

The New York Times

DESIGN NOTEBOOK

Return to Innovation In a House That Dares

By JULIE V. IOVINE

WHATEVER happened to truly innovative houses? Houses so radical in concept, so bold in execution and at the same time so comfortable and appealing that they made people want to change the way they lived? Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater (1935) was one: its rooms flowed as smoothly into each other as the river running under the house. The Maison de Verre, built in 1928 in Paris, revolutionized the way people thought about using glass as a residential material. An entire wall of glass block admitted light while maintaining privacy.

For an explorer, a new home is the great adventure.

Those were the days when houses were considered the seedbed for architects' brave notions. In postwar America, architects focused on mass production as the way to make better houses not just for the wealthy but for everyone. While they were at it, they redefined what was formal, what was informal; what was inside,

what was out, and how rooms without walls could reflect a more casual living arrangement.

These days, new houses in America seem to be more about size than innovation. Architects save their inspiration for museums, libraries and performing arts centers. (Even Frank Gehry, who used unheard-of materials like chain link in his own Los Angeles home in 1978, has eschewed houses in favor of designing cultural institutions.) As a result, developers are the ones who decide how everyone should live, and how many Palladian windows to install.

It is possible to see how house-making could be different with Margaret Nomentana's place in Maine, designed by Scogin, Elam & Bray of Atlanta. Part Zermatt, part "Three Little Bears," this 3,600-square-foot house only looks as if it zoomed in from another dimension. It is a direct descendant of the houses that cast off tradition only to make a richer experience of place.

"The house is the great experiment in American architecture," said Mack Scogin, an architect and former chairman of the architecture department at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, who designed the house with his partner and wife, Merrill Elam. "Not just because it represents the great American dream of owning your own house and individualizing it, but because the reality is so achievable."

Ms. Nomentana's fantasy was at first deceptively simple: to build a house on a lake carved out of nature just for her and her three dogs. And it should have an edge as abstract as the contemporary artwork she ad-

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INTO THE WOODS Margaret Nomentana, left, who kayaks, built a house as challenging as a river run. Above, the explosive porch off the living room.

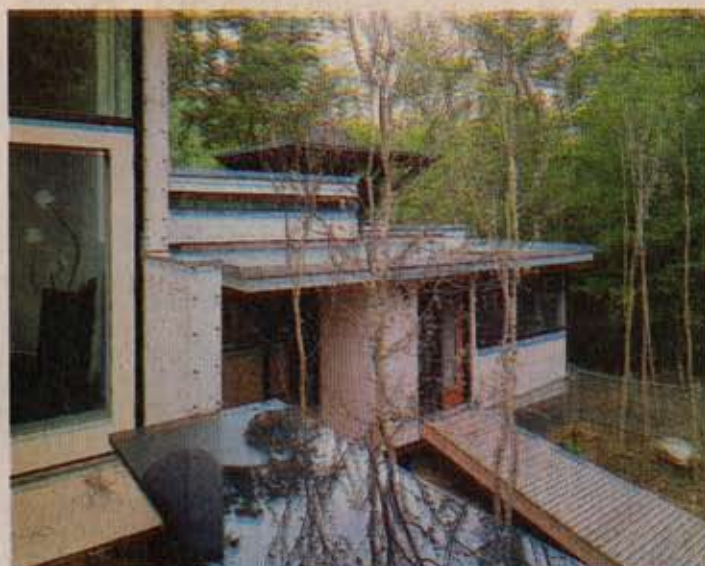


Michael Moran (above); Brian Vanden Brink for The New York Times (top left); Merrill Elam

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HOUSE OF FACETS, NOT FACADES From left: The front has pop-up energy; an entrance bridge with calligraphic elegance; from the guest terrace, a peek at the dog room and run; the living room perched on stilts.

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mires. "My parents had commissioned a house back in the 50's in the days when people thought architecture could solve all the problems in the world," she said. "My parents bought into that."

Like them, she wanted a house that dared to be different. Unlike them, she didn't expect it to solve the problems of the world.

Ms. Nomentana, 53, is a petite dynamo of a woman (just back from kayaking off the coast of Turkey), a trained interior designer and painter who likes her canvases to be at least twice as tall as she is.

Her architects did not present her with an abstract sculpture spun out of their own intellectual interests, the kind of avant-garde derring-do that people have good reason to dread. That's not Scogin and Elam's design style. The excitement in their work is generated by the belief that the personal experience of home — the owner's ambitions, as well as her daily chores — ought to dictate the design.

From the materials used in the house to the way the layout accommodated her dogs, the architects strove to let their client's ideas guide their hand. When Ms. Nomentana told them of her interest in the minimal beauty of Japanese architecture, specifically the work of Tadao Ando, they chose a cement-based fiberboard (a common, highly durable siding material usually disguised to look like clapboard) that would imitate the look — but not the cost — of Ando's concrete houses. The window frames are wood, but painted black to have the more abstract look of steel.

When their look of steel. When the dogs needed space, they designed a room and positioned it across from her bedroom because they knew where the dogs really slept. "The last thing we wanted to do was to put Margaret in a box," Ms. Elam said. "The house we did is the opposite of what you'd expect from a house on the lake with a big room and a plate-glass window looking out at the view."

Walking through Ms. Nomentana's house — built on girder-slopes that anchor the house to its steep slope going down to the lake — is an exploration turned revelation. Touring the house is like scaling some unfamiliar peak. On a first visit, leaving crumbs seems advisable.

A short arc of bridge springs from a black metal walk to the pre-weathered zinc door. The bridge handrail looks as elegantly telegraphic as Japanese script. Once through the door, visitors stand inside a three-story cube, walls lined with books. It's the library, and there's a staircase at its center that winds around a glass-enclosed outdoor well, a shaft of nature, which the architects call the impluvium. At top it opens to the sky, and at bottom it is filled with smooth rocks. To get anywhere, it's necessary to circumnavigate the impluvium, but there are no clues as to which way will take you where you're going.

The experience is disorienting, and thrilling. Toto, we're not in Maine anymore.

Mr. Scogin said that visitors are supposed to feel a sense of traveling through and discovering new places — not arriving at a specific room. "All the spaces are equally



MAIN PASSAGE A long corridor links the disparate elements of Margaret Nomentana's house; the entrance is up the steps at center right. Overhead is the free-floating bridge that connects to the studio.



THE FLOW The main staircase, above, winds around a glass-walled space (impluvium) near the entrance; thus the architects offer views of both the house and nature at each turn. The bong-shaped sink in the master bath, right, is by Philippe Starck.



privileged, and every one of them has something of interest to offer," he said. Indeed, even the main hall, a kind of spine, is busy with things to look at: views of the lake and other parts of the house through

slots of windows; a perilous suspended bridge overhead; paths to follow.

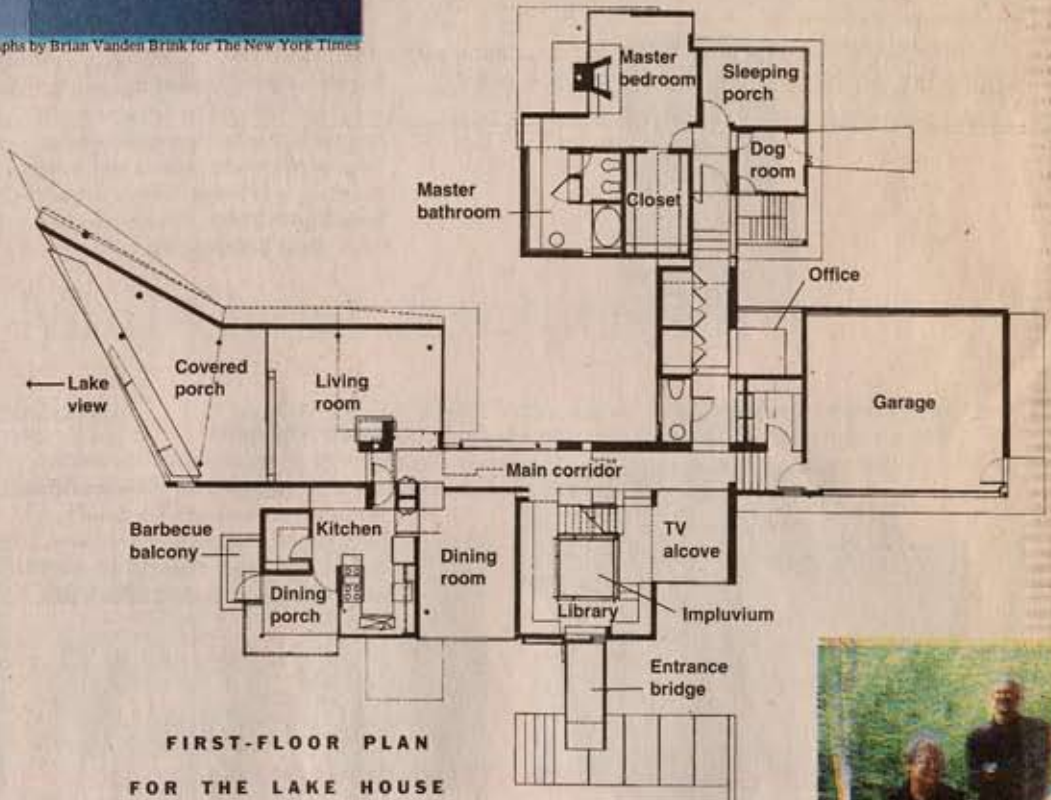
In one direction is the kitchen, dining room, eating porch and living room, which at 350 square feet feels small, even cocoonlike, because of a massive fireplace and caterpillar-ribbed orange furnishings. "Margaret specified that she didn't want it to be particularly large," Ms. Elam said. "She just wanted lots of glass." Two solid walls are nothing but.

To counter the living room's intimacy, a porch explodes, releasing you into nature. Its exuberant design sheers off part of a support wall, veering off at a vertiginous angle. (The sheered wall was the result of a builder's mathematical error, which created a gap that everyone liked so much that they kept it.)

At the other end of the house, the main corridor makes a sharp left, tracks up a few stairs — past an office alcove — and ascends a few more steps to a private wing. Within this part of the house is Ms. Nomentana's bedroom with a black zinc fireplace, her private sleeping porch ("I'm a bed person," she said. "I could spend all day in bed reading.") and a separate room for her Champagne-colored poodles: Avalon, Glastonbury and Cornwall, with a doggy door and ramp to their yard.

Upstairs, the guest bedroom is larger than the master suite. To get to Ms. Nomentana's studio, you must climb a tower, traversing the suspended bridge over the main corridor, with a sheer drop to each side.

Ms. Nomentana bought the 2.8-acre plot of Maine forest (a two-hour drive west of Portland) when it was under four feet of snow. ("That's really hard for a Southerner to understand," Ms. Elam said.) Ms. No-



FIRST-FLOOR PLAN FOR THE LAKE HOUSE



COCCOON ROOM The 350-square-foot living room, dominated by a boxy fireplace and Ligne Roset sofas, looks toward both the house, above, and the lake.

mentana was determined to move from Los Angeles after the earthquake of 1994. She chose Maine because that's where she had spent childhood summers.

From the start her architects were aware that a person alone in the woods might feel lonely. No other house is within view — even in winter. So, they gave the sprawling house a companionable feeling "like a village," Ms. Elam said, "so that when she looked out the window, she'd always be looking at another part of the house."

The effort it takes to negotiate the place is its most exciting innovation. Unlike most modern houses, key rooms are strung out far from each other to make travel time through the house as prolonged, even complicated, as possible. "Margaret was clear about wanting to be challenged," Mr. Scogin said. He laments that modern conveniences have sapped the vitality from many houses, making them too easy, too boring, to inhabit.

Ms. Nomentana — who as an adult took

Merrill Elam and Mack Scogin, the architects.



her last name from the Via Nomentana in Rome — wanted surprises. When the floor plan showed a kitchen nowhere near the garage (making grocery-portage a long haul), she never blinked.

This is a difficult house to understand at a glance. The house as journey of discovery defies the Kodak moment. It becomes familiar only with time, like a person with depth, and there are always a few secrets in reserve. More important, it shows that the American tradition of reinventing how to live is still a vital experiment. "The process was so much fun, I'd do another house in a second," Ms. Nomentana said. "Except that there's no reason to ever move again."