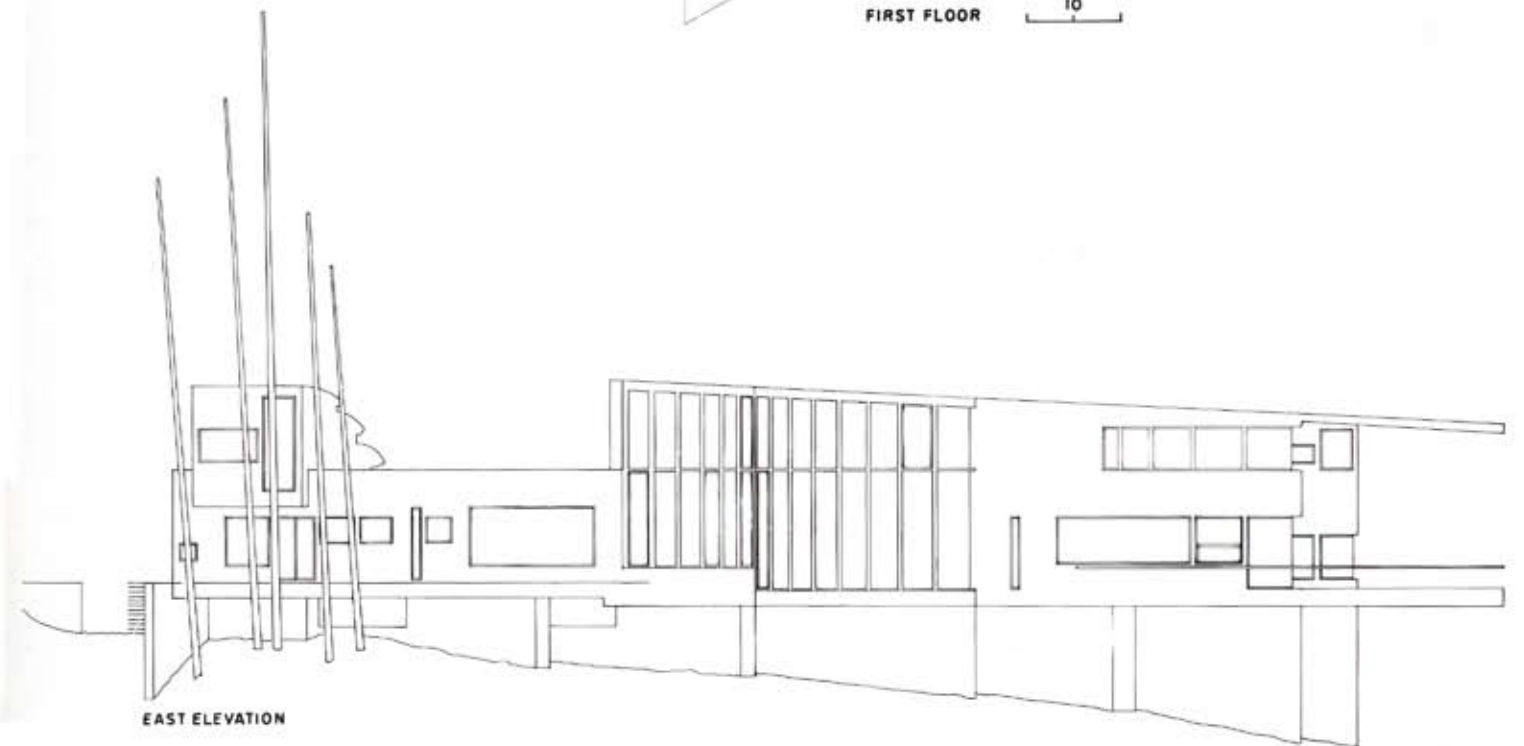




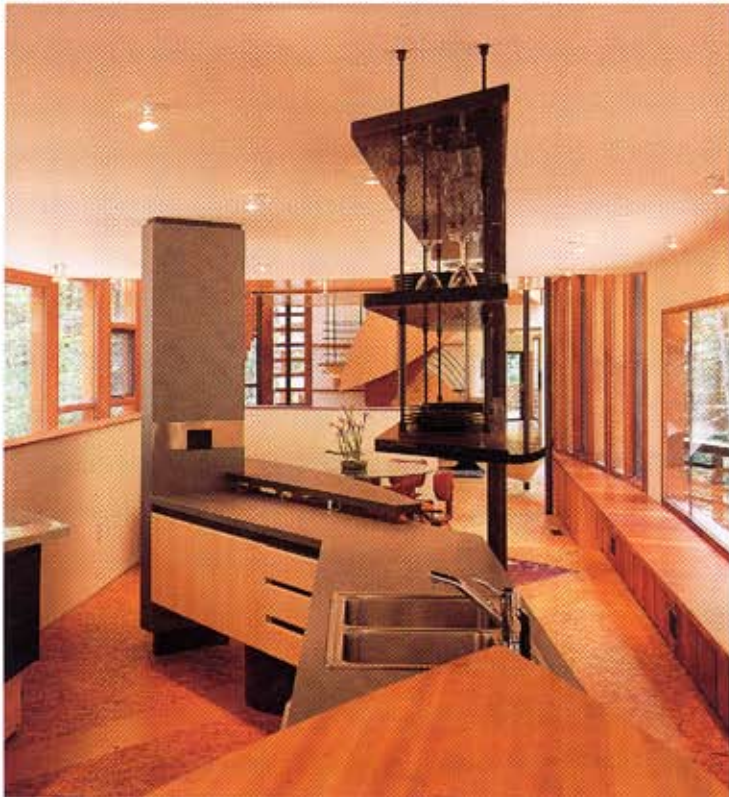
"If you don't put them in, no one will miss them. But if you do, no one will forget them," is how Mack Scogin convinced the Chmars to install five leaning telephone poles in their kitchen deck (opposite and above). The poles, however, are not just testimony to Scogin's powers of persuasion; these former trees act as a counterpoint to the house's dominant horizontality, and are a playful segue from the manmade to the natural. The main house and guest wing form an L (right).



1. Carport
2. Dining room
3. Living room
4. Master bedroom
5. Guest room
6. Goshinden room
7. Bedroom







The living room of the Chmar House (overleaf) is bracketed by two staircases—one a minimal but highly crafted orthogonal composition of birch and red-wood, which gradually climbs the daylight east side of the house to the Goshinden room (top left), and the second, a sculptural assemblage of petal-shaped birch and plywood panels and curved steel, which leads to second-floor bedrooms. Three grades of flakeboard flooring, fastened to a concrete sub-floor by bronze screws, echo the pattern of dirt paths and fallen leaves outside. Built-in benches flank an open kitchen (bottom left), where birch- and laminate-clad surfaces repeat lozenge shapes found elsewhere in the house.

Credits

*Chmar House
Atlanta, Georgia*

Owners:

Linda and Tod Chmar

Architect: *Scogin Elam and
Bray Architects—Mack Scogin,
Merrill Elam, and Lloyd Bray,
principals-in-charge; Susan
Desko, design team*

Engineer: *Pruitt Eberly, Inc.
(structural)*

General Contractor: *Welch
Tarking, Inc.*

