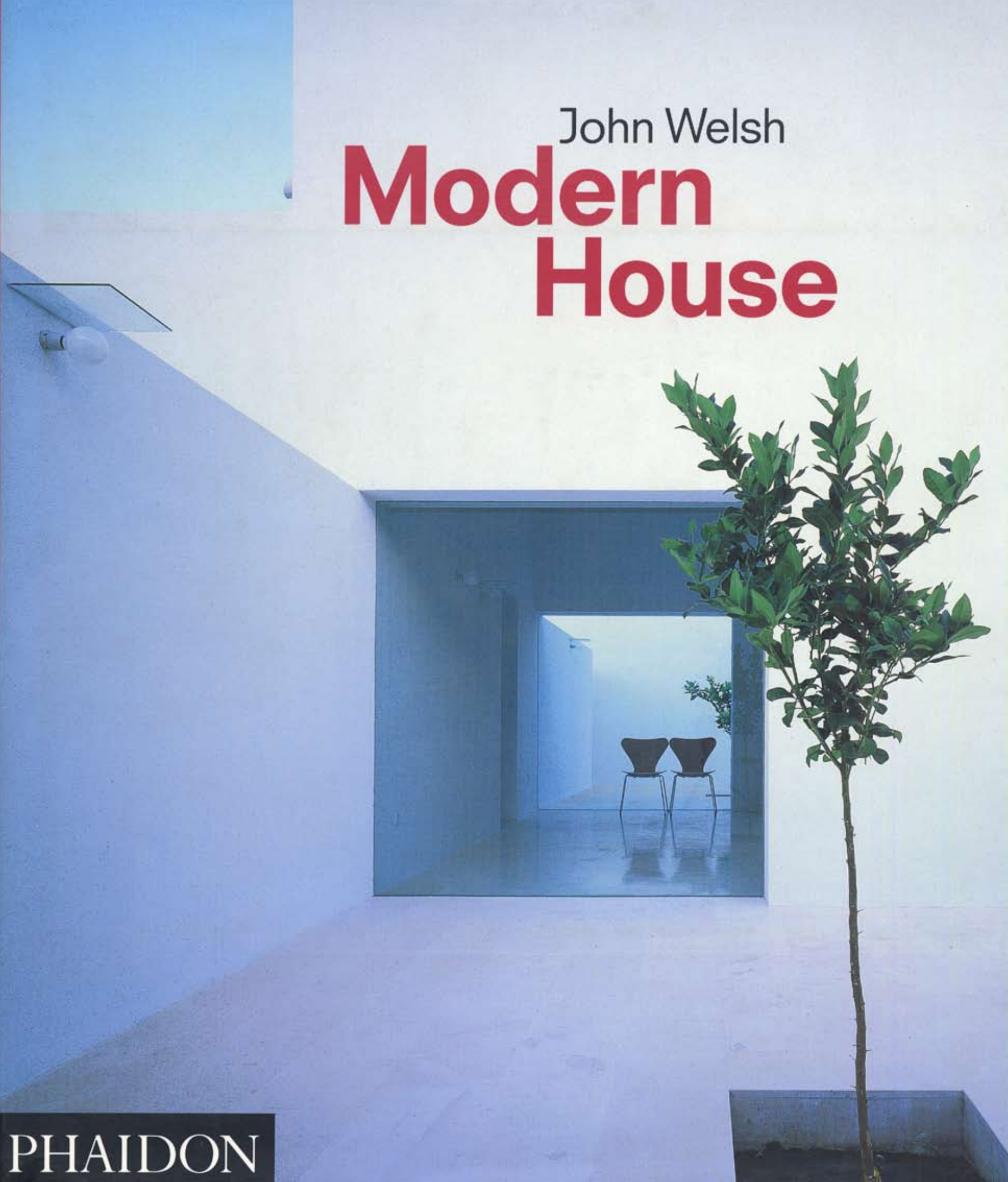


John Welsh

Modern House



PHAIDON

Scogin Elam & Bray Chmar house

Atlanta, Georgia, USA, 1989



No house, apart from Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, could fit more perfectly into its landscape. Even the bedroom balcony of the Chmar house rests among the trees.



The buildings of Scogin Elam & Bray can be interpreted as having been inspired by the two sides of Frank Lloyd Wright's organic legacy: his interest in locating buildings in the perfect spot, such as at Fallingwater; and the later period of Wright's work where the helicoid plan takes precedence: think here of the David Wright house (1950) in Phoenix, or the Guggenheim Museum in New York (1959).

The Chmar house appears, at first, to fulfil both criteria. Its location in its woodland site, for example – a clearing created by a fallen tree – is chosen with a similar care to that of Fallingwater. SEB's means of expressing such empathy, however – for the Chmar house is full of the angular geometries and cantilevers more common to deconstruction, a style more usually seen in the city – seems to be radically at odds with the tranquillity of a virgin forest. How can such an apparent contradiction be resolved?

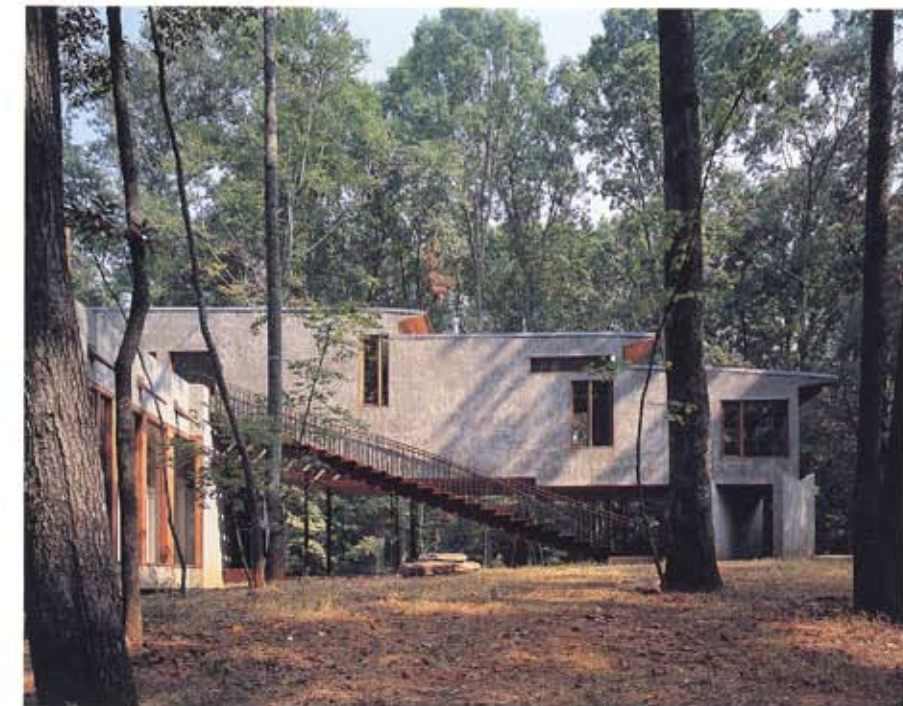
Atlanta-based SEB often deals with the world of the American suburb, the retail strips where empty building sites are squeezed between the multimedia icons of drive-thru America. Here, the practice has tried to achieve an architecture it terms popular yet remarkable among the contextless wastes; the result is an architecture successfully alien to its surroundings. Buckhead library (1989), in an up-and-coming suburb of Atlanta, for example, is definitely

Despite Scogin Elam & Bray's constant respect for context, they also know how to control it. Thus, while the Chmar house is everything the client wanted and fits within its location, it also plays a part in a far wider architectural debate: is it deconstruction or merely a sensible rearrangement of rooms in a time-honoured modernist tradition?





The decks (opposite) and the stairs (right) help to forge links between this human insertion into the landscape and the wood itself. Even the telegraph poles rising through the decks act as a reminder of the sometimes ironic similarity between technology and nature.



deconstructionist. Morrow library (1991), in a more family-oriented suburb, has its terracotta-coloured walls decorated with the prints of local children's hands.

The Chmar house, though, is for a private client and, in addition, is in a very different type of location. The clues to its appearance lie not just with the libraries but also in two houses by SEB (two incomplete projects). The Weekend house and the Roderique house are both in beautiful settings, but one is for a busy city couple, the other for a large family with children, nanny, occasional grandparents and frequent guests. Just as the libraries display some of the characteristics of their end-users, so these two houses reveal the diversity of the two clients.

The Weekend house, for example, is the guest house for a larger house to be built some time in the future on the site of an old overgrown estate. The very casualness of weekends and the variety of future guests are some of the defining characteristics for the house. A series of sliding walls/doors subdivides the house for multiple uses and frees up the plan. The device is carried through to the elevations, where other walls/doors can be pulled back to break down divisions between inside and out and even alter its appearance - voids become solid blocks and vice versa.

The Roderique house has a far more complicated and introverted plan, created by the characters of



Scogin Elam & Bray's deconstructivist tendencies are shown (top) in the Buckhead library, Atlanta (1989) and the more Chmar-like qualities of the unbuilt Weekend house (above).

many individuals and their activities. The formal dining and living room are some way off on their own, placed neatly beside a lawn. Yet, the kitchen, toy store, family dining and living room are a pickle of intertwining and overlapping geometries. Upstairs, the use of curves to emphasize the youthful exuberance of the children's bedrooms contrasts with the straight lines of the parents' bedrooms, which stress the sedateness of maturity. The resulting elevations are a mass of shapes and cantilevers.

The Chmar family is different yet again, as they belong to an obscure Japanese religious sect. Their beliefs look for daily inspiration from light before an ancestral altar in a Goshinden room at the heart of a house. In more practical terms, the Chmars were seeking a house that was at one with its precious surroundings, and that provided all the bedrooms, kitchen and living rooms for an average family without destroying its surroundings.

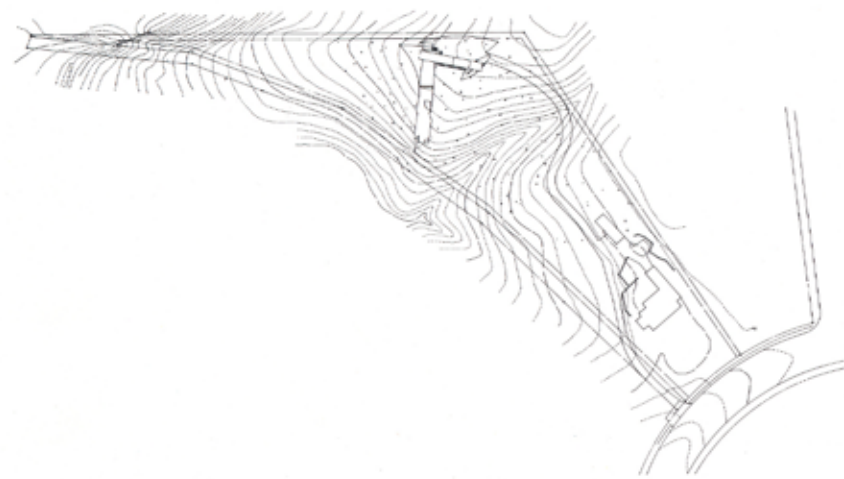
SEB raised the main two-storey part of the house on concrete foundations as the site sloped away to the north. Another semi-detached one-storey guest wing is similarly raised, allowing a car port to be hidden below. The elevation of the two blocks leaves the forest floor largely untouched. The two parts of the house run perpendicular to each other, producing a plan that Scogin compares to a pen knife with its bottle opener and shallow blade extended. This is how his imagery works: one deck

The living room of the Chmar house (right) picks up on the woodlike exterior and benefits from the full width of the building's footprint.



The façade (top and above), which looks like a multi-faceted screen, ensures a superior quality of light is shed into the interior.



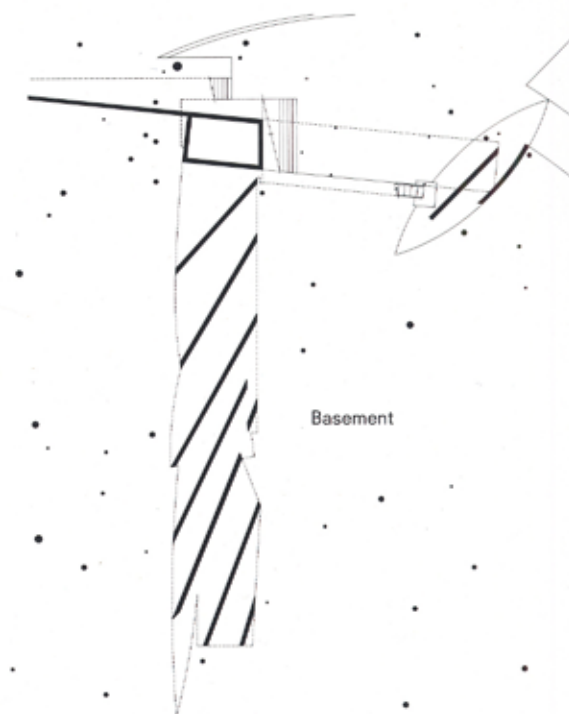


Site plan. The house lies away from a suburban main road but its exact location was dictated by a clearing in the woods created by a fallen tree.

is cantilevered razor sharp over the slope and into the woods; the other deck is more traditional but for the five telegraph poles that rise up through it. The length and breadth of the decks break down the division as to where the house stops and the wood begins.

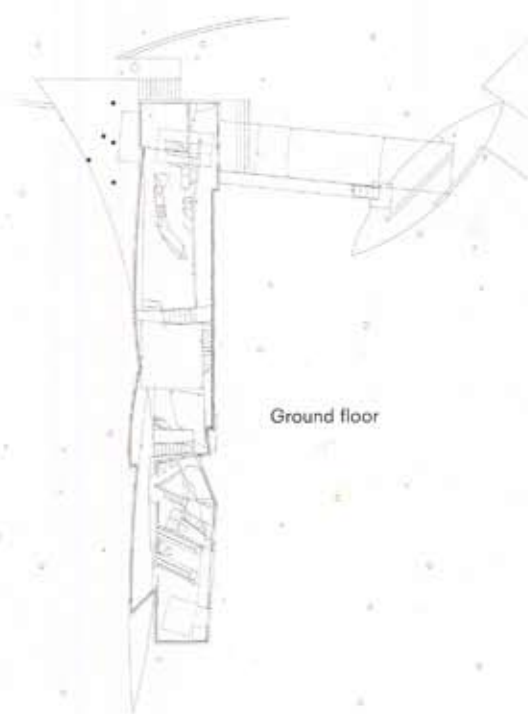
Such architectural reticence was evidently a requirement of the brief, but one SEB takes to its limit. The grey, concrete-like render of the exterior reduces much of the façade to a mere backdrop for winter shadows or summer foliage. Yet, the potential monotony of such a finish is relieved by the windows. The redwood frames stand in marked contrast to their grey surrounds, and their various shapes, from simple oblongs through to horizontal panels, create a dramatic syncopation of forms. The variety of windows is not mere whimsy. Each one relates logically to its context. Strongly horizontal windows, for example, rise double-height through the thickest part of the main wing, illuminating the ground-floor living room and the Goshinden room elevated at first floor above.

The redwood also sets the tone for the interior. The floors are covered in sheets of composite chipboard, their randomness imitating the fallen leaves outside. And the two staircases are studies in carpentry; one a traditional set of steps and risers in birch and redwood up to the Goshinden room, the other a composition of plywood panels up to the children's bedrooms.

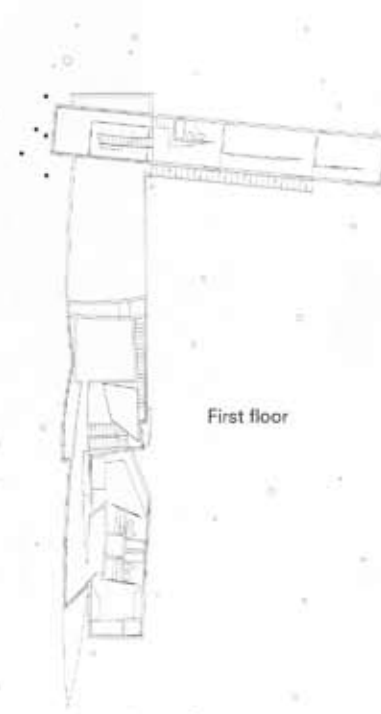


Basement

The forms of the Chmar house and the two others by SEB beg the question whether a house can fit into the landscape despite espousing a style more often associated with the city; between the Wrightian context and the city-slickness of deconstruction. Yet, there is another explanation. Deconstruction can be interpreted not simply as some stand-alone development but as a natural and inevitable progression by the post-war European avant-garde, such as Rem Koolhaas' OMA (see page 100). This theory argues that deconstruction takes the Miesian parallel arrangement of rooms – the German pavilion in Barcelona (1929), for example – and uses it not in plan but in section. And what inspired Mies but a similar order of rooms in Wright's Prairie houses?



Ground floor



First floor

Floor plans (from left to right): basement; ground floor, living room and main bedroom; first floor, guest rooms and Goshinden room.



Elevations of the two wings: the sitting room and bedroom (above, right) and guest rooms (below, right).

