

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD



RECORD

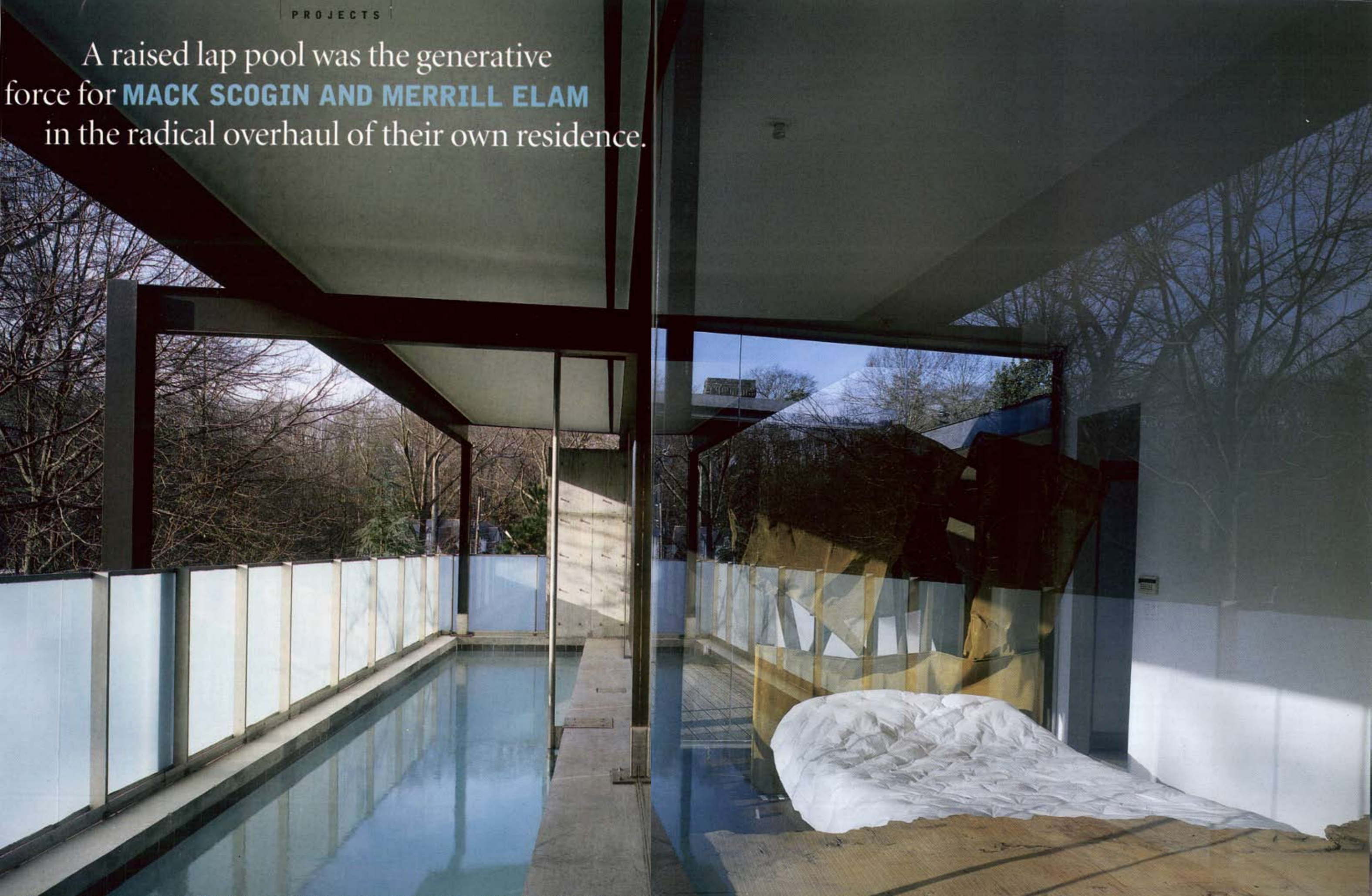
HOUSES

Listening to Interior Designers

Making a Spec House Special

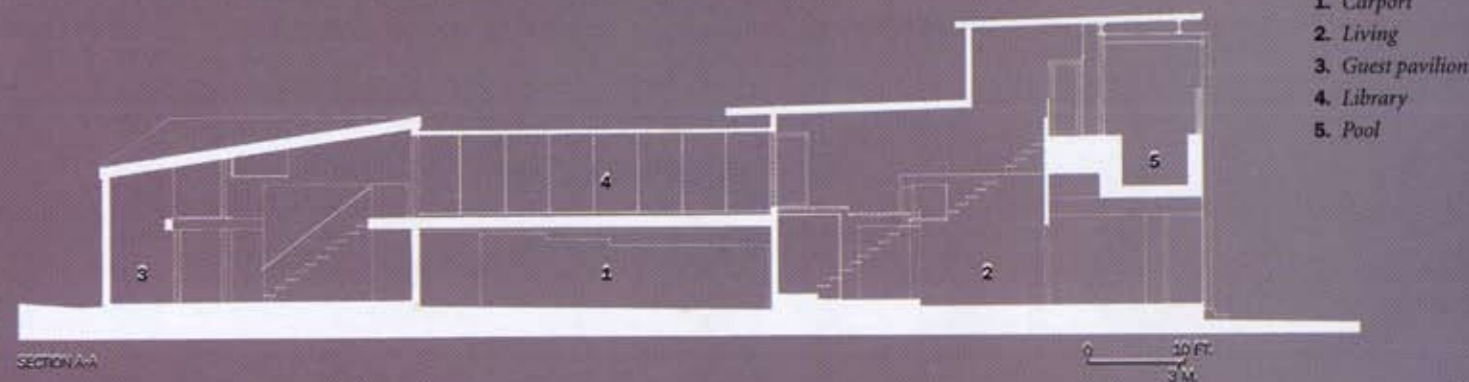
America's Most Visited Houses

A raised lap pool was the generative force for **MACK SCOGIN AND MERRILL ELAM** in the radical overhaul of their own residence.





Elam hopes to plant a bamboo grove in the front yard to shield the 1,500-square-foot-house from the street (below). Laminated glass provides a hazy screen for the second-floor lap pool. At night the screen is animated by wavy patterns and mysterious reflections (left). A bridgelike library, unfinished for now, connects the main house with two guest pavilions in the back (section right).



All eyes on the high board." The children's summertime call reverberates through the leafy streets of Brookwood Hills, a planned residential community dating from the 1920s, tucked between downtown Atlanta and the affluent Buckhead area. While Brookwood's community swimming pool and the perilous activity on the uppermost diving board draws its share of attention during the months of June, July, and August, it's the structure across the street—the new house of architects Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam, with its own daring water feature, a second-story lap pool wrapped in milky glass—that has all eyes on it year 'round.

Scogin and Elam have lived in the neighborhood since 1976, when they purchased a steep-roofed postwar bungalow, not for its architectural merits but for its modest price and desirable mid-urban, mid-suburban location. "Merrill hated the house," Scogin recalls. "So much so that the day we moved in she took a sledgehammer and knocked down walls between the tiny rooms." Elam adds, "I just started throwing stuff out the back window."

If the desire for a new architectural order was present from the

FINDING A PLACE FOR THE POOL WAS NOT EASY, SO THE ARCHITECTS PUT IT UP IN THE AIR.

moment the architects moved in, it took time, a gradual accumulation of financial resources, and surprising twists of fate to make their imagined changes real. For nearly 20 years, Scogin and Elam lived in their bungalow, completing only modest renovations—a streamlined interior plan and the addition of two small guest pavilions in the backyard.

Three years ago nature stepped in. In October 1995 the gale-force winds of Hurricane Opal snapped a mature water oak planted at the sidewalk and it fell diagonally across Scogin and Elam's lot, landing on the couple's bed. Luckily they were both in their apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Scogin was completing his term as chairman of the Department of Architecture at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Twice before, trees had fallen on the house, swatting the roof, but this one fell *into* the house.

When the news reached the couple, they didn't rush home. "It's a bit of an embarrassment," explains Scogin of their delayed reaction. "We

by Karen D. Stein



lived in a modest house for years. We spent our time working on other people's houses, not our own. So we didn't have *things*." When they did finally return to Atlanta to salvage their belongings, there wasn't much left of their house. "This tree cracked all the walls and split the roof's ridge beam," recalls Elam. "If it had been a car you would have said it had been totaled." It took 15 men more than two days just to remove the tree.

At first, the architects camped out in what was left, pitching a tarpaulin in a tiny corner of the wobbling structure to keep out the rain. Like many who have suffered the loss of their home from natural causes, they planned to rebuild, re-creating the house pretty much as it had been. "We were going to save as much of the house as possible," remembers Scogin of their initial response. "We did demolition drawings for the contractors that said, 'save this, but not that.' Then we'd (*text continues*)

Project: 64 Wakefield Drive, Atlanta

Architect: Scogin Elam and Bray Architects—Mack Scogin, AIA, and Merrill Elam, AIA, with Lloyd Bray, AIA

Engineer: Palmer Engineering Company (structural)

Consultants: Edward L. Daugherty, Landscape Architect (landscape); Ramon Luminance Design (lighting); Aqua Blue Pools, Inc. (pool installation); Paul Wilson (metalwork)

General Contractor: John Wesley Hammer Construction Company

PHOTOGRAPHY: © TIMOTHY HURSELY





Party of three "Not at all," is how Lloyd Bray characterizes his involvement in the design of Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam's house. Elam's opinion differs—not in terms of workload, but attitude. "He provided tolerance," chuckles Elam of Bray's invisible role in the house, "as he does in all that we do." Explains Bray of the three-way partnership, "Mack and Merrill are the design spirit of the firm. I throw out design ideas. Most of them get laughed at, though every once in a while one will get incorporated into a project. I concentrate on business issues."

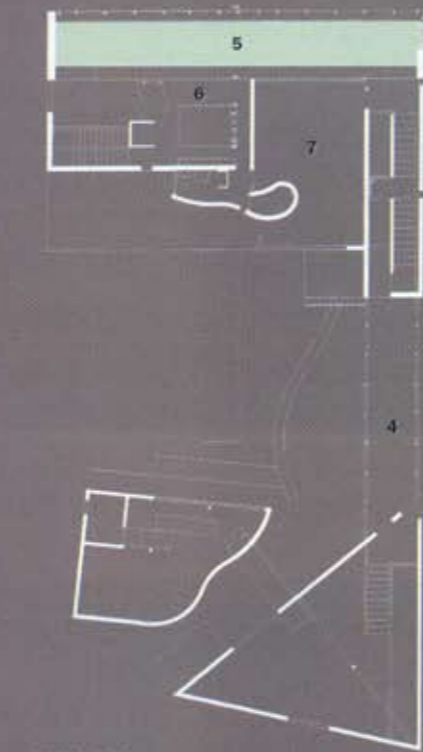
This happy collaboration has been going on since the late 1970s, when the trio worked together at a much larger Atlanta office, Heery and Heery Architects and Engineers. Scogin was the firm's president, chief operating officer, and director of design until 1984, when he left to form his own practice. Elam and Bray soon followed.

While Scogin and Elam over-

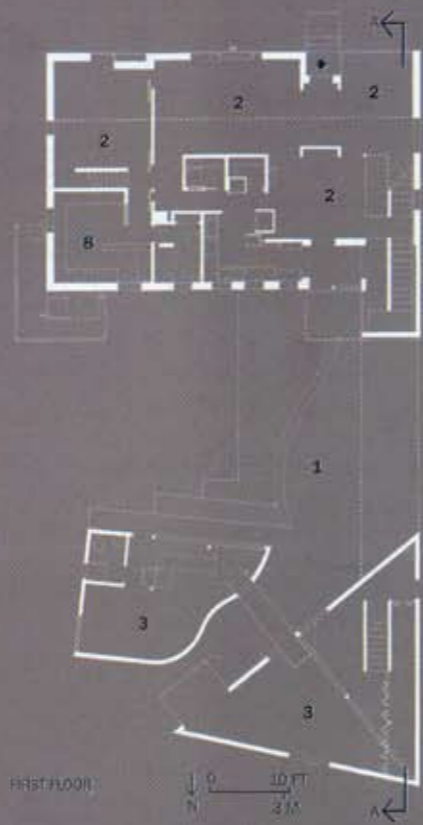
From left to right: Merrill Elam, Mack Scogin, and Lloyd Bray, principals of their own Atlanta-based firm since 1986, poolside at Elam and Scogin's house.

see all design aspects, Bray keeps things running. His partners travel far and wide teaching, lecturing, and interviewing for new work. Scogin is a Harvard professor, so he spends two days a week in Cambridge for at least one semester a year. Elam has taught all over the country, including Los Angeles's SCI-Arc, Clemson University, and the University of Virginia. This year she's commuting to the University of Houston.

"Mack and Merrill work all the time. They wake up in the morning and they do architecture all day," reports a somewhat incredulous Bray. What about the pleasures of their new house? "Well, maybe now they wake up in the morning and take a quick swim. And then they do architecture all day." *K.D.S.*



SECOND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR

- 1. Carport
- 2. Living
- 3. Guest pavilion
- 4. Library
- 5. Pool
- 6. Master bedroom
- 7. Deck
- 8. Laundry/dressing



For now, Elam and Scogin's collection of architect-designed chairs is their principal furnishing.



Furnishings in the house remain minimal for now. A blackboard from Scogin's former office at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design is preserved with sketches by director Robert Wilson (below), who lectured at the school.

come by and it would all be gone," says Elam. Apparently, the contractors didn't think much was worth saving.

Then Elam had an epiphany: "One day I said, 'I don't want a house, I just want a pool.'" No one was more surprised than Scogin, who says, "It was a total shock to hear Merrill ask for a lap pool. She never wanted anything. It became an obsession to get her that pool."

Finding a place to put it was not easy. The backyard, with the two pavilions and swath of grass, was not large enough, and putting the pool in the front yard was prohibited by local zoning.

The result was to push the pool up in the air. "It was the generative moment," says Scogin of the decision to locate the lap pool on the second floor of a "plan that makes no sense." It is indicative of Scogin and Elam's architecture that "no sense" became common sense and that happenstance took on the air of inevitability as the scheme developed.

The outdoor pool, surrounded by a deck, is the culmination of Elam's quest. It crowns the two-floor master-bedroom suite, with dressing rooms and closets downstairs and a sleeping area, bathroom, and bathing above. "It's a vertical suite," jokes Elam. "It's a house that keeps

"IT'S A VERTICAL SUITE," JOKES MERRILL ELAM OF THE TWO-FLOOR MASTER BEDROOM.

you healthy by making you go up and down." Hoisting the pool required its own heavy lifting. The shell is cast-in-place concrete, which is one to two feet thick on its four sides, one foot deep, and supported by 12-foot-deep foundations at the load-bearing walls. Once the pool was designed, other living spaces were arranged around it.

The architects, who moved into an apartment during construction, stopped by regularly to discuss design details with the contractors, working in a design-as-you-go process that they thoroughly enjoyed but would not use with clients. In fact, as their house was under

Steel beams seem to be a dramatic expression of structure (above) but are in fact decorative. The 50-foot-long pool is supported by

concrete outer walls. A piece of wood is suspended between the pool enclosure and the bedroom's built-in television cabinet (right).





Wood-fibrous cement flooring panels were laid on top of the existing structure (above). The pool's shell has a purposely rough finish.

architects' unique expressionistic forms, which are as much about aesthetic appeal as about constantly playing against expectations—finding coherence in the seemingly absurd collage of spaces, and richness in the plainest of materials.

"The house is the great experiment in American architecture,"

THE OVERLAPPING SPACES ARE LESS A SERIES OF ROOMS THAN A CHOREOGRAPHY OF MOVEMENT.

says Scogin. But in their own house, the architects went a little further, melding horizontal and vertical spaces into a three-dimensional pinwheel. The overlapping spaces are not conceived as a series of planned rooms as much as a choreography of movement. "I told my mother there are no rooms, just situations," reports Scogin of the first parental visit. This deliberate ambiguity and open-endedness of "rooms" is increased by

construction their firm, Scogin Elam and Bray Architects, was working on four other houses concurrently. [For the first completed project of the group, a house in Dillard, Georgia, see RECORD, April 1997, pages 90–97]. The firm's houses are as different as their clients, locations, uses, and budgets. But all are connected by the

reflections of the open-air pool against its shimmering glass partial-height walls. At night, the windswept pool water casts shadows on the translucent front, animating the facade with ripples. During the day, images of trees are projected onto the concrete walls around the pool, making the structure itself appear transparent. "I wake up every morning seeing through concrete," marvels Scogin of the panorama of trees, both real and reflected, that is visible from his bed. "The first thing I see every day is a miracle." ■

Sources

Oynx entrance stoop: Artistic Stone Craft

Aluminum windows: Phoenix Metal and Southern Aluminum

Glass and aluminum entry doors: Amarlite

Custom hardware: Designed by Mack Scogin

Cabinet hinges: Grass America, Inc.

Plastic laminate surfaces: Wilsonart International

Cementitious flooring: U.S. Architectural Products Inc. (Plycem)

Pool floor, wall tile: Quality Pool Tile

Encapsulated halogen lamps in recessed sockets: Abco

Lighting controls: Lutron

Sofa: B & B Italia, courtesy Domus/Atlanta (Charles Section sofa designed by Antonio Citterio)

Oversized ottoman: Flexform, courtesy Domus/Atlanta (designed by Antonio Citterio)

Chaise: Cassina LC-4 Lounge, courtesy Domus/Atlanta (designed by Le Corbusier)