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FEATURE:

A 19-year collaboration
between architect and client





In an unusual scenario, Mack Scogin & Merrill Elam joins forces with a volume builder for a one-of-a-kind project: the **BAILEY HOUSE STUDIO**

By Sara Hart

The back story of the Bailey House is as intriguing as it is unlikely. In the beginning, the project seemed to have all the right ingredients—an exceptional site, talented architects, and a client with vision. Radcliffe and Loran Bailey bought 7 acres of

heavily wooded, rolling land, which backs up to a nature conservancy but also sits just a few yards off the blacktop winding through a middle-class neighborhood in suburban Atlanta.

The young couple, parents of two children, approached Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects to design a house with a studio for Radcliffe, an artist gaining national prominence with his large, colorful paintings that mingle African-American historical vignettes with his own family photographs. The work appears at once studied and—inspired by the artist's lifelong obsession with jazz—improvisational.

The architects' parti proposed a square and a rectangle (a 2,000-square-foot house and 2,000-square-foot studio, respectively) linked by a bridge element (a deck with a 200-square-foot library or family room). The scheme remained straightforward as the architects strove to keep costs down, but bids came in way over the clients' budget. "At that point—a dark moment in any project," explains project architect Brian Bell, "we all realized that if the house and studio were going to get built at all, the Baileys might have to give up program." (In the end, it wasn't necessary.)

Then, the story takes an unconventional turn. Loran Bailey called the Atlanta Housing Authority, a public-housing agency, and requested a list of local builders. This was, as the architects admit, "a suspect proposition, full of risks." On the list, she recognized John Wieland, head of an eponymous company—one of the Southeast's largest private-home builders—and a patron of the arts. He contributes generously to area art institutions, and his extensive collection includes Radcliffe's work. So, it hardly seemed farfetched that the two would know of each other—and not surprising that Wieland would agree to an unusual project for a rising artist.

Two potentially deal-killing stipulations existed, however. First, the contract would be between the owners and Wieland, relieving the architects of fiduciary obligation, but also limiting their control. Second, and most vex-



The Bailey House Studio sits on 7 heavily wooded acres, just minutes from downtown Atlanta.

ing, all building materials, including finishes, would have to come from "supply-fabrication" subsidiaries of John Wieland Homes and Neighborhoods. These companies provide everything from foundations and exterior-cladding options to plumbing fixtures, window treatments, and kitchens.

John Wieland has erected 20,000 homes in his company's 30-year history. Such success requires an economically dependable, albeit rigid, system of building, offering the consumer a catalog of options not unlike those of automobile manufacturers. This approach may seem antithetical to the architect-designed, one-of-a-kind residence, which eschews economies of scale in favor of often expensive, unique materials and meticulous detailing. Certainly, the dangers of rendering the adroit Modernism of Scogin and Elam in clapboard and shutters may have been real, but by the architects' own admission, Wieland's agreement to take on the project proved critical to getting it built.

The contractual agreement had one clear advantage. The architects could keep their fees low because they wouldn't need to issue change orders or detailed construction documents. In the end, Bell, representing

Project: Bailey House Studio, Atlanta
Architect: Mack Scogin Merrill Elam—Merrill Elam, AIA, principal in charge; Mack Scogin, AIA, collaborating principal; Brian Bell, project

architect; Barnum Tiller, John Trefry, Denise Dumais, Charlotte Henderson
Engineer: Palmer Engineering
General contractor: John Wieland Homes and Neighborhoods



Radcliffe Bailey's 2,000-square-foot studio (right, with artist seated center) receives muted sunlight via eaves, sealed with clear plastic sheeting—an alternative to expensive skylights. The artist can also work in the covered outdoor studio (bottom left). For the two-story living room, the large picture window is a composite of smaller units ganged together and set within the fiberglass-clad facade (top left).



The interior drama comes from the form of the vertical circulation, rather than exotic materials. Like a tower, rotated 45 degrees within the cubic volume, the sculptural stair (this page and opposite) plays closed nooks against open balconies, where one can survey the indoor space and woodland views.



Mack Scogin Merrill Elam, and Doug Tolleson, Wieland's builder, negotiated the design and execution verbally and with sketches. "Getting Tolleson's feedback was crucial to keeping costs down and achieving a buildable project within Wieland's framework," recalls Bell. "We had to be flexible, and they had to allow themselves to be stretched."

Scogin and Elam finessed the limitations in several ways. Knowing that Wieland typically clads houses in cementitious boards—wood-grain textured and then painted—the architects took the raw, unprocessed panels and bolted them to most of the exterior walls. Elsewhere, as on the living room elevations, they included translucent, corrugated panels of fiberglass bolted over reflective insulation. Light filtering in shines back out, so under favorable conditions, the facade glows.

Wieland's limited window offerings tend to be small and rectangular. Given the beautiful wooded views, though, the architects wanted large expanses of glass. Bell and Tolleson figured out a way to gang several units together, with the architect negotiating the only variant—a lightweight horizontal structural member.

The studio is a tall rectangular box—all function, few amenities. But the architects inserted a particularly clever detail, where exposed wood

trusses extend beyond the exterior walls, forming a typical overhang. They sealed it with clear plastic sheeting, in place of an opaque soffit. Artists need daylight, but with a budget prohibiting such extras as skylights, the determined designers improvised, instead of deleting. Radcliffe now gets that shadowless sunlight preferred for painting—at no extra cost.

Most mass-production home builders use forgiving techniques, concealed by ornament—so they're unaccustomed to Modernism's tight tolerances. Rather than fight a losing battle against the builder's standards, Scogin and Elam deliberately sought an unfinished, yet consistent, look throughout, and reinforced the strategy with off-the-shelf fixtures and hardware applied inventively. Over time, the Bailey family will fill out the house and studio by improvisation in much the same way that Radcliffe approaches his canvases. Here, the high-design architect and the volume home builder both learned that their cultures needn't be incompatible. ■

Sources

Cementitious panels: Hardipanel
Fiberglass: Resolite
Windows: Peachtree

For more information on this project, go to Projects at www.architecturalrecord.com.

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|----------------|-------------------|
| 1. Kitchen | 6. Office |
| 2. Living room | 7. Library |
| 3. Mezzanine | 8. Studio |
| 4. Bedroom | 9. Outdoor studio |
| 5. Bathroom | 10. Deck |

