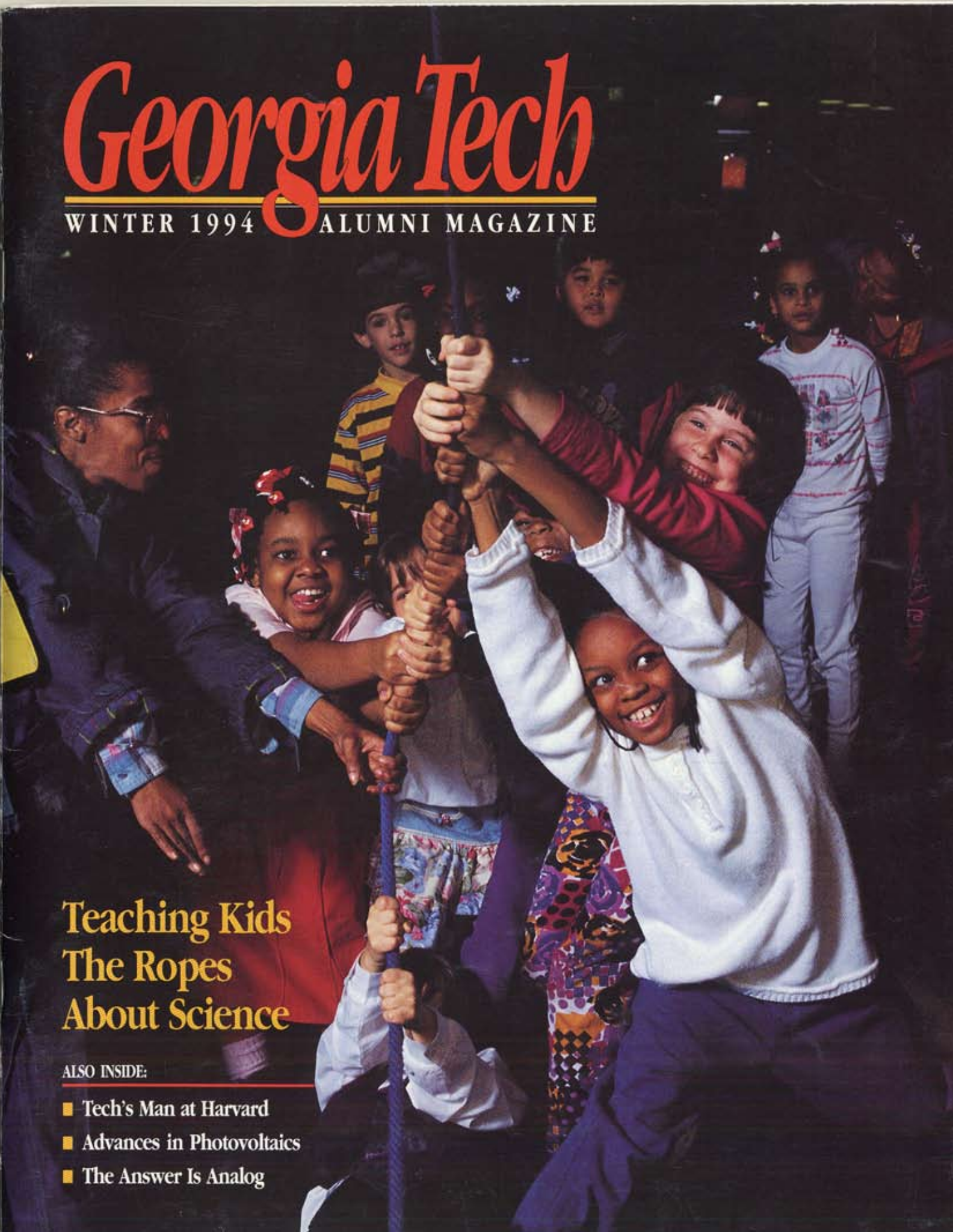


Georgia Tech

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Teaching Kids The Ropes About Science

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The Juggler Of Harvard Architecture

Georgia Tech's B. Mack Scogin balances risk with tradition

By Jerry Schwartz

To hear it told by computer disciples, there is almost nothing in the field of design and drafting that computers can't inhale and spit back at you faster than a speeding pencil and eraser. But for B. Mack Scogin Jr., the lessons he learned at a Georgia Tech drafting table more than 30 years ago are still the most important.

And they are lessons he now imparts to students of the Harvard Graduate School of Design as the chairman of the school's architecture department.

"Yes there are a lot of things that computers can do for us. They allow us a great deal more freedom in describing unusual shapes and getting things built," Scogin says of the changing state of his profession. "But it's going to be a while before a computer is



Georgia Tech alumnus B. Mack Scogin, chairman of Harvard University's architecture department in the Graduate School of Design, and his wife, Merrill Elam, also a Tech architecture graduate, stand before the Buckhead branch of the Atlanta-Fulton County Public Library. The facility, designed by their firm, Scogin, Elam and Bray, has received a national award of excellence.

STANLEY LEARY PHOTO

going to be able to capture and describe what your mind and your hand can do now."

Born in Atlanta, former president and chief operating officer of Heery and Heery Architects, Scogin is a founder and principal of Scogin, Elam and Bray architects in Atlanta, and a 1966 graduate of Georgia Tech with a bachelor of architecture degree.

At the time of his appointment as chairman of Harvard's architecture department in 1990, Scogin had only been an adjunct professor at the school for a year. "My position at the school has traditionally been for a practitioner rather than an academician," Scogin says. "That, in itself, implies a certain challenge to the establishment."

The establishment at Harvard is an imposing one, indeed. Since 1937 when the legendary Walter Gropius arrived at Harvard bringing with him the influence of the German Bauhaus tradition, the school has been a seminal influence on the world of design. Together with his Bauhaus colleague Marcel Breuer, Gropius trained some of the most famous architects of recent generations.

Among the Harvard graduates of the Gropius period were the architects I.M. Pei, Philip Johnson, Edward Larabee Barnes, John Johansen, Paul Rudolph, Ulrich Franzen and Victor Lundy.

"Every week I go up there I get more and more impressed with the institution," Scogin says. "It is so steeped in tradition that it is now at the point where it can laugh at itself. It can represent itself back to itself in ways that are critical. It is an amazing responsibility to maintain a tradition that on the one hand is incredibly single-minded, but on the other hand has to be totally inventive. It's like driving down the freeway on two wheels, balanced on one of those concrete median barriers. Harvard is not inhibited by either end of the spectrum. It demands invention. It demands risk. It demands exploration. At the same time, it demands a respect for history and tradition."

Scogin brought with him to Harvard a wealth of awards for his designs. Over the past five years, the nine-year-old Atlanta architectural firm of Scogin, Elam and Bray has won three national awards from the American

Time called the Scogin firm's Clayton County Library one of its "Best of 1988," adding it "is the kind of municipal building you'd expect to find only on a drawing board, a 'K mart for information,' ... practical, fun-loving avant-gardism."

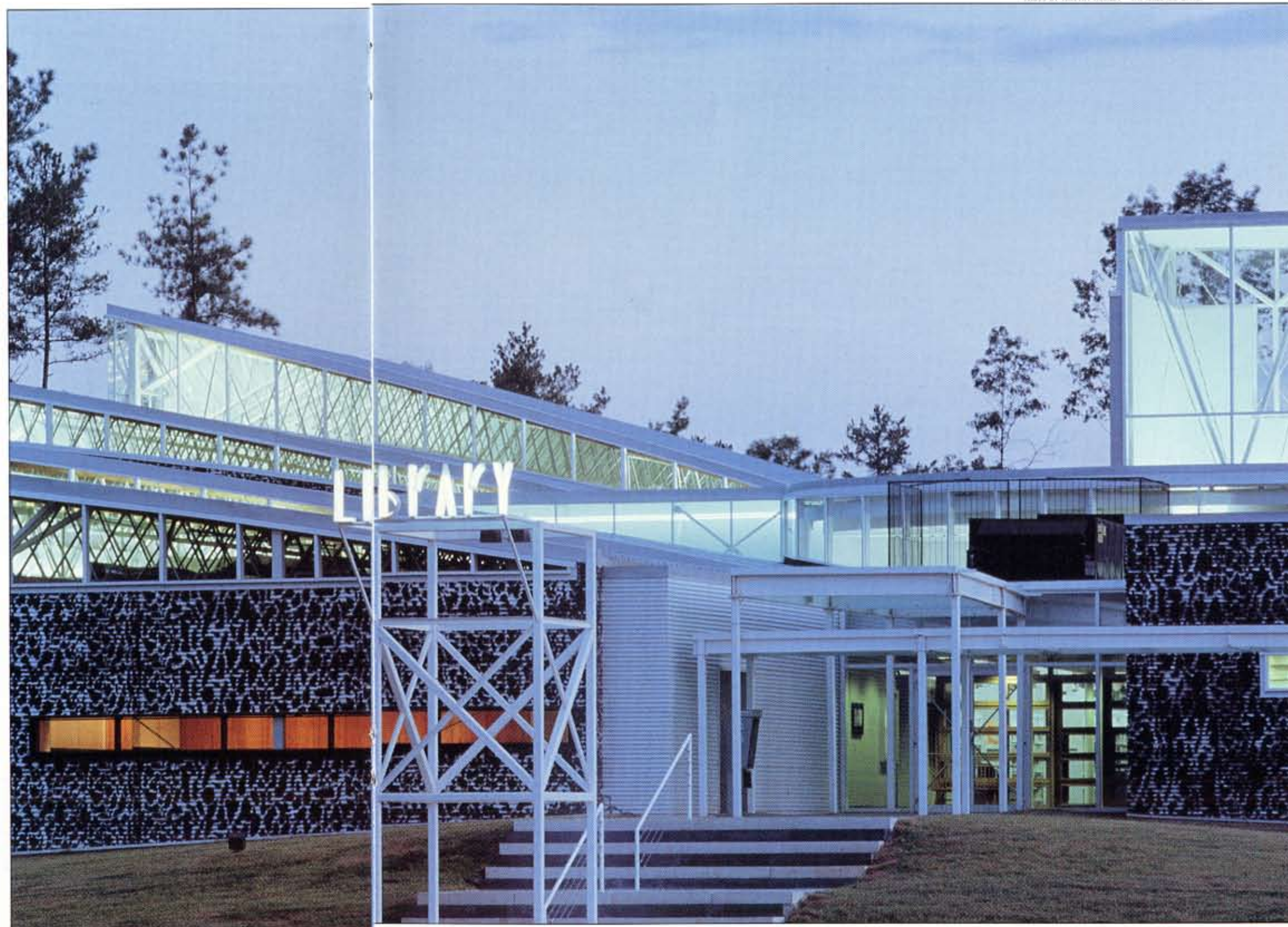
Institute of Architects. For a young 12-member architectural firm, that is an astounding haul. "Not many firms have won that many," says Dennis Smith, director of media relations for the AIA in Washington D.C. "Most architects

would love to have *one*."

When *Time* magazine selected Scogin, Elam and Bray's design for the headquarters branch of the Clayton County Library as one of its "Best of 1988," the magazine wrote,

"With its corrugated-steel exterior and wild cubist geometries, the Clayton County Library is the kind of municipal building you'd expect to find only on a drawing board. Yet there it is in suburban Georgia. Architects Mack Scogin,

PHOTO BY TIMOTHY HURLEY • THE ARCHITECTS OFFICE



Merrill Elam and Lloyd Bray designed what they call a 'K mart for information,' part industrial-strength Pee-Wee Herman, part scrupulously planned service facility. This is practical, fun-loving avant-gardism."

Washington Post architectural critic Benjamin Forgey also singled out the firm's design for the Buckhead branch of the Atlanta-Fulton County Public Library. "All wrapped in black, this building clearly embodies a bright new idea about modern architecture and, at the same time, a spirited, inventive take on the oft-ignored architectural possibilities of the commercial strip."

In addition to his wealth of practical experience and a mantle full of awards, Scogin brought to Harvard a view of architecture as a discipline that is part of the larger world. In naming him to the architecture department chair, Gerald M. McCue, dean of the Graduate School of Design, noted that Scogin's work "has explored ways in which human activities and social conditions can lead to new architectural opportunities and possibilities."

Scogin said the image of the architect as an isolated creator is fading. "The whole discipline of architecture must connect itself to society or it's going to be extinct—and that's just not going to happen. So, there's no doubt that in the schools today you can feel it in the students, their desire to connect to the real pressing needs of our society in terms of their architecture and urban design and planning. It's really quite exciting."

In Scogin's view, the same change ultimately will find its way to Atlanta which—since the days of General Sherman—has largely developed through a pattern of wholesale demolition and rebuilding.

"The fact is that Atlanta cannot continue to grow in the way that it is growing. And I don't mean geographically, and I don't mean in terms of numbers. I'm talking about growth in terms of its ethical, moral, social and cultural commitment outside the market-driven values of progress that we have experienced over my lifetime—the last 50 years. You just can't sustain growth that way."

As an example of the prototypical Atlanta style of development, Scogin cites the proposal to raze 72 acres in downtown Atlanta to make way for a Centennial Olympic Park.

"That's the sort of consummate Atlanta style of making things happen. But the whole attitude of tearing things down and replacing them with the new is an incredible mindset that sometimes astonishes me. A proposal like that would just be ignored in most cities in this country, in most cities in the world. You just couldn't do it anywhere else."

Scogin's own inclination is to avoid demolishing anything unnecessarily—even a tree. His most recent AIA award was given for an Atlanta home tucked neatly onto a wooded lot and blending into the surrounding landscape.

In a 1992 interview about the home of Atlanta attorneys Linda and Tod Chmar, Scogin said, "I can remember Linda telling me that she hated the house they lived in, that it seemed stabbed into the ground—a violation. They wanted a house that had a different relationship to its environment. We didn't change the natural terrain. We didn't grade it one bit. We could do that by lifting the house up on concrete supporting walls. A stream runs under the house undisturbed."

Scogin traces his architectural influences to his days at Georgia Tech and an unusual faculty. He and Merrill Elam, his partner and wife, entered Georgia Tech in 1961.

"The architecture faculty had been at Tech for a number of years. And it's fair to say that it was a rather elderly faculty but, looking back, an unusually sophisticated faculty. They taught that architecture was a continuum and a slowly evolving discipline that had everything to do with givens, traditions and time-proven principles that could be challenged in a number of ways—technologically challenged, sociologically challenged—but that it was a slow and evolving discipline.

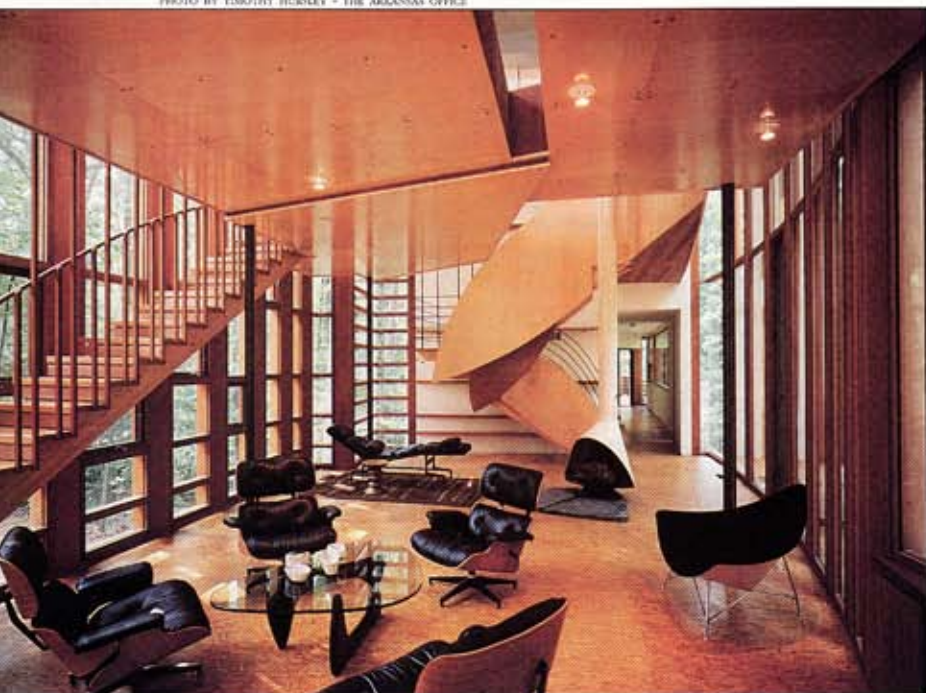
"That may sound unimportant, but if you think back to what was happening elsewhere in the world and elsewhere in other architecture schools, it was just total bedlam. Things had been completely turned upside down. Ideas that everyone was totally invested in were being challenged in many architecture schools. But being here at Georgia Tech, with that particular faculty, it never affected us. We just maintained a steady course."

The Harvard style of the late '50s and early '60s—still under the influence of Gropius—was exactly the opposite, Scogin said.

"Gropius was sort of an anti-historicist. He was a great believer in modern times, modern techniques, technology, of the intellectual

When attorney Linda Chmar told Scogin she wanted a house that didn't violate the environment, he built a house without changing the natural terrain. Even a stream runs under it.





With structures like the Chmar home, "it's been exciting to me to participate in the city making itself. The difference between Atlanta and other places is that something still is being made here and that you can contribute."

pursuit as being a means to an end. At the time, that view served things well, particularly in the post-war period."

But in that post-war period, the years of his youth, Scogin concedes he was all but oblivious to architecture. "I certainly never was interested in architecture as a young person, especially not in high school. All I did was play tennis and basketball and football and hang out with my buddies.

"I guess it's fair to say I've always been kind of mildly interested in drawing and art. But if you took art courses when I was in high school, you were a sissy, so I didn't."

His earliest influence came from his parents. His father worked at Rich's department store building most of the store's furnishings. "My father was always making things, constructing things. And I think I took it for granted that everybody's parents built something," he recalls.

"There was an element of happenstance, too. I couldn't afford to go out-of-town to college, and Georgia Tech was a great school here in town where the tuition was something like \$92 a quarter."

And, he adds with a laugh, "they had great football teams back then. It was kind of natural for me to want to go to Georgia Tech

regardless of what the major was."

Since leaving Tech, Scogin has seen changes in both his profession and his home town. "I think architecture has gone through a period of great challenge and has definitely evolved. It could be argued that it is on the verge of some fairly significant change. But I think without a doubt there is a return to seeing the profession as one that is inextricably lodged in the meaning of our present day, and it has to evolve along with the times in some very careful and methodical ways."

Scogin has seen the city of his birth, education and entire professional life change its face completely. Along with the physical changes, he said, Atlanta is on the verge of a new phase of cultural maturity. "Sooner or later the people of Atlanta, including myself, have got to emerge from this kind of regional crutch where we lean back and use our roots as some sort of excuse—as a way of not engaging the broader world. I think it has served us well, but I think it's time to mature a little bit. And I include myself in that.

"You still have to somehow catch the Southern manner, the Southern attitude toward behavior. Atlanta is not the South, not the Deep South. It has a different attitude. There's a positiveness. That's a word that you hear a lot about Atlanta and the city, but it's a very important word. There's a positiveness toward getting things done that I think is wonderful. But to me, the difference now is that we have to direct that same positive attitude towards things of accomplishment. To me, there's a very big difference between just building, and accomplishment. Accomplishment has more enduring qualities to it. In order to do that you have to have a broader view.

"A place like Atlanta is exciting because it has been making itself. And what's been exciting to me is the chance to participate in the city making itself—in a very small way—but at least I've been here.

"That's the difference between Atlanta and a place like Boston where the city was finished 300 years ago. You can build all you want in Boston, but the character of that city is set. If you ask the difference between Atlanta and some other place, I think that's it. It's the idea that something still is being made here and that you can contribute." ■

Jerry Schwartz is an Atlanta-based free-lance writer.