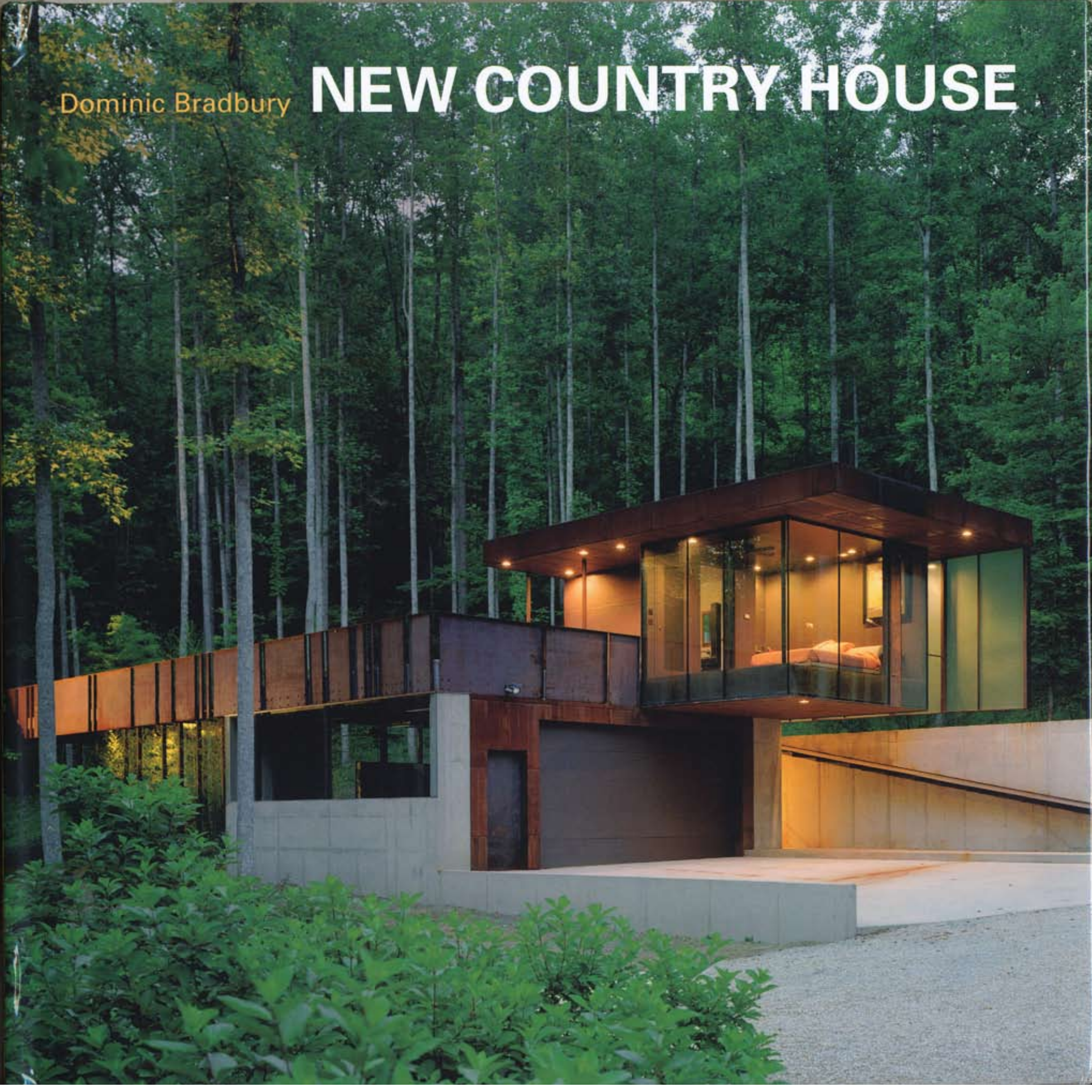


Dominic Bradbury

NEW COUNTRY HOUSE



MOUNTAIN GUEST HOUSE

MACK SCOGIN MERRILL ELAM, Dillard, Georgia, USA 2001



An enigmatic echo of the architects' design for their clients' original house nearby, the Mountain Guest House is also an entity in its own right. Combining a garage/store with a self-contained lodge, plus terrace and suspended deck, the house is layered with contradictions between solidity and transparency, drama and concealment. Set within a grove of poplars, it is a house hidden purposefully in the tree line.

The houses of Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam are determinedly contemporary structures, juxtaposing old and new materials and structural themes, but with the congregational nature of old farmsteads, with their traditional collections of interconnected barns, outbuildings, silos and living quarters. Mack Scogin Merrill Elam's houses take this compound idea

to a more abstract plane: these are homes that don't reveal themselves in an instant, that offer a journey between adjoining spaces with their own formal and thematic identity, a journey between interior and exterior rooms, a dialogue between open-plan areas and more intimate, enclosed retreats. They are a world away from the pure box-like homes of Philip Johnson or Marcel Breuer, delighting in complexity, ambiguity and visual experimentation, teasing and confusing the eye.

This is certainly true of the Mountain Guest House, set within a wealth of slim poplars on a 9.7-hectare (24-acre) site in the Appalachian foothills of northern Georgia, two hours' drive north of Atlanta. Indeed, when one first looks at the building it is hard to decide exactly what is going on. A glass box bedroom appears suspended in mid-air, floating

left The bedroom is essentially a raised glass box looking across the woods and toward the owner's main house. The impression is of floating elevation or of sleeping within the tree line.

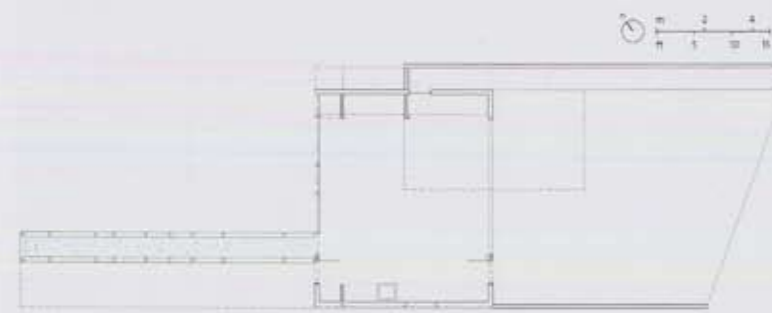
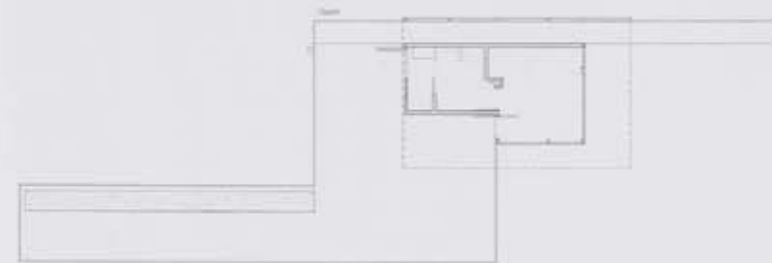
below The poplars around the building form a backdrop and visual cage, blurring the building into the landscape. This idea is accentuated further by the bamboo planting, which grows up beneath and through the walkway terrace to the left.

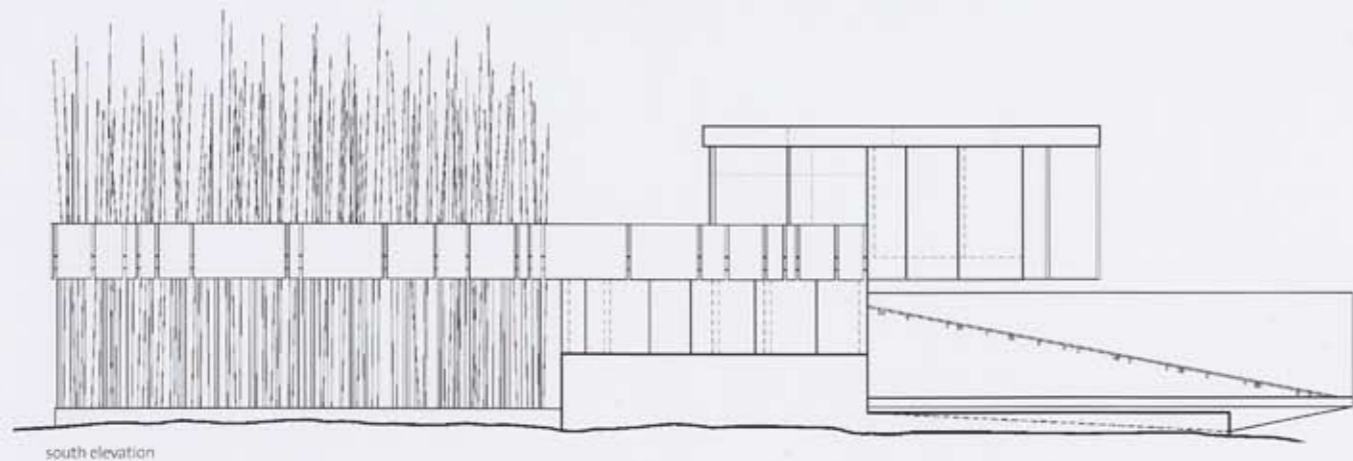


above an indeterminate concrete structure. To the other side of the building a walkway seems to magically project outward into the trees but comes to a full stop. The trees seem to surround much of the building like a cage, dissolving the boundaries of the structure within the woodland canopy.

The house is, in fact, composed of three basic elements: a garage and store room, a bedroom/bathroom and a raised terrace. Naturally the garage is at ground level, with concrete walls and entrance way, plus one large window. In essence, the garage is entirely subservient to the glass room above, which cantilevers out over the entrance way to the store. The garage becomes a plinth and support for the living space above – accessed by a steep ramp, introducing a diagonal to contrast with the rectangular format of the house – and the base for its adjoining slate-floored terrace, which spurs outward in the opposite direction to the ramp to become a raised walkway or viewing platform, supported by a series of stilts. The stilts disappear in the tree trunks, with the picture blurred further by bamboo planted below the walkway and growing up into it and through it via a series of lattices. No wonder the building is sometimes nicknamed 'the treehouse'.

right At dusk and night, the raised glass bedroom assumes a level of surrealism – a 'tree house' sitting among the poplars. The accommodation is accessed via the diagonal ramp to the rear of the garage entrance.





south elevation

'The trees provide a filtered privacy and help wed the house to the terrain,' says Merrill Elam. 'On the south side the poplars help shade the house in summer and allow sunlight through in winter. They also filter a view of the meadow nearby, but do not obscure it.'

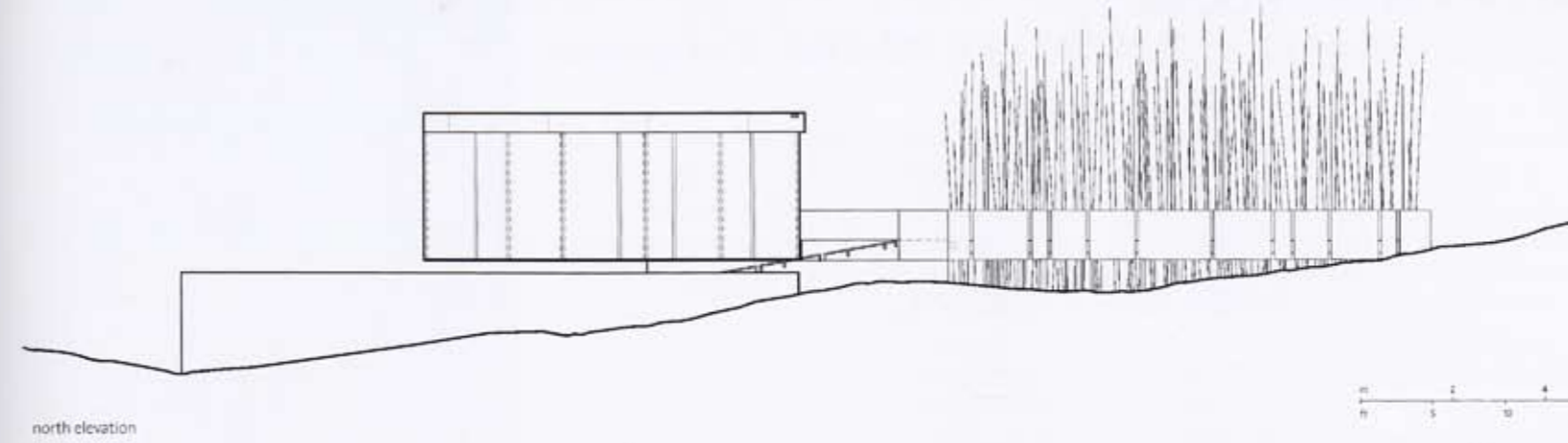
The building is a satellite to the original house, by the same architects, some 50 metres (150 feet) away, which is set slightly lower into the site. Designed and built a number of years earlier for clients who wanted a vacation house that would one day become a primary residence, the main building adopts much of the same language as that which informs the guest house. Again, the low-slung, flat-roofed, single-storey building is divided into a number

of components, with the main house complemented by another guest area and garage and a large, screened porch. And again, there are a number of visual games afoot, with the scale of the building unclear.

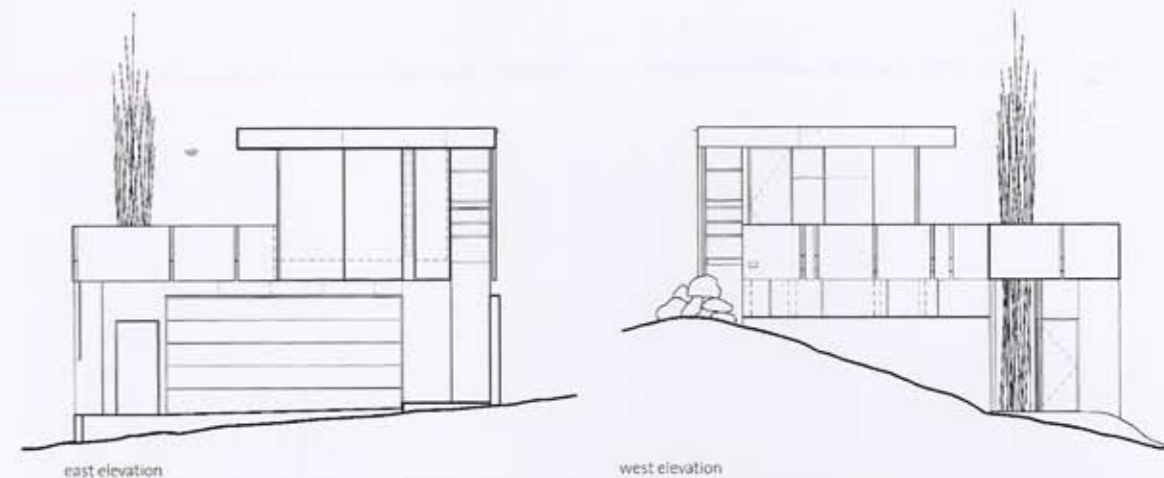
The site itself had been cleared and farmed earlier in the twentieth century, so the poplars represented relatively new growth. But with both buildings, everything possible was done to respect and preserve the landscape, with the houses woven into the existing terrain. 'Sensitivity to the landscape is a statement,' Merrill Elam says. 'In this case, it reflected the attitudes of the owners toward the stewardship of the site.'

When the client's family extended with the arrival of grandchildren, the original garage became a playroom and sleeping space began to appear limited. Hence the need for the new guest house, which offers a sense of seclusion and quiet, but with a stylistic link to the main house, which can be seen – along with the woodlands – from that glazed sleeping box.

Here, then, concealment and subversion were interrelated themes explored within the design of a building that on one level is extremely simple and on another, particularly complex. Much has been made of the practice's sensitivity to context and respect for the landscape, tying them into a tradition of sensitive modernity pioneered by the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright. Mack Scogin Merrill Elam continue to prove that such sensitivity doesn't impose limitations upon imagination or innovative creativity.



north elevation



east elevation

west elevation

left The slate-covered terrace adjoining the living space gives way to the pier head projecting out into the trees. To the right of the pier head, bamboo planting emerges from slats in the structure, forming a wave of greenery.

right The entry ramp emerges up toward the rear of the living space, which is protected by a wall of translucent, frosted glass, which also provides privacy for the bathroom.

