

People

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SECTION E

Couple goes out on a limb to live in the trees



JOHNNY CRAWFORD/Staff

Tod and Linda Chmar built their multi-level Druid Hills house amid the trees as the land would allow.

Unique design has roots in spiritual beliefs

By Catherine Fox
STAFF WRITER

Tod and Linda Chmar liken their unusual home to a tree house, and no wonder.

Nestled amid the oak and birch trees at the edge of Fernbank Forest in Druid Hills, the two-wing structure rests on concrete walls that lift it into the leaves. Because the gray stucco and redwood house is very narrow — 22 feet at its widest point — and studded with windows of various sizes and shapes, the boundary between outdoors and indoors is blurred.

But this 4,000-square-foot, multi-level tree house is also, in a sense, a place of spiritual enrichment.

Every morning and evening, the Chmar family, which includes 22-month-old Ian, climbs a petal-shaped stairway in the living room to their goshinden room, where they honor their ancestors and perform the rituals of Mahikari, an organization founded in Japan and devoted to spiritual purification through the giving and receiving of light.

"This house is all about Linda and Tod, how they live their lives and how



TIM HURSLEY/Special

The geometry of the 4,000-square-foot house is, the builder says, an architectural miracle.

they feel about the environment and man's relationship to nature," explains Mack Scogin, whose firm Scogin, Elam & Bray earned a prestigious 1992 AIA Honor Award for the design of the Chmar House. They receive the award tonight at a ceremony in Washington, D.C.

"The ideas have come from their

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▶ Scogin, Elam & Bray continue winning and setting trends. See Page **E10**.

House: Family lives in harmony with nature

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investment in Mahikari. It structures their life."

And it structured the house. The Chmars, both attorneys, decided to build a house when they had trouble putting a goshinden room in their Tudor home in Druid Hills.

"I can remember Linda telling me that she hated the house they lived in, that it seemed stabbed into the ground... a violation," Mr. Scogin says. "They wanted a house that had a different relationship to its environment."

As Mrs. Chmar says, "A tenet of Mahikari is living in harmony with nature."

They bought the 2¾-acre wooded property from a developer after his plan to build five houses on the land was quashed.

"We walked the property. A tree had fallen and made an opening," Mr. Chmar recalls.

It was a perfect spot to slip a house into the woods. The architects designed it so that it would disturb the land as little as possible.

"We didn't grade it one bit," Mr. Scogin says. "We didn't change the natural terrain. We could do that by lifting it up on concrete supporting walls. A stream runs under the house undisturbed."

The architects responded to the Chmars' attitude toward nature in many ways. There are numerous decks, including a bowed one at the "prow" of the house that thrusts its occupants into the woods. The many windows not only minimize the separation from their surroundings but also let in lots of light.

"The house is built on a north-south axis so we get more light. We can see sunrise on one side and sunset on the other," Mr. Chmar observes.

The materials used in the house are primarily wood — redwood and birch. The architects used flakeboard (compressed plywood pieces) for flooring, an unusual move intended to suggest the forest floor.

"We don't wear shoes in the house for spiritual reasons," Mrs. Chmar says. "The texture

feels good on bare and socked feet."

Then there is the sense of procession built into the plan. Visitors enter a foyer and sit on a built-in bench to remove their shoes. A long hall at ground level leads to a few steps into the living room, at the opposite end of which are the stairs to the heart of the house, the goshinden room.

While meeting the room's physical requirements — it has to be at the highest point of the house and had to face a certain way — the architects also worked to make its importance felt through the design.

"The complex geometry of the house is all about creating pressure points that emanate from the altar [in the goshinden room]," Mr. Scogin says. "Every single line has some relationship to the altar, and how you enter the house and get to the altar."

Typical of the architects' work, the plan replaces the standard 90-degree angles with acute angles, curves and ellipses. The contractor, Welch Tarking Inc., employed a crew of elderly craftsmen to do the job.

"It was a labor of love for them," Mr. Scogin says. [The care and detailing] is the strength of it. From an architectural standpoint, just the framing of it is almost a miracle."

Unusual features include the five telephone poles that support and pierce one of the decks. They are a striking abstraction of the surrounding trees and iterate one of the basic themes of the house, the relationship of the built object to nature.

Frank Lloyd Wright explored this theme in his now-famous house designs, and inevitably his work comes to mind when looking at the Chmar House. Wright's work was all that the Chmars' neighbors — 16 border the property — had to go on when the house was under construction.

Anne Graner watched it go up from her back yard. "We were amazed while it was being built and wondered what it would look like, but it blends in so nicely with the woods," she says. "The Chmars have been very gracious. They've had the neighbors for



KEITH HADLEY/Staff

Lloyd Bray, Merrill Elam and Mack Scogin share more than 50 years of experience between them.

Scogin, Elam & Bray win again

When the Chmar House receives its 1992 Honor Award at the American Institute of Architects' gala ceremony tonight, it will mark the third time in five years that its designers, Scogin, Elam & Bray, have ascended the dais.

The firm is only 8 years old, but its principals, Mack Scogin — currently chairman of the architecture department at Harvard's Graduate School of Design — Merrill Elam and Lloyd Bray, share more than 50 years of experience, the bulk of it working at Heery Architects and Engineers.

As leaders of a 12-person firm founded in 1984, they quickly received local, regional and national attention for their imaginative manipulation of the modernist aesthetic. The 1988 Honor Award to the High Museum

at Georgia-Pacific Center broke a 22-year drought among Atlanta firms in 1988, and the Clayton County Headquarters Library, which Time magazine named one of the best buildings of the year, brought the firm another in 1989.

The winning projects suggest the different directions their work can take, from the elegance of the wood-paneled museum to the funky wit of the library — a Kmart for information — and the careful contextual consideration of the Chmar House, their first residential design.

"Not many firms have won that many," says Dennis Smith, director of media relations for the AIA in Washington D.C. "Most architects would love to have one."

— Catherine Fox

Sunday brunch and an Easter egg hunt."

Nancy Fleming, a friend who lives nearby, says the house was "the talk of the neighborhood" during construction. Now, she says, "It's fun to visit. It's a fasci-

nating house."

The Chmars concur.

"What surprises us is how much more interesting it becomes all the time," says Mr. Chmar. "It's like living in a piece of sculpture."