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# Arts

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INSIDE TODAY



Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam

## Bumper crop

AIA honors Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects with four prestigious awards.

**M10**

ANALYSIS

# Again, masters of the modernist vernacular

## Scogin, Elam win AIA nods

By CATHERINE FOX  
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After the jurors selected the projects to receive honor awards for the South Atlantic region of the American Institute of Architects, they were dumbfounded to learn that they had given four of the five to one firm: Atlanta's Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects.

It was not just that the projects — a small guesthouse, a college dormitory, a branch library and a factory — were different in type, scale and materials. More to the point, they each used a modernist vocabulary in their own way. Although the typical Scogin-Elam building is thoughtful and imaginative, the pair has never developed a signature style, like, say, Richard Meier, designer of the High Museum of Art. On purpose.

"It is difficult to pin us down," says Scogin, "because each project comes out of the site and the client."

That's what keeps their practice interesting, Scogin says. Architecture is such a long, drawn-out process, and a tedious one, that any routine would be deadly. "What we love doing is maintaining a level of innocence with our work and our approach," he says.

Elam, 60, and Scogin, 59, find architectural thinking to be wonderfully all-encompassing. They consider it all — from how a residential client stacks his socks to how a corporation plans to invest in its future. Working with the Clayton County library system, they developed a metaphor for a library as a light-filled warehouse for books. For the guesthouse in North Georgia, they wittily integrated the elevated structure into its wooded site by planting bamboo so that it grew up through the floor of the terrace. To encourage a sense of community in the dormitory at Tulane University, they created street-level spaces for students to gather.

Jury member James Valerio, a Chicago architect with Valerio DeWalt Train Associates, admires Scogin and Elam for their resistance to establishing a "brand image," which he considers a shortcut to solving architectural problems. In hindsight, however, he recognizes what he calls "the Mack and Merrill touch" in the four



Photos by Timothy Hursley

Scogin, Elam and Bray's (as the firm was then called) modernist aesthetic was tellingly at work in its design for the Lee B. Philmon Branch library in Riverdale (above), completed in 1997 — it's a book repository that literally and figuratively lets the light in. Continuing the cascade of awards for Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects — their recent community-minded design for student housing at Tulane University (left).

projects.

"There's a sense of the nobility of the materials, whether it's precast concrete panels at the factory or the Cor-Ten steel at the guesthouse," he explains, adding, "I see an interest in dematerializing the buildings. They touch the ground very gently."

He might have added that the Scogin-Elam signature includes a certain elegance.

Scogin and Elam, who are married, characterize their collaboration as an ongoing conversation between independent thinkers. (They also credit former partner Lloyd Bray, who left in 2000, for his work on the projects that won honor awards.) This approach has stood them in good stead. They have an impressive record of national awards. Global Architecture magazine, a Tokyo publication, put the North Georgia guesthouse on the cover of its current issue and featured a big spread of it, as well as the house and studio recently completed for Atlanta artist Radcliffe Bailey in southwest Atlanta.

In the spare downtown Scogin-Elam office, a staff of 20 works on an array of projects. Among them are a campus center at Wellesley College, a music library at the University of California at Berkeley, the school of architecture at Ohio State University and a federal courthouse in Austin, Texas.

Each has its unique challenges. At Ohio State, for example, the architects have developed a new way to use marble — almost as shingles — which is the facade material required by the donor. The Austin courthouse, which is on a tight urban site, will be a vertical building that must be planned for 30 years' worth of expansion.

One thing is certain with this firm: For each challenge there will be an equally unique solution.



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**ATLANTA SCORES BIG AT SOUTH ATLANTIC AWARDS**

The South Atlantic region of the American Institute of Architects, which encompasses Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina, produced a bumper crop of high-quality buildings this year.

"This is one of the best groups of submissions I've ever juried," says Chicago architect James Valerio. "It compared favorably with juries I've done at the national level."

"Juries usually set the standard [for awards] based on the overall quality of the submissions. We moved the bar up here."

Of the 21 projects to receive awards, six were by Atlanta architects.

**Honor Awards for Architecture:**  
All by Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects (formerly Scogin Elam and Bray):  
Willow Street Student Housing, Tulane University, New Orleans.  
Herman Miller Cherokee Operations, Canton.  
Lee B. Philmon Branch Library, Riverdale.  
Mountain Tree House, Dillard.

**Merit Award for Architecture:**  
Brock Green Architects, for MidCity Lofts, Atlanta.

**Merit Award for Interiors:**  
Thompson Ventulett Stainback & Associates. Hot Springs Convention Center, Hot Springs, Ark.

— Catherine Fox

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