

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

McGraw Hill
CONSTRUCTION

04
2003

\$9.75 A PUBLICATION OF THE MCGRAW-HILL COMPANIES

www.architecturalrecord.com

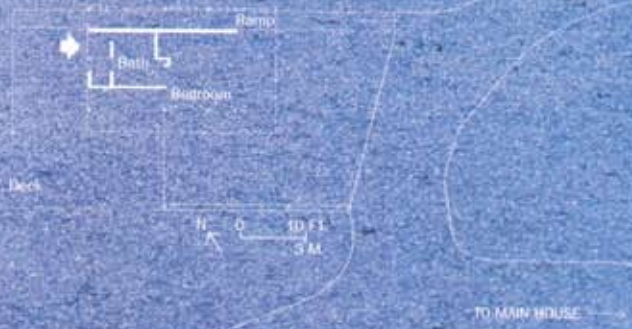
Record Houses 2003

INSIDE

Essay: THE PROMISE OF THE PROTOTYPE

Mack **Scogin** Merrill **Elam** creates a woodland aerie, perching the **MOUNTAIN GUESTHOUSE** amid a grove of slender poplars in north Georgia

The cantilevered bedroom appears as a glass cube afloat in the forest. Sheltered, but outdoors, a ramp leads up to the main living area. The long, narrow deck, edged in Cor-ten steel, is penetrated by bamboo sprouting through a floor grate.





From both front (below) and back (above) elevations, the steel columns supporting the deck blend with the forest, mimicking the rhythm of poplar trees—as do the vertical slits in the Cor-ten parapet.

By Sarah Amelar

Giving the fleeting illusion of one long, high span traversing the forest, the narrow deck of the Mountain Guesthouse extends into the north Georgia woodland with the attenuated grace of a rope bridge across a jungle chasm. Though the deck actually rests on thin steel columns over gently sloping ground, these posts almost disappear into the landscape as they echo the rhythm and proportions of the slender poplars around them. With a thicket of bamboo sprouting (by design) through its deck, a cantilevered bedroom virtually floating among the trees, and an entrance requiring a slightly daring ascent (via ramp), this 1,000-square-foot cottage has earned its nickname, “the tree house.”

But its materials—glass, Cor-ten steel, slate, and concrete—are hardly typical of a tree house. And neither its architects, Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam, nor the clients initially envisioned such a long, lofty structure—nor even a guesthouse. Instead, the design evolved organically as the owners’ lives changed.

It all began with the main house, just 80 feet away, which Scogin Elam and Bray [RECORD, April 1997, page 90] built on a woodland drive that winds through a 24-acre site in the Appalachian foothills. The Atlanta-based owners—a journalist and his wife, an avid landscaper—wanted a weekend retreat that could become their permanent home. Along a creek, the architects created an inside-outside house with a next-door guest suite (the original one on the site), playing planar forms against the surrounding hills. Soon the clients’ children married, recalls Scogin, “started birthing babies—

and, before you knew it, the grandbabies had taken over the guesthouse.” So, he and Elam returned to convert the garage into a playroom.

But the client, who’d done much of the landscaping herself, hankered after a shed for her tractors and seedlings—and then, well, the idea of adding a swimming pool emerged. To keep out animals, Elam proposed raising it on a high deck—reminiscent of the architects’ own pool in their Atlanta home [RECORD, April 1998, page 130]. So, the design morphed from a garage/potting shed into a lap pool on an elevated deck with a cabana. But, in the end, it seemed impractical to maintain a pool in a part-time home, and the project was trimmed back to a garage. “Suddenly,” Elam recalls, “we all missed that long, high, horizontal element in the landscape.” Besides, the owners really did need more room (and privacy) for visitors.

With the program finally settled, the architects created a one-bedroom aerie that is remarkable in its sculptural qualities and response to the setting. From the serpentine drive, this guest hideaway comes into view before the main house. Its diagram is fairly simple: a rectangular volume (the bedroom and bath) partially cantilevered atop a larger rectangular form (the garage), with a long, upper-level deck off one side and a ramp descending in the opposite direction. But Scogin and Elam transformed the diagram through an exquisitely subtle balance of solids and voids, volumes and planes, and opaque or matte surfaces and transparent or reflective ones.

As a result, parts of the building practically vanish or seem smaller than their true dimensions, while other elements—the long deck



PHOTOGRAPHY © TIMOTHY HURSELEY



The entry ramp (above and above right) passes between vertical planes of concrete, translucent glass, and Cor-ten steel. Slate paving continues from the deck into the bathroom (right) and throughout the interior. The bedroom overlooks the main house (below).



and ramp—expand the house's perceived size. In less skillful hands, the front of the cast-concrete garage, for example, might have appeared heavy and bulky, but instead, its top half virtually dematerializes. Here, a wide band of mullion-free glazing, reflecting nearby foliage, reads as an opening—setting the Cor-ten parapet above it visually afloat. On the same elevation, two cantilevered forms appear equally unfettered by gravity: the cubelike bedroom, with floor-to-ceiling glazing, and the planar roof over it.

Ambiguity—between permanent and ephemeral, natural and built, heavy and light, indoors and out—plays an essential role in this structure. While its materials may be hard and man-made, they meld with the site, as the steel's rusty patina mimics moss and lichen on the poplars, and slats in the parapet, along with the columns, echo the rhythms of the forest.

Merging indoors and out, the entry ramp, leading to living space over the garage and basic kitchen, rises between a well-grounded wall of Cor-ten and a shoji-like screen of translucent glass. As the route passes narrowly between building skins, it accentuates the play of light and shadow. The arrival point is a 1,000-square-foot deck—an outdoor living room with sunset views—that doubles the house's occupiable space. Slate pavers continue inside from the deck, covering the entire floor. In the bedroom, the interior seems to open completely, with floor-to-ceiling glazing—but the glass is fixed, while operable panels in the room's solid walls offer airflow.

For all its apparent ambiguity and paradox, the design is neither jarring nor contradictory. Strong verticals and horizontals play harmoniously against the hills and the ramp's dynamic diagonal. And though this well-grounded house may seem suspended in the treetops, it merely holds that position visually—hovering in an exceptionally fine balance. ■

Project: Mountain Guesthouse, Dillard, Georgia

Architect: Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects—Mack Scogin, AIA, Merrill Elam, AIA, principals; David Yocum,

Penn Ruderman, Denise Dumais

www For more information on the people and products involved in this project, go to Projects at architecturalrecord.com.