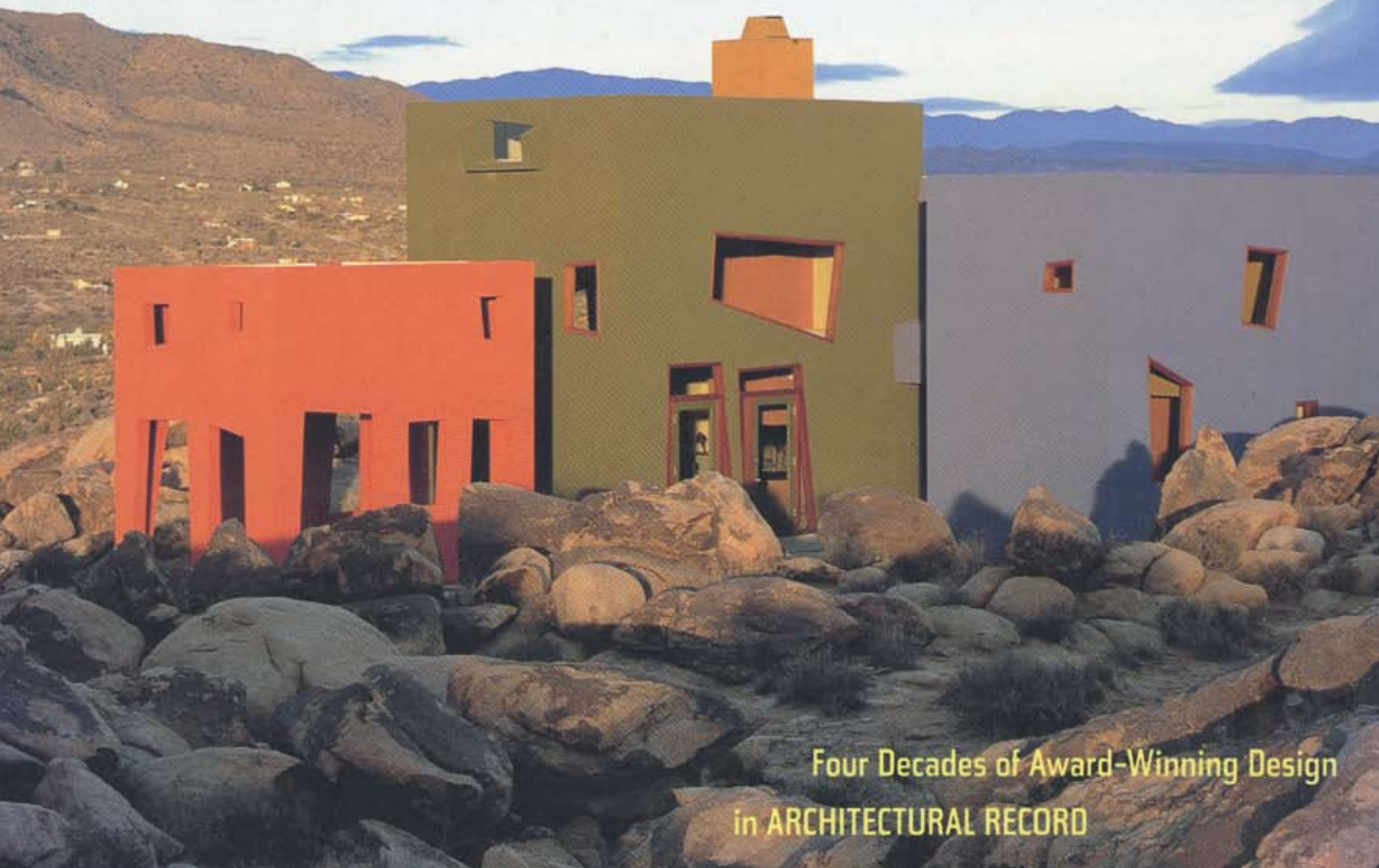


Modern American HOUSES



Four Decades of Award-Winning Design
in ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

Chmar House



Chmar House
Atlanta, Georgia
Scogin Elam and Bray, Architects
1991

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 four-thousand-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—2½ 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

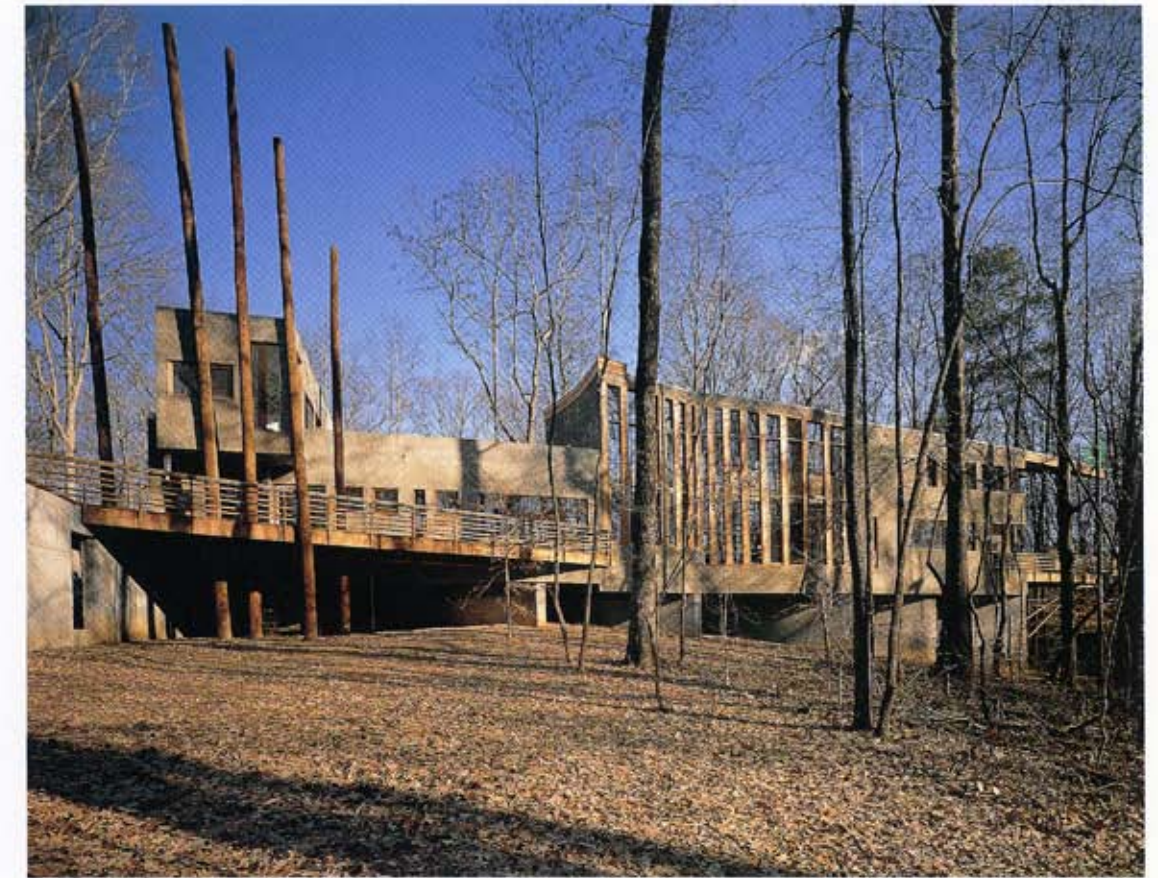




into the foliage on concrete foundation walls that step down to the north, leaving the hillside otherwise untouched.

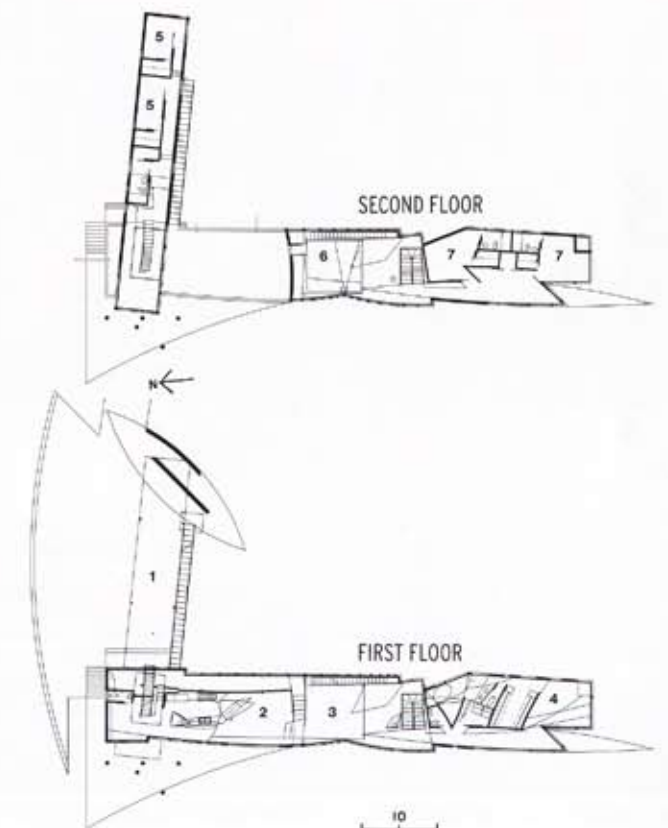
Nearly perpendicular to the main house is a semidetached guest wing that spans the driveway, creating a sheltered entrance and carport. In plan, the house resembles an open switchblade, its sharp edge a master-bedroom balcony poking into the woods. In elevation, the house is a visual sleight of hand: 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.

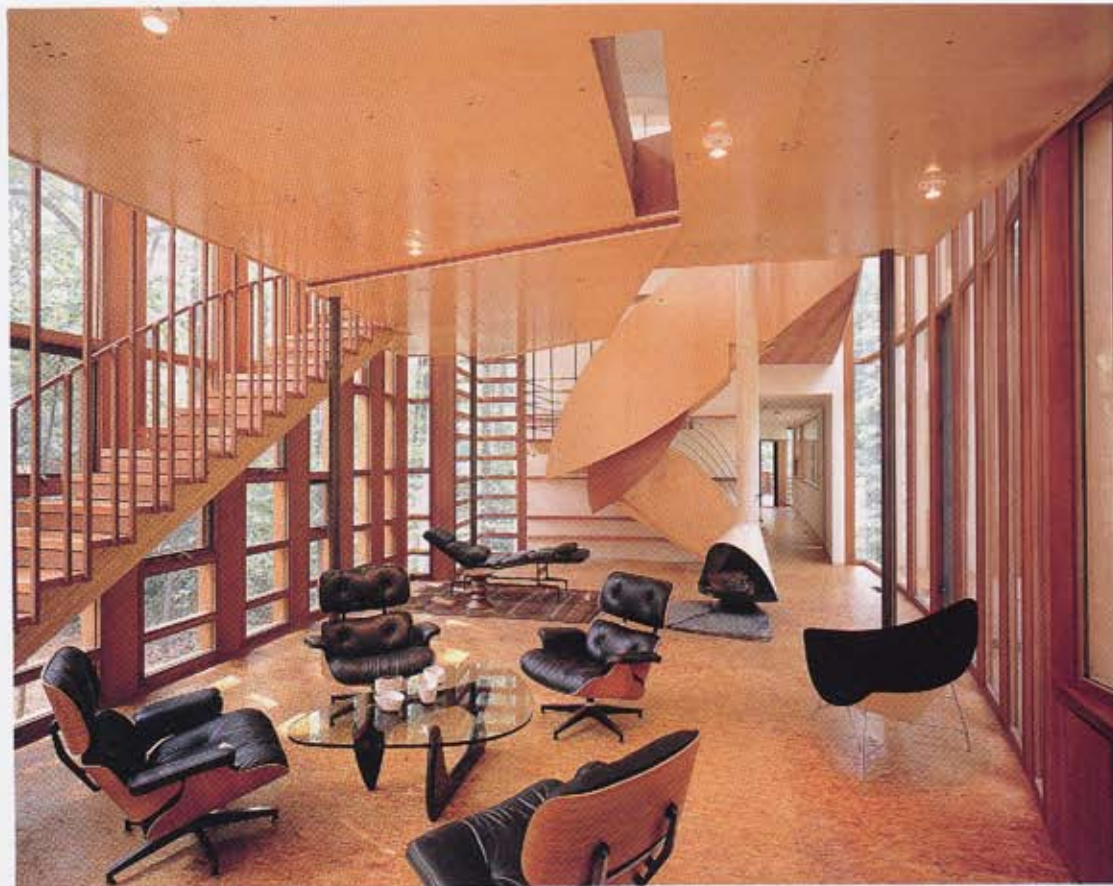
In organizing the interiors of the main house, which is 130-feet long and bulges to twenty-feet



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, 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 ribcage 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

the 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 walls of the Goshinden room, and holes in a nearby glass-encased wood door transmit an otherworldly glow from outside. The ground plane of the house sweeps out into the woods in a triangular deck off the kitchen, punctuated by five sixty-foot-high leaning telephone poles, which, like the house itself, are both firmly planted and freely soaring.

Karen D. Stein, 1991

