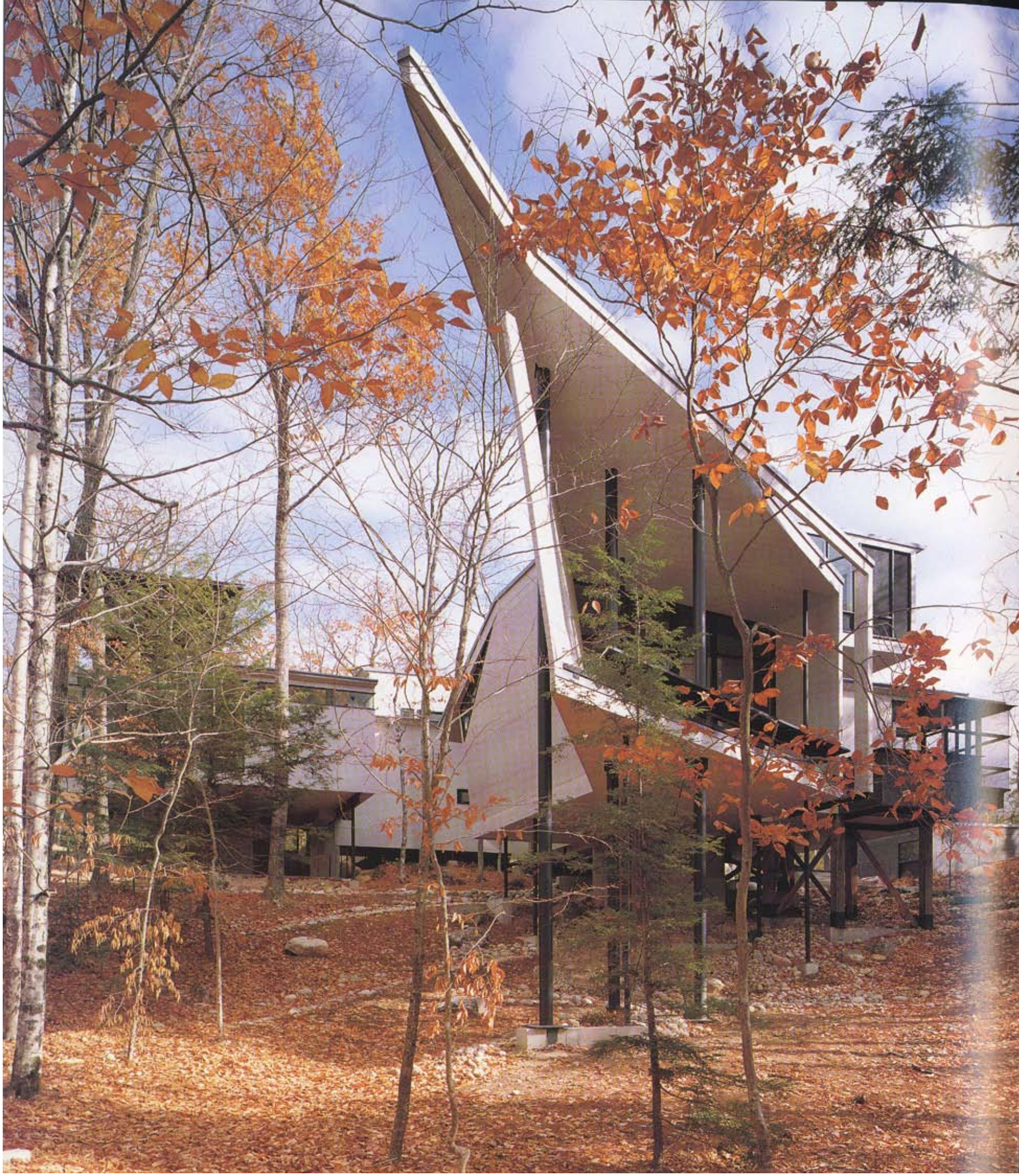


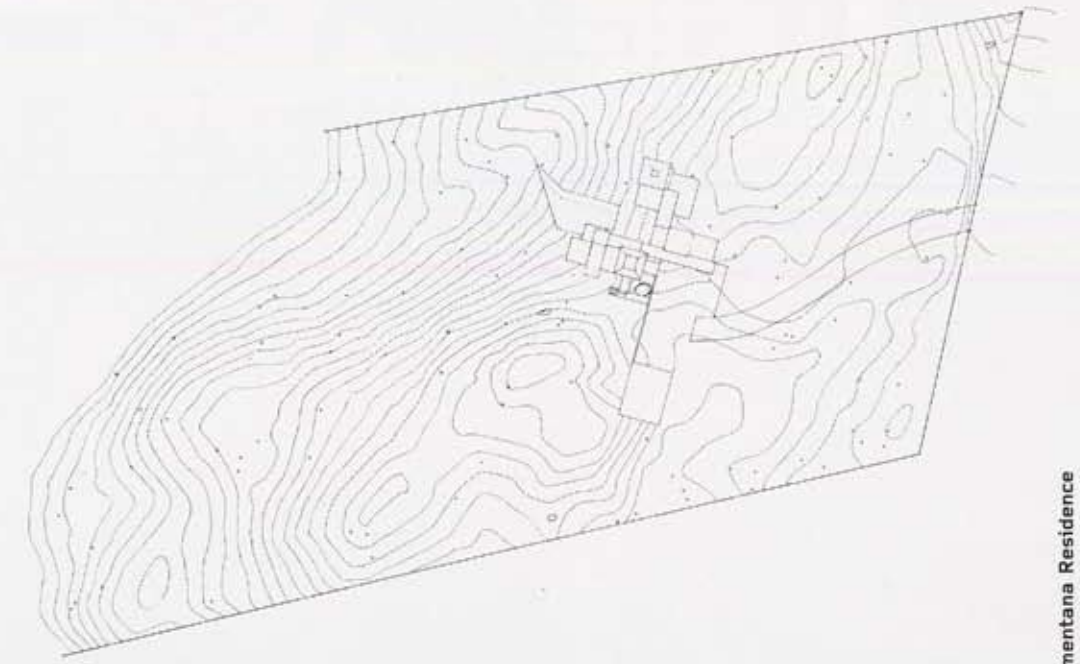
CLARE MELHUIJSH

MODERN HOUSE 2

PHAIDON



The architects adopted the traditional typology of farmhouse construction in Maine, which they describe as a 'house-town', offering a sense of conviviality and involvement. The house is not an object building, but a rich configuration of linked volumes, with a strong connection to nature (see site plan, right). This is underlined by the design of projecting vantage points, or 'porches' from which to look out into the landscape, as on the south-facing entrance elevation (below) and sharply angled living-room wing (opposite).



Nomentana Residence
Lovell, Maine, USA
1997

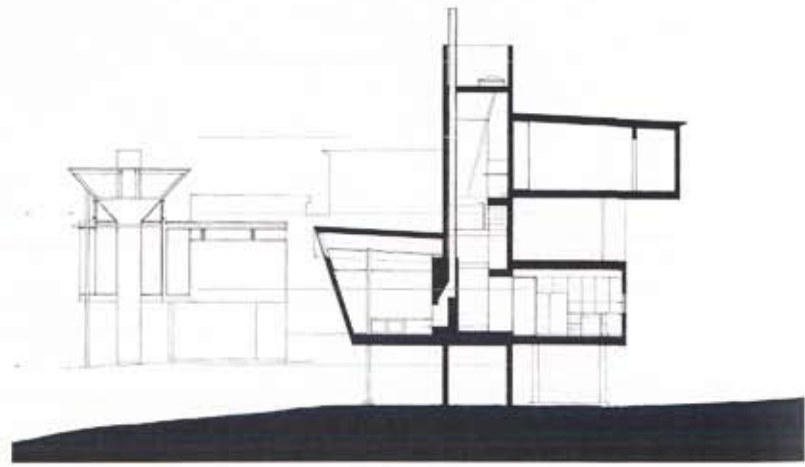
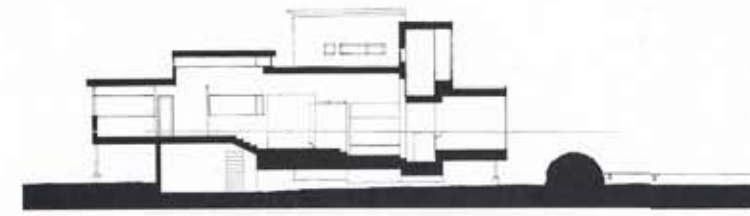
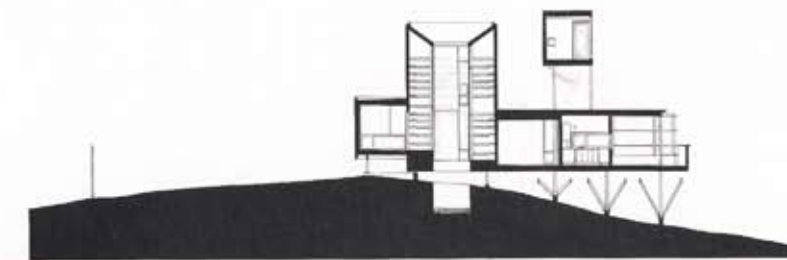
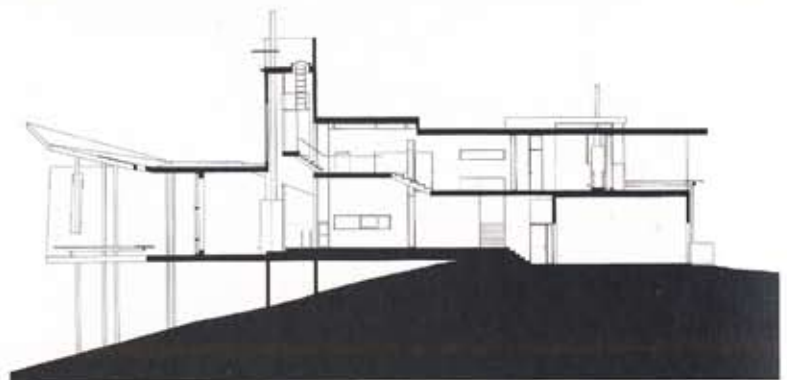
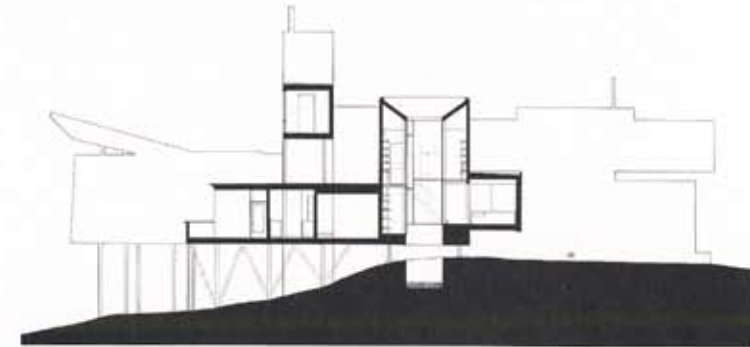
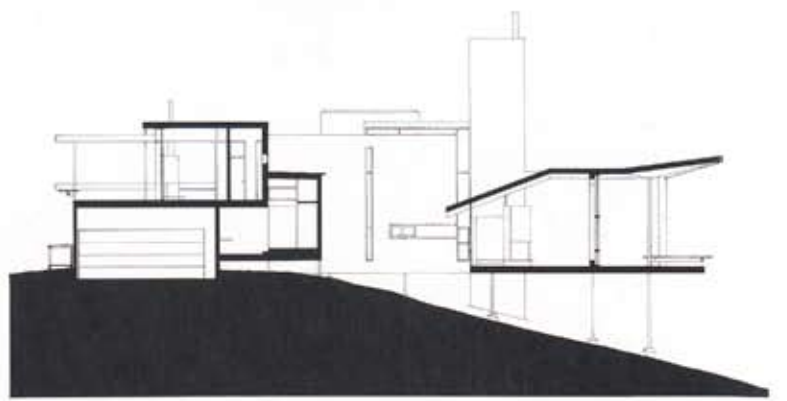
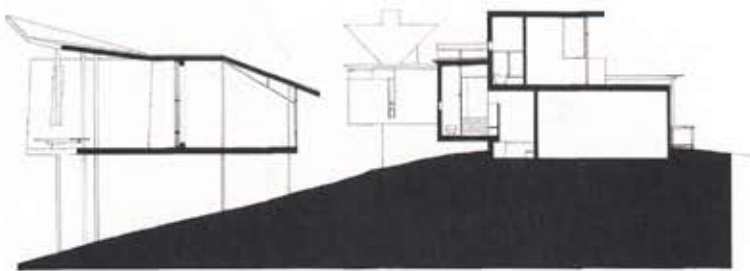
Scogin, Elam & Bray
108 THE RURAL
RETREAT



This house is the result of an unusual relocation from West to East, and North: from Venice Beach, California, to Horseshoe Pond in Lovell, Maine, north of Toronto. The client's decision to move was in part prompted by the wildness and unpredictability of a Western landscape prone to earthquakes, mudslides and forest fires, and a desire to establish a home and artist's studio in close connection with a less extreme, more stable and greener natural environment.

In their design of the house, the architects evoke a traditional model of domestic construction in Maine, the 'big house, little house, back house and barn'. This typology, which they describe as that of a 'house-town' offers complete connection of domestic and farmhouse activities during winter months as well as a sense of conviviality and involvement even in the more remote locations, establishing a resistance to feelings of isolation. Hence this house, while embodying in many ways the ideal of the rural retreat, distanced from the pressures of contemporary life, also demonstrates an awareness of the continuing depth of ancient human fear when brought face-to-face with nature and solitude.

Nomentana, a painter and interior designer, 'wanted to be as close to nature as possible', but her past experiences had also shown her that nature cannot always be relied upon as a friend and companion. The architects took pains to design a house that was not 'an object building looking out exclusively to the landscape', but a rich configuration of linked volumes and internal and external spaces, that would allow the inhabitant to keep parts of the house, and its lights, in constant vision from wherever she might be in the house at a particular moment. Mack Scogin has



observed that 'the house is about a forced movement that becomes a companion you constantly have to deal with as you move through it.'

The critic Joseph Giovannini has drawn an interesting comparison between the Nomentana Residence and Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, outside Paris – a link easily made by virtue of the use of pilotis in the Nomentana scheme, which elevates most of the living accommodation above ground level. He defines the Villa Savoye as the classic 'object building' which the Nomentana house is not. Indeed, the use of pilotis, the light grey external walls and manipulation of transparent and solid planes in the latter, suggests a reading of the house as a curious distortion of the Savoye model. The multiplicity of volumes presents a stark contrast with the compact plan and internal organization of the Villa Savoye, which has the advantage of limiting the extent of the intervention on the site.

The Nomentana House is a rambling structure by comparison, although the use of pilotis emulating the surrounding slender tree trunks serves to minimize its footings on the ground and create an apparently lighter intervention. The plan is described as pinwheel-shaped, creating a series of distinct vantage points, formally articulated as 'porches', from which to look out on the surrounding landscape and forming an embrace around an open area at the centre of the site. Each element of the plan, which comprises a living room, sitting room, dining room, kitchen, library, two bedrooms, drawing studio, garage and detached painting studio, is expressed volumetrically within the external massing of the building, creating a complex, abstract form, which seems to be in a constant state of movement, against the backdrop of the woods and mountain.



The architects' notion was one of 'wrapping the house around nature'. The result is a complex, abstract form which seems to be in a constant state of movement, and gives volumetric expression to each element of the plan, as shown in the images and sections. Clockwise from top left: oblique view across the living room porch, north elevation, two views of south-facing entrance elevation.

Sections in pairs from top to bottom (opposite): east-west sections at the living room and guest room looking north (left) and south (right); east-west section at the stairwell/library, looking north (left) and through the living room, chimney tower also looking north (right); section through the library, sitting room and drawing studio (left) and through the sitting room and kitchen porch looking east (right); section through the sitting room, master bedroom and hall looking east (left) and through the living room, kitchen, chimney tower and drawing studio looking east (right).





The living-room 'porch' is designed to allow 'snow and rain and light to come through the house; nature comes in and falls out'.

This approach is a result of the client's express wish not to have open, generic, 'loft-type' living spaces, but a series of small, differentiated rooms, each with its own clear identity. Perhaps this can also be understood as a response to the wide expanses of nature outside the windows, in the sense of an intention to draw nature into the embrace of a more protective living environment, rather than open up, or expose, the interior space of the house itself to nature.

The architects refer to a notion of 'wrapping the house around nature', which is a rather different concept from that of the classic, modernist picture window, with its implication of framing and distance. They point in particular to the design of the jutting, angular living-room porch, with one sheltering wall in which a large opening is punched to allow 'snow and rain and light [to] come through the house; nature comes in and falls out'. Comparable aspects of the design include the two-and-a-



half-storey glazed impluvium at the centre of the book-lined foyer/stairwell, forming a prominent vertical pin through the house and drawing views of the sky into the interior.

The structure consists of timber and steel frame, the main body of the house clad in cementitious fibre-board, and the detached painting studio in zinc. This represents an interesting disavowal of obviously 'natural' materials in the conception of the house, and an embrace of industrially produced components which contrast, rather than blend, with the surrounding landscape. The clear distinction between the natural and the manmade is emphasized by the use of perforated metal for the stairs, and plate aluminium for the balustrades, and the predominant use of light grey and white walls throughout the interior and exterior. Significantly, a strong argument against whiteness and abstraction as being 'unnatural' was formulated by the nineteenth-century German architectural historian Gottfried Semper, who proposed that polychromy actually clarifies form, by bringing the eye back to a natural way of seeing. Semper suggested that the origins of internal walls lay in the use of moveable, textile partitions in which colour would have been inherent. But his views were cast out and largely forgotten as a result of Modernism's institutionalization of the white wall, signifying the supremacy of contour and outline.

To a great extent, the Nomentana residence also emphasizes the importance of those values. By placing itself firmly within a cultural context of Modernist referents, it provides a consistent reminder to its inhabitant and visitors of a sustained cultural connection with urbane, urban society, even when submerged in the depths of the rural landscape.



The interior views reveal something of the interconnected character of the floor plans (opposite: left, lower level, right, upper level), with glimpses from each room to other parts of the house. Industrially produced components contrast, rather than blend with, the surrounding natural landscape, demonstrated by the book-lined foyer/stairwell and the living room and its porch (far left and opposite top)

