

SEE-THROUGH HOUSES

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INSPIRATIONAL HOMES AND FEATURES IN GLASS

Photography by James Morris

Rambling forest homestead

ARCHITECT: MACK SCOGIN MERRILL ELAM

It is still part of the great American dream to own a single family house on its own defined plot of land. Such a dwelling serves as a moated castle and refuge, a place in which to withdraw from the world, while house ownership is an emblem of worldly success.

For many Americans, their dream home is set in the suburbs and is likely to conform to one of two predominant styles: Colonial in the east and California ranch in the west. In a small number of cases, however, the house is transformed into a vehicle for personal expression for both client and architect. Despite changes in family structure, leisure time, and household technology, the basic house design brief remains essentially unchanged: yet, precisely because it is so thoroughly known, architects are at liberty to experiment and exercise their creativity. The house is also perhaps the only building type over which an architect can have complete design control and which allows him to establish a truly intimate client relationship, free of the often inhibiting influence of developers, cost managers, and bureaucrats. The house, then, is the repository of dreams and fantasies of both designer and occupant. In a nation that prizes originality and values individual expression, its cultural importance cannot be overstated.

This house in Maine, on the extreme reaches of the East Coast, was a wonderfully permissive commission that gave architects Mack Scogin Merrill Elam the freedom to explore and express an artistic agenda. Its owner, a painter and interior designer, moved from

LEFT The house is a modern reinterpretation of the traditional Maine farmhouse typology, in which an accretion of elements creates a cluster of forms. A cubic tower marks the threshold point of the plan.

LEFT, INSET The crisply orthogonal geometry of the tower makes a strong contrast with the lushness and wildness of nature.

RIGHT A ramp resembling a drawbridge leads up to the main entrance, providing a ceremonial approach.





Held on slim columns, the house weaves through the forest and wraps around nature, bringing it into the heart of the dwelling.

OPPOSITE The sharply angled living-room wing thrusts dramatically into the forest. The house is not an object building, but a complex configuration of linked volumes in close touch with nature. Porches offer vantage points from which to enjoy the magnificent surroundings.

ABOVE A rustic collage of materials evokes the textures and colors of the landscape. **ABOVE RIGHT** In response to the sloping site, parts of the building are supported on slender, stiltlike columns that emulate the surrounding tree trunks and minimize footings on the ground, so the house disturbs the site as little as possible.

RIGHT The aperture in the wall enclosing the covered porch was designed to break down barriers with nature by allowing snow, rain, and light to enter the house.

BELOW RIGHT A long bench runs along the edge of the living room porch.

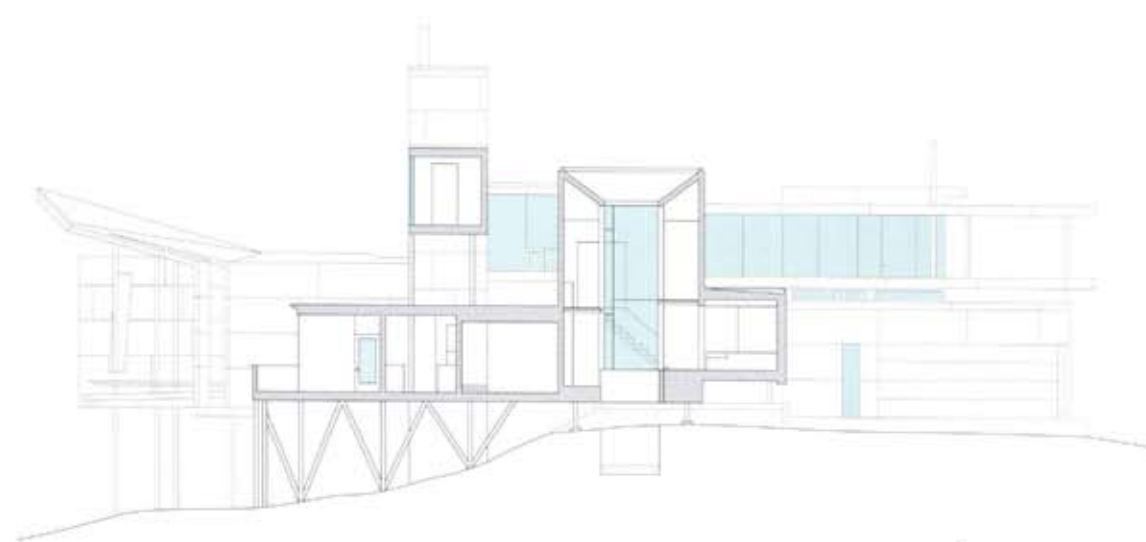
Venice Beach in Los Angeles to Maine after the earthquake of 1994. She bought a plot in the White Mountains National Park overlooking a lake, where she commissioned the architects to design a two-bedroom house with ample space for living, painting, and entertaining. The brief included a request for distinct rooms, as opposed to more open, loftlike spaces, and a desire to be close to nature.

The site, which covers not much more than 2.5 acres, yields an intimate view across the lake to Lord's Hill, the easternmost boundary of the National Park. The hill, an inclined plane approaching the vertical, comforts with summer and spring greenery, dazzles with autumn colors, and shimmers and glistens in winter snow and ice.

For the architects, the site was the generator. Covered in a delicate carpet of mossy plants, it formed an extraordinarily fragile and beautiful ecosystem. Mack Scogin Merrill Elam's first design decision was that this should be disturbed as little as possible, so any new construction had to touch the ground lightly. The north side of the plot slopes up to a street; the south, down to a lake. A low concrete curb was used to divide the site into two parts, making a clear distinction between the man- and nature-oriented precincts.

The house is not a classic villa in a landscape. Rather, it is a clustered configuration of linked volumes and internal and external spaces. The overall arrangement is inspired by the traditional Maine farmstead, described by Merrill Elam as "big house, little house, back house, and barn. The front door is formal, but everything else is tagged on." This way of grouping rooms together in an extended cluster meant farmers could do their winter chores without being exposed to the harsh Maine climate. The architects also observed that the farmsteads usually





ABOVE LEFT Stairs lead to the upper levels of the house; the way is marked by glimpses of the forest through vertical slashes of glazing. ABOVE CENTER A spinal corridor links the front and rear of the house, threading together the various spaces. ABOVE Wherever you are in the house, nature is never far away. LEFT A cross-section through the stairwell and library shows that the house sits on an artificial extension of the ground plane, in response to the sloping site.

Linking the floors in the center of the house is a glazed stairwell that provides room for a library.

OPPOSITE TOP LEFT Taut sheets of steel form geometric balustrades connected to skinny tubular handrails. The integration of industrially made components contrasts with the surrounding landscape. OPPOSITE TOP RIGHT On the upper level of the library stairwell is an intimate book-lined enclave. OPPOSITE BOTTOM LEFT Glazing around the stairwell courtyard offers views through to other parts of the house. OPPOSITE BOTTOM RIGHT The main staircase winds around a glazed two-story external void. Exposed to the elements, it conveys daylight into the deep recesses of the house.

sat on a flat plane, unlike this site, so a new ground plane was built for the house, taking off from the saddle of the hill and moving out toward the pond, establishing a datum for the building. The elements to the north of the dividing curb—the garage and zinc-sided painting studio—sit directly on the ground. South of the curb, the architects maximize views by lifting the house into the trees on wood and steel pilots, or slender, stilllike columns. The elevated floor plane reveals the rocky terrain that was embellished by Boston-based landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh with native plants. A switchback path crosses the site under the belly of the house, working its way toward the lake edge. Cement-board panels are bolted to the house's exterior walls and raised underbelly; the variegated light-gray siding responds to the effects of rain, snow, and sun with subtly expressive patterns.

A cubic tower marks the entrance and serves as the fulcrum of the pinwheel-shaped plan. Throughout the site, views are stunning, so there was no reason to privilege one direction over another. The tall, cement-board form encloses a stairwell leading into a long, stepped corridor. This spinal device links a set of small rooms that look and feel like elevated garden pavilions floating among the branches. The brief called for cellular rooms, opened up in various positions on the site to seem much bigger than they actually are, each with its own orientation. To the south and west, wings define and lock outdoor spaces into the plan. Thus the external, in-between spaces become a dynamic part of the house. The house's constituent parts are disarmingly conventional, consisting of living and dining rooms, a kitchen, two bedrooms, and two screened sleeping porches. There is also a library, a drawing studio, a



ABOVE The intimate, clustered form of the house brings nature into close contact with the interior. Framed views of the landscape constantly surprise and delight.

OPPOSITE The client's desire to avoid open, loft-type spaces has given rise to a series of small, differentiated rooms, each with its own clear identity. Each room forms its own environment, through specific and carefully considered architectural responses to view, exposure and function, including the placement of windows, the choice of glass, and the shape of the room's walls.

detached painting studio and garage, and a small room for the owner's two dogs. Each room forms its own environment, through its separation from other spaces, and specific architectural responses to view, exposure, and function: choice of glass, placement of windows, shape of enclosing walls. Long corridors string the rooms loosely together, providing a visual and spacial harmony. This typology of an informal, tentacular plan form elevated above the ground extends the ideas behind the Chmar House in Atlanta, which Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects designed in 1990 and which led to this commission.

Although each room is roughly the same size, no one space is favored over another. The main bedroom includes an elaborate fireplace, even though the room is compact, and it differs radically from the guestroom, which opens onto a generous terrace with a cantilevered *brise-soleil* parapet. The hallways have extensive window walls, bringing light into the

Rooms are treated as distinct spaces, each distinguished by its place in the landscape, the shape of its enclosing walls, and the play of light.

interior. Lined with books, the main staircase winds around a mysterious glazed impluvium (from the Latin term for "rain"), a two-story external void exposed to the elements and another means of conveying light into the recesses of the house. Rainwater replenishes a pool in the center of the void. Reflections of books and sky mingle and play off the water, glass, and bookshelves. The material simplicity of the house is complemented with a few pieces of classic Modernist furniture, such as a Scandinavian dining table, and understated heirlooms. The architecture is allowed to speak, without being engulfed by clutter.

In their recent commissions, Mack Scogin Merrill Elam have explored riotous free-form geometries, but in this house there are relatively few exotic deviations. Only the living room breaks ranks from the orthogonal, opening up to vistas of the lake and mountains. Exterior walls slice outward to form a terrace, and one wall leans outward, with a long hole punched through its thickness. The gesture is another way of connecting the house with nature; and the hole allows yet more light to permeate through the house.

Remarkably, the house manages to be both mature and enthusiastic: wise and disciplined, yet free and enchanting. Mack Scogin Merrill Elam may have abandoned Modernist notions of logic and order in their ingenious formal maneuvers throughout the house, but these moves are never gratuitous or narcissistic. They reveal a view, perform a particular function, or create a poetic pause in space and time. All this enriches the experience of being there.

Each constituent part of the plan is expressed volumetrically, within the external massing of the building, generating a complex, interlinked, abstract form, which seems to be in a constant state of movement against the backdrop of forest and mountain. In terms of experiencing space, the house appears to look back on itself, so you are never alone and always aware of other spaces, other views, and the presence of nature. The pinwheel-shaped plan creates a series of vantage points articulated as porches from which to savor the surroundings, and embraces an open area at the center of the site.

The use of slender pilotis to elevate parts of the house recalls Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, an iconic Modernist house in its own grounds near Paris and, in many ways, the model for the modern villa. The Villa Savoye was also raised up on columns, allowing it to contemplate nature from a lofty height. Critical comparisons have been made between the two dwellings, but they are very different. The Villa Savoye is a compactly planned object building in the landscape, yet at the same time removed from it, suggesting permanence and solidity. By contrast, the rambling form of this Maine house, with its slim pilotis emulating the surrounding tree trunks, weaves and dodges through the forest like an informal encampment, becoming part of the landscape. Yet, although the house rests on the notion of the rural retreat, it also demonstrates an awareness of the continuing depth of primal human fear when brought face to face with nature and solitude.





Like a modern version of a tree house, the living room is a glazed eyrie hovering above the forest. Exterior walls skew outward, and one plane tilts in

an almost ecstatic gesture to nature, with a long hole punched through its thickness. This part of the house is a vivid expression of the

architects' predilection for riotous geometry. Angular and dramatic, the living room forms the prow of the house, a place of light, warmth, and shelter.

Glass plays a key role in opening up the house to spectacular views and light, emphasizing the strong connection with nature.



Interiors are carefully planned to reveal a view, filter light, or create a poetic pause, all of which contrive to enrich the spatial experience.

ABOVE A modern hearth forms the focus of the living space, but instead of being solid and massive, it is set in a glazed wall, framed by trees, recreating the idea of a campfire in a forest.

BELOW A long, low window seat allows maximum enjoyment of the views.

BELOW RIGHT A view of the bathroom shows strips of glazing at high level.

OPPOSITE The prow of the living room launches boldly into the forest.

Mack Scogin Merrill Elam have opened up the house so it looks inward as well as out to views. Never complete in its form, it reaches out to nature without trying to contain it in a closed courtyard. The architects reacted to the site, but also devised a house that could act as a companion to a single person. The house is deliberately configured so the owner can see the bedroom from the living room, for example, and light from other parts of the dwelling. The rooms are always in communication with each other.

Poignantly, the house marks a return to the forest and a return to the studio for an artist too long removed from both. The house breathes in the site, transfiguring it through a series of internal spatial events—framing, focusing, extending, enclosing, dismissing, and celebrating. Like Maine dwellings through history, this house is the result of form added

on form, spaces adjoining defensively or closely clustering, resisting the long, harsh Maine winters and giving the impression of small “house towns.”

Glass plays its part in the opening up of the house to light and views. Both clear and translucent glass are employed to create different levels of light transmission. While clear glass is extensively used in the walls of some rooms, framing and defining views, translucent glazing on the eastern wall, which overlooks the entrance, gently and subtly diffuses natural light, like a Japanese rice-paper screen. Other materials include a mixture of cement-board panels, zinc siding, concrete floors, and a wood-and-steel structural frame. Different textures and colors generate a rustic, collagelike effect, constantly surprising and delighting.

Movement through the house is rewarded by shifting views in an interior realm that favors no single viewpoint. A panoply of phenomena invites promenades of discovery—light and shade, for instance, are played out dramatically against an almost photographic black-and-white palette. The house is a reinterpretation the Modernist tradition of a villa elevated on pilotis into a new and highly poetic typology. Yet, despite its formal and material intricacy, the house feels simple and unforced. At the core of the architecture is a person and the design directly reflects an individual’s needs and tastes. As Merrill Elam affectionately observes, “The house could not have been built for anyone else.”



Sheer mountain house

ARCHITECT: MACK SCOGIN MERRILL ELAM

One of the threads running through American architecture, and American Modernism in particular, is the relationship of building to landscape. The idea of blending in and blurring the distinctions between inside and out is identified especially with Frank Lloyd Wright's organically inspired Prairie houses. By contrast, the notion of defining a formal, almost urban realm within the wilderness of nature informs such memorable architectural set pieces as Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia campus, completed in the early 19th century.

These two models coexist in the design of a house in the Appalachian foothills of Georgia by Atlanta-based architects Mack Scogin Merrill Elam. The strategy of working with the grain of the land, embodied in a long, low plan spread over a single story, has clear overtones of Frank Lloyd Wright's work. More pragmatically, it will also enable its clients to use it not only as a weekend retreat, but also

LEFT The house is so well integrated with the landscape that its overall scale is hard to grasp. From some approaches, the building seems to merge with its thickly wooded setting, while from other directions, it has a solid, intimidating presence. BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT Concrete planes and wooden decks shape external rooms that extend beyond the living area into the landscape. A right-angled concrete wall reaches out beyond the western end of the house. Wood-framed glass walls give the interior a lightness and transparency, dissolving the building's volume and making a connection with nature in all its wild magnificence. RIGHT The austerity of the concrete planes is tempered and softened by planting.

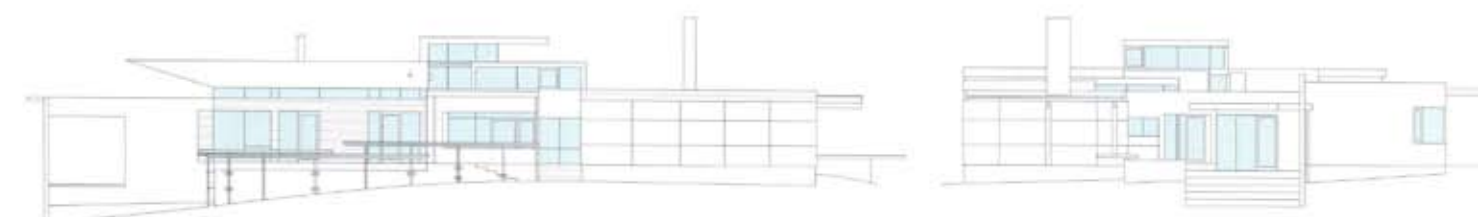


as their main home after retirement. While some contemporary architecture glorifies the collision of building elements or forces, this Mountain House seeks a sense of balance and equilibrium. Designed for a couple with varied backgrounds and interests, the house accommodates differences by finding common ground. The outcome is a dwelling that is both urban and rural, formal and informal, casual and deliberate, but never contradictory.

The clients, whose children by previous marriages are grown up and now live elsewhere, have their roots in different parts of America and pursue separate careers: he is a journalist and avid collector of regional art; she is a gardener and landscape designer. But, just as they have learned to share in each other's professional lives, the house also brings contrasting elements together: inside and out, solid and void,



light and shade, intimacy and openness. The first clue to the delicate balancing act achieved by Mack Scogin Merrill Elam is the entrance court, a sweeping drive rustically paved with local stone, around which the main parts of the house are clustered. The architects relished the idea of placing this urban element in a rural setting, in the manner of French and English country estates. The juxtaposition of city and country is heightened by the centrally placed screened porch on the entrance court that offers carefully framed vistas through the porch toward the trees, before you have even left your car. The house grows increasingly informal as visitors move to and through it. Placed at one corner of the court, the main entrance leads to a double-height gallery filled with the couple's evocative and colorful collection of regional art. From this tall but constricted space, you pass into the generous, open living



ABOVE The guest suite overlooks a lawn and pond. Shown below it are the house's south and east elevations. **FAR LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM** Harmony between house and setting is evident in the play of reflections on glass, the bold artwork in the hall, the layout of the entrance court, and the detail of a corner window.

room with its sweeping views down the hillside to a grassy pasture and the mountains beyond. Here the transition from city to countryside is complete. The large volume of the property is broken down into three major elements—the main house, a guest house and garage, and the screened porch—yet its overall scale remains enigmatic. Depending on how you approach the building, it creates intriguing illusions of size. From some perspectives, it seems

to merge with and disappear into the landscape, while from another approach its cantilevered roofs, like broad hat brims, endow it with a powerful presence. Set in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains less than 1 mile (1.5km) from Georgia's border with North Carolina, the secluded site is thickly wooded and surrounded by rolling mountains. With its long, low volumes and strong horizontal emphasis, the house hugs the ground, forming a deliberate contrast



Although the land was heavily wooded when the present owners acquired it, it had been cleared and farmed earlier in the 20th century.

with the verticality of the hills and the slender birches and poplars. A small stream runs across its southern edge, supplying power for an old grist mill and water for horses in a neighbor's pasture. Drawn by the landscape, light, and tranquility, an artists' colony has been established nearby.

While the site is undeniably beautiful, it presented a number of challenges. The initial one was finding the most suitable place to build. An old farmhouse had once stood at the foot of a large oak tree near the road leading to the site, and the clients originally hoped to build there. But, after walking around with the architects and builder, they concluded that the house should sit further in on flatter land that had more privacy and offered better views of the pasture. This meant constructing a long driveway, but the builder found evidence of an old existing access road and used it as the outline for the new drive, adjusting the route to preserve as many trees as possible. The base of the drive was used to form a dam and create

a pond west of the new house. Another potentially problematic site condition was an abundance of water. The local climate is extremely damp—indeed, this part of Georgia is one of the wettest places on the eastern seaboard of the U.S. To counteract the effects of the wet weather, concrete footings and foundations were built to create a partial basement, allowing water to run around the house and down the stream to the south. However, it was discovered that many local subcontractors were capable of executing high-quality concrete work, as a result of the need for retaining walls in a hilly, wet landscape, so concrete as well as glass developed into a key element in the design.

Concrete is used for both practical and expressive purposes. Forming the foundations and base of the house, it performs much of the heavy structural work, but it is also used to extend the house into the landscape, forging a link between ground and architecture. An exposed concrete wall running

through the kitchen and entrance gallery, and a concrete chimney, help to anchor the house to the land. At the same time, a right-angled concrete wall reaches out beyond the western end of the house, partially enclosing an outdoor room. On the opposite side, another concrete wall extends past the guest house. The solidity of the concrete is tempered by the lightness and transparency of the wooden-framed glass walls, which dematerialize the architecture so the roof planes appear to be simply hovering in midair, with no visible means of support. The slender wood frames echo the slim trunks of the surrounding birches.

Although largely wood-framed, the house has some steel elements. The screened porch is framed in steel, and steel beams were used in some of the cantilevered roofs. The longest cantilever, however, is supported by wooden trusses that, because they run deep into the living room, can extend far beyond the building envelope without the aid of steel.

ABOVE LEFT Elegant Modernist furniture and rugs complement the architecture in the spacious living room, which is linked to external terrace decks by sliding doors. The room is suffused with a delicate, shimmering light. Clerestory windows capture and diffuse radiance from above and give the impression that the roof is floating over the space. The owners love the changing quality of light that animates the space.

ABOVE Strips of glazing at the top and bottom of walls break up their mass. **RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM** The main bedroom, on the northern side of the house, has low windows incised into the walls. It is linked to the kitchen and entrance hall by a long corridor, which provides space for displaying the owners' art collection. Bare concrete walls act as a neutral backdrop for vivid paintings. **FAR LEFT** Windows have been placed to form abstract geometric patterns.





ABOVE Steps lead up to the raised terrace enclosing the living space. Sheer planes of glass separate the interior and the exterior.

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT The rustic yet elegant character of the living room is reinforced by polished wood floors. Plywood chairs based on a classic design by the architects Charles and Ray Eames evoke the spirit of functional Modernism. The sculptural forms of the chairs cast bulbous shadows on the wood floor.

In terms of a brief, the clients asked for just two things: wall space for their artworks and extensive views out to the landscape. As part of the balancing act that characterizes the project, the architects opened up the house along much of its southern side, with vistas to the creek and pasture. A long porch also emphasizes the connection with the exterior. The northern side is more closed off, providing the wall space necessary to display the clients' art collection.

Although the sweep of the interior is predominantly horizontal, vertical accents are provided in places such as the entrance gallery and part of the master bedroom. Interiors are suffused with a shimmering light, both from the sun and the moon. The clients were struck by the way the light animates the whole house. They also like the fact that the screened porch acts as a second living room, playing country cousin to the more urban indoor one on the opposite side. Equipped with a built-in concrete bench, together with a large grill hanging from a central chimney, and radiant heating in the concrete floor, the porch can be used all year round for entertaining. These expansive, semipublic spaces can easily accommodate a crowd, yet hideaways are scattered through the house, such as the inglenook behind the living-room



fireplace, the study tucked inside the entrance gallery, and a little bay window on the master bathroom that opens out on a private court enclosed by hemlocks. By setting the guest house just a few steps away from the main house, a sense of privacy is achieved while maintaining the feeling of a closely knit compound. Although small, the guest house is a comfortable, self-contained refuge with its own outdoor porch overlooking one of the site's two ponds.

The house embodies some admittedly radical moves, such as focusing the plan on the void of a screened porch and treating the entrance court as

a raised plateau; yet ultimately they do not seem out of place. These details, together with the use of clerestory windows to illuminate the interior and the house's exaggerated horizontal lines, strongly recall the work of Wright and reinforce a wider connection with American Modernism. Such affinities are more in the nature of family resemblances, however, inflected by context and brief, than simply direct quotations. At once part of the surrounding forest, yet cutting through it to frame views and enclose outdoor spaces, the Mountain House is a celebration of a finely judged symbiosis between architecture and nature.

ABOVE A freestanding fireplace backed by an intimate inglenook is the focal point of the living room, where the abundance of clerestory windows strongly recalls the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and reinforces a wider connection with American Modernism. In common with many of Wright's buildings, the house reflects a finely judged balance between architecture and nature.

Intimate nooks and alcoves add a human aspect to the dynamic spatial drama of the living room.



MAIN PICTURE A sweeping approach to the house culminates in an entrance courtyard paved with local stone. The architects relished the idea of placing the courtyard, an essentially urban element, in a rural setting.

INSET Compared with the openness of the southern side of the house, the northern side is more closed off to the outside world, but its interior wall offers plenty of space for hanging pictures.

Light and space in suburbia

ARCHITECTS: MACK SCOGIN MERRILL ELAM

Tucked between downtown Atlanta and the affluent Buckhead district are the leafy streets of Brookwood Hills, a planned residential community dating from the 1920s. While Brookwood's community swimming pool draws its fair share of attention during the summer months, it is the structure across the street, the house of architects Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam, that is the focus of envious attention all year round. On the second floor, wrapped in screens of milky glass, is a narrow lap pool. Passersby can hear the splashing when the pool is in use, but cannot see the bathers—and, unlike the public pool, no swimsuit is required.

Scogin and Elam have lived in the neighborhood since 1976, when they bought a steep-roofed bungalow, not for its architectural merits, but for its modest price and desirable location midway between Atlanta's inner city and suburbs. Merrill Elam hated the original house—so much so that, on moving in, she took a sledgehammer to the walls between the tiny rooms. If the desire for a new architectural order was apparent from the moment the architects moved in, it took time, an accumulation of resources, and some surprising twists of fate to make their imagined changes real. For nearly 20 years, Scogin and Elam lived in their bungalow, making only modest renovations—a streamlined interior plan and the addition of two small guest pavilions in the backyard.

In 1995, nature intervened, when a tree blown down in a hurricane crashed through the roof of the house, landing in the couple's bed. Fortunately, they were both in their apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Scogin was teaching at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. Twice before, trees had fallen on the house, but this was the first time that one had actually fallen into it. The house was completely destroyed; the tree had split the walls and cracked the ridge beam of the roof. (It took 15 men two days just to remove it.) At first, the architects camped out in the remnants of their home, planning to rebuild it largely as it had been. Then Merrill Elam had an epiphany and decided that she wanted a lap pool. It became the couple's grand obsession and dictated the course of plans for the new house.

From the street, the house is decidedly enigmatic, a curious presence among the more conventional bungalows and split-levels. The facade's geometric composition is dominated by the strong horizontal planes of the lap pool on the second floor.





The living space is located on the south-facing street side of the house, to take advantage of light and views. Taut planes of frameless clear glass resembling a store window are set against the heaviness and solidity of concrete. A staircase with open risers leads to the bedroom and pool on the second floor.

THIS PICTURE Defined by white wall planes, the living area is a series of fluid, open-plan spaces. The overlapping areas are not conceived as a series of planned rooms, but rather as a choreography of movement. The exposed steel beams are a visual joke—they have no structural function.



A spirit of ambiguity constantly plays against expectations, finding coherence in the seemingly absurd collage of spaces.

The site faces south across the street, with views towards the neighborhood park and tennis courts, with hills beyond. Fueled by dreams of exercise and relaxation, the idea of the lap pool provided the impetus for the design. Finding a place to put it was not easy, however. The backyard was occupied by two guest pavilions, leaving no room to maneuver, and local zoning laws prohibited siting a pool in the front yard. Eventually the architects decided to put it on the upper story of the new house. The only way the site could accommodate the 50ft- (15m-) long pool was across its width, so it was dramatically elevated to the second floor, spanning the spaces of the floor below and orientated to the south for the light. Extremely heavy and massive, the pool shell is made of on-site concrete. This varies in thickness between 1' and 2ft (25 and 50cm) around its four sides and is 1ft (25cm) deep. The shell has a deliberately rough concrete finish so its presence is expressed throughout the house. It is supported by 12ft- (3m-) deep foundations underneath the load-bearing walls.

Shielded from the street by a translucent glass wall, yet open to the sky and air, the pool challenges the notions of public and private space. Surrounded by a wooden deck, it crowns the two-floor master-bedroom, with dressing rooms and closets downstairs, and a sleeping area and bathroom above. Once the pool was designed, other living spaces were arranged around it. The laminated glass provides a gauzily translucent screen around the pool, which is animated at night by wavy patterns and mysterious reflections as the glass glows with light.

The architects regularly discussed design details with the contractors, working in a casual, "design-as-you-go" way that they relished, but would not use in formal commissions. In fact, during the house's construction, Scogin and Elam were also working on four other houses concurrently with their practice.



ABOVE The staircase cascades down through space. Clear glass crisply frames the balustrade.

BELOW Books are arranged informally along a wall.

BELOW, INSETS Items from Scogin and Elam's collection of architect-designed chairs are displayed at various points throughout the interior.





The firm's houses are as different as their clients, locations, uses, and budgets, but all are connected by a distinctive, expressionistic form-making, which is 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," says Scogin. But in their own house, the architects went further, melding horizontal and vertical spaces into a three-dimensional pinwheel.

The deliberate ambiguity and open-endedness of rooms are increased by the reflections of the open-air pool against its shimmering glass walls. At night, the windswept pool water casts shadows on the translucent facade, animating the surface 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, describing the panorama of trees both real and reflected that is visible from his bed.

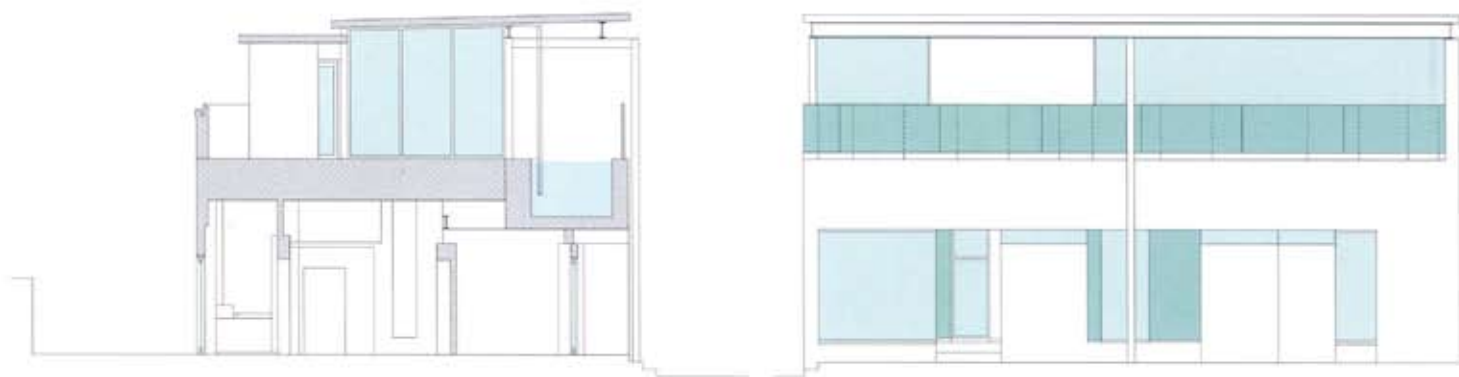
Some of Scogin and Elam's most memorable houses have been for dramatic rural sites, locations that have given them the freedom to experiment. By contrast, the Atlanta house had to conform to an urban context and an extremely tight site. The pool's presence and structure is clearly expressed as a broad band of rough concrete running along the facade. The massiveness of the concrete is tempered by the delicacy of the translucent glass wall above that screens the pool from public view. Putting the pool in such a conspicuous position is a highly unconventional move that flies in the face of the American suburban norm of the pool discreetly tucked into a backyard corner. In this case the pool addresses the public realm, but is still a private space. The only tantalizing clues to its presence are the sounds of splashing and ripples of light reflected off the water onto the translucent glass screen. At some stage, Elam hopes to plant a bamboo grove in the front yard to shield the house from the street.

Inside, the pool structure forms the ceiling to the living quarters below, but despite its physical massiveness, it does not feel heavy. Guests sit in the living room underneath the pool tank without



FAR LEFT AND THIS PICTURE The open risers allow views through the staircase as it darts between floors.
FAR LEFT, INSET Leather club chairs, originally designed by Le Corbusier, frame a doorway.
ABOVE LEFT The heavy-duty kitchen sink is suspended from the ceiling by a series of thin rods. The kitchen is placed at the rear of the house, overlooking the guest pavilions.
BELOW LEFT Wall planes dissolve spaces. Walls are predominantly white, with wood-fibrous cement flooring panels laid on top of the concrete floor structure.





flinching. Scogin and Elam relish this paradox between lightness and heaviness, which is a consistent theme of their architecture. They allude to the great domes of European classical architecture, such as the Pantheon in Rome, which although physically heavy, achieve a certain lightness of experience. Likewise, the pool's great mass seems to float through the space of the house.

On the second floor, the glazed pavilion of the bedroom directly overlooks the narrow strip of seductively blue water, separated from it by an insubstantial membrane of clear glass. Throughout the house, glass is set against more massive elements, creating surprising juxtapositions, revealing views and bringing light to the interior. Sheer planes of clear, frameless glass are also used to form balustrades around the stairs and landings. The glass is detailed with a great precision, so that it appears seamless and floating, enhancing a sense of lightness and dematerialization. Walls are predominantly white, with wood-fibrous cement flooring panels laid on top of the concrete floor structure. The smooth texture of the floors and walls forms a resonant contrast with the rough concrete of the pool. Exposed steel beams appear intermittently throughout the interior, ostensibly as a dramatic expression of structure, but in fact as mere

ABOVE LEFT A cross section shows how the pool is supported at first-floor level. Elevating the pool was an unorthodox solution, but lack of space gave the architects no alternative. The pool shell is made of concrete, which varies in thickness around its four sides. It is supported by deep foundations underneath the load-bearing walls. The underside of the pool forms the ceiling of the living area, but despite its heavy physical presence, it achieves a certain lightness of experience.

ABOVE RIGHT The strong horizontal planes of the lap pool dominate the geometric composition of the facade.

connects the main house with the guest pavilions. The second floor is entirely devoted to the bedroom, the pool, and its deck, a sybaritic den of luxury. But both Scogin and Elam are by nature workaholics. "They do architecture all day," according to their partner Lloyd Bray. Does this make them immune to the distracting pleasures of the house? "Well maybe they wake up in the morning and take a quick swim. And then they do architecture all day."

Being based in Atlanta has given Scogin and Elam's practice a certain freshness and originality of vision. The quintessential American suburban city spreading out in tree-lined streets, Atlanta is still evolving and still, in many ways, searching for some kind of identity. This quality of undefinability underscores the work of the practice. Free from the encumbrances of history, context, and the architectural politics of the East and West Coasts, they have been able to develop their own vision and approach. Atlanta's relative youth colors the city's perception of architecture as evolving and experimental, rather than a precious and untouchable historical commodity.

Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects cultivate their sensibilities to the point where they can do with architecture what is usually thought of as beyond the realms of architecture: capturing and exploring different possibilities. One critic has described it as "a

Throughout the house, clear and translucent glass is set against more massive elements, creating surprising juxtapositions.

decoration, an example of architectural playfulness. Furnishings consist mainly of Scogin and Elam's collection of architect-designed chairs that are arranged like sculptures around the house.

The plan is a fluid series of spaces contained and locked together within the rectangular footprint of the site. The living space is placed on the south-facing street side, to take advantage of the sun. Kitchen and laundry rooms are located at the rear, overlooking the two self-contained guest pavilions that occupy the garden. A bridgelike library at second-floor level

sort of embraced madness." They do not necessarily begin with the proper and the inevitable. Their outlook is sometimes more challenging and less manageable. But neither do they set out to change the conventions of architecture, to ignore the fact that architects must create buildings with use and meaning. Instead, they augment architecture with the enduring lessons of the irregular. Projects such as their own extraordinary house are the outcome of mixing together what they know architecture can do and what, in their wildest speculations, they think may be possible.



THIS PICTURE A piece of wood forms an impromptu shelf, suspended between the pool enclosure and the bedroom's built-in television cabinet. **TOP RIGHT** Junctions between glass panels are detailed with seamless precision. **CENTER RIGHT** Seen from below, the wooden shelf seems to hover in space. **BOTTOM RIGHT** The interior geometry of solid and void is one of the most distinctive features of the house.





THIS PICTURE AND TOP LEFT
 The bedroom is a glazed pavilion overlooking the enticing strip of water. The pool addresses the public realm, but is still a private space, enclosed by a screen of translucent glass. Water casts rippling reflections on the underside of the cantilevered roof, which protects and shades the pool.

CENTER LEFT Bedroom and pool merge into one fluid volume.

BOTTOM LEFT There is no visual clue to the pool's presence from the street.

