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FOR ARCHITECTS AND BUILDERS
OF DISTINCTIVE HOMES

VOL. 1, 2017

On the Verge



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RD RESIDENTIAL DESIGN

For Architects and Builders of Distinctive Homes

Welcome to *Residential Design* magazine. We are the only national professional publication devoted to residential architects and custom builders. We're dedicated to providing you with expert insight and substantive information on high-end residential design and construction.

Our print edition is published quarterly. And our newsletter is published twice a month. If you are not already a subscriber and would like to be, please write to: *Residential Design*, Circulation Dept., P.O. Box 3007, Northbrook, IL 60065-3007, or call (866) 932-5904, or email rd@omeda.com.

If you have an exceptional single-family residential project you'd like us to write about, or an interesting and instructive business story you'd like to share with other professionals, please email Claire@SOLAbRANDS.com.

We look forward to having you join our *Residential Design* community.

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1880 Oak Ave., Suite 350
Evanston, IL 60201
847.920.9513

Publisher

Paul DeGrandis
Paul@SOLAbRANDS.com

Group Editorial Director

Patrick L. O'Toole
Patrick@SOLAbRANDS.com

Editor-in-Chief

S. Claire Conroy
Claire@SOLAbRANDS.com

Art Director

Smith Design Co.

Audience Development

Mike Serino
MSerino@magservgroup.com

Creative Director & Production Director

Tracy Hegg
Tracy@SOLAbRANDS.com

Projects Manager

Heidi Riedl
Heidi@SOLAbRANDS.com

Midwest and West Sales Manager

Paul DeGrandis
Paul@SOLAbRANDS.com

East, Southeast Sales Manager

Beth Emerich
EmerichB@SOLAbRANDS.com

East, Southeast Sales Manager

Joanne Naylor
Joanne@SOLAbRANDS.com

Product Resource Section/Classifieds

Mike Serino
Mike@SOLAbRANDS.com

Digital Programs Manager

Tim Steingraber
Tim@SOLAbRANDS.com

Subscriptions

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The Homecoming



Inventing a new magazine is a little like designing and building a new house. They both take vision and hard work, of course, but most of all they require a team effort—a combination of talented people all doing what they do best and working toward a common goal. We hope you enjoy spending time with us in this house, and that you find it a warm and welcoming gathering place for the residential professional community.

While quite a bit is new to me in the experience of launching *Residential Design* magazine, much is also comfortingly familiar. First and foremost, I'm thrilled to serve my favorite people again: architects and custom home builders. Like you, I have an abiding passion for houses and I care deeply about how well they are designed and built.

For me, working on *Residential Design* feels like a homecoming. I'm returning to the magazine world after a brief hiatus that included a major life change: My family and I moved from my hometown of Washington, D.C., to Atlanta, Ga. In the past year or so, I have sold two houses, leased one for a short stretch, and then bought another. You could say that, in a very practical way, I've been immersed in the business of residential design through all those transactions. The search for a new home for my family underscored how difficult it is to find a decently planned and executed dwelling, especially if you have a time constraint. It almost doesn't matter what the budget, good houses are hard to come by. And that's good for architects and builders.

While I was literally getting my new-to-me house in order, I began the task of house hunting for the magazine. I sent out calls for projects and story ideas to architects and builders across the country. The response was immediate and gratifying. Dozens of beautiful projects came pouring in, and one in particular caught my eye: a beautiful contemporary house designed by Richard Williams and located in Rappahannock, Va., among the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains (page 26). Coincidentally, it's a just a mile or two, as the hawk flies, from a house I had just sold and feel some considerable heartbreak in letting go.

It was a poignant homecoming traveling out and walking Richard's project with him, gazing at the same mountains my house had looked upon. The damp overcast day deep into autumn was the perfect objective correlative for my wistful return. Richard's mood was wistful, too, as this project is one of his favorites. It represents a quieter period in his career when he had time on his hands to deliberate over every detail. It had the dream clients and the dream builder, too, all in a beautiful, inspiring setting.

We hope this magazine feels like a homecoming for you, too—one you'll want to return to again and again, to find community, design inspiration, and ideas that fuel your passion and strengthen the profession as a whole. This is a house we all can share. Please don't hesitate to tell us how we might improve how it looks and lives for you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "S. Claire Conroy". The signature is fluid and cursive.

S. Claire Conroy
Editor-in-Chief
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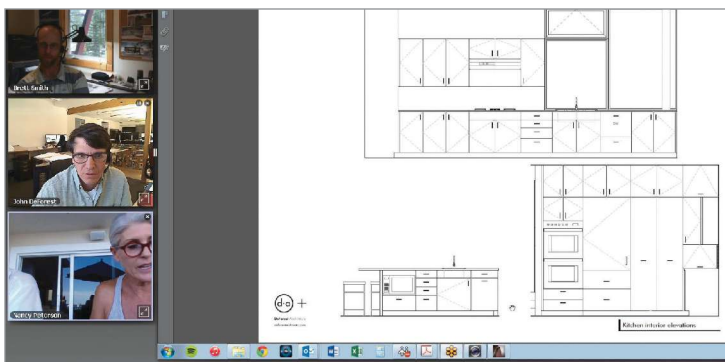


Great Projects Anywhere

DEFOREST ARCHITECTS
SEATTLE



Photos: Courtesy of DeForest Architects



Top: Seattle-based DeForest Architects and the cyber image of their remote employee. Above: Collaborating with staff and clients at a distance.

Large, nationally known architectural firms are accustomed to commissions from out-of-town clients. But, increasingly, smaller local firms are getting those phone calls, too. Powered by the boundless reach of the World Wide Web, residential design customers can find their project collaborators anywhere. Architect John DeForest, AIA, principal of Seattle-based DeForest Architects discusses the impact out-of-town work has had on his 12-person office.

RD: Where are you working right now?

JD: We have projects in Oregon, Montana, and Michigan, in addition to some that are an hour or more drive from Seattle.

RD: As a small firm residential firm how did you start finding out-of-area jobs?

JD: It happened organically for us as we began to get calls from a distance—largely because of web exposure—particularly Houzz and Pinterest. There isn't such a barrier anymore to not being local. We now have what we call a "GPA policy"—Great Projects Anywhere. We are open to working on great projects and with great people.

RD: What advantages do you see to working out of town?

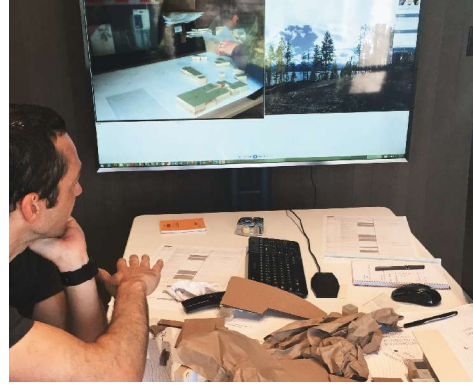
JD: Here in Seattle, we are in an architect-dense market. Some of the people who call from other places don't have those resources. But, basically, it's just fun for us, because we get to work in really beautiful, interesting places—a sand dune in Lake Michigan or in snow country. I personally really like learning, and getting to use different tools.

RD: Did you make an intentional effort to reach beyond your local borders?

JD: It has evolved from a reaction to a job inquiry to a more proactive effort to get the word out. We continue to get projects via the web. I would have thought that to be practicing as far away as Michigan, you'd have to be a "starchitect." It's not like people are discovering our coffee table book.



Rendering and photo: Courtesy of DeForest Architects



Far left: House in Bend, Ore., for interior designer Nancy Burfiend.
Left: A remote architect in Lake Tahoe, Nev., meets with Seattle staff about a project in Montana.

RD: You also have staff that works remotely in other parts of the country. How did that happen?

JD: In one case, a key member of the staff came to me and said, “I love the opportunity here, but my heart and family are in Tahoe.” I have another who lived about an hour away who had kids, making the commute much harder. And we have somebody now who’s senior who works from home one day a week.

RD: What impact has that had on the firm?

JD: The pluses are the ability to attract and retain top people, but the people in the office do end up bearing more of the front-line stress. And we do miss the kinds of spontaneous conversation that can happen when people are close by, now that we have to pick up the phone to talk.

RD: What steps have you taken to make it easier to communicate across distance with staff and clients?

JD: Any new workstation we buy is mobile. We got a wider angle camera for video conferences so everyone at the table can be seen. We added lamps for better light, and hooked up a camera focused on the desk—a “sketchcam.” We use voice over internet, so staff phone numbers are consistent. And we use ARCHICAD, which has a really good collaborative function and a way to send a link to download an easily navigable model. It makes us less dependent on viewing things in a physical space.

The next step, and we have a client who’s working on this, is virtual reality software where everyone has an avatar. Before I tried it out, I thought you couldn’t see social cues, but you can. It’s still a step down from face to face, but it’s a step up from remote.


RD: Are any analog processes still important?

JD: I came up with one foot in the analog world and one in the digital. And there are tasks that straddle both—like drawing while on camera. We still spend a lot of time walking the site, talking with building officials. At some point in the process, clients come to Seattle and spend three days in a quasi-charrette. We show them materials and mock-ups. We have more physical resources in the office—samples, for instance, and bigger screens. We’re hired by people who enjoy the process, and coming to see us is part of that process.

RD: How do you run the project at a distance?

JD: I’m not intimidated by working in different jurisdictions. Generally, we get a reciprocal license in the state, if it’s required. From a construction standpoint, you have to make sure you have a really good local contractor. So we go through an even more extensive process with the contractor. Builders in vacation spots might be used to just taking plans and building, but our work is too custom for that. We’ll pick and choose whether to go local for other consultants. For local, I’d say: structural engineer and soils and civil engineers. Site webcams help us keep track of the project, as does drone photography, in addition to digital photography, email, site visits, and phone calls. It’s actually a pet peeve of mine that people don’t pick up the phone and call more often.

RD: What percentage of your work is out of town now, and how does that fit with firm goals?

JD: We’re working on about 16 projects right now, and at least 25% are four or more hours—or a plane ride—away. That feels like the right amount—any more might be too much. It’s fun to have those projects. It’s good for quality of life and it keeps the learning curve higher. But that’s the trick as the firm’s arc continues, how do you make sure you stretch in the right ways? 

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The Thin Man

ROBERT M. CAIN, ARCHITECT
ATLANTA, GA.

Nestled in the Virginia Highlands, one of Atlanta's toniest neighborhoods, is a diminutive Mid-Century house recently resuscitated with a very light hand. The modesty of the intervention is the first thing one notices upon touring the house. The second notable aspect is that it exists at all amid the pseudo-Tudors, period bungalows, and new builder-spec foursquares that characterize the pricey in-town location. The area's cachet stems in part from its walkability to schools, shopping, and dining, along with its proximity to the booming Midtown business corridor. Atlanta is rediscovering modern in a big way, both for its existing housing stock and even for its new speculative houses. The trend is fueled in general by a growing national taste for modern design, but also locally by a swelling population of California transplants, drawn to Atlanta's flourishing film and television industry. And some of the most discerning of these modern-loving clients are discovering Atlanta's indigenous modernist, Robert M. Cain, FAIA.

Would that all of Atlanta's new modern work were as skillfully done as Bob's. The chief problem one sees are thick, clunky roofs, but other proportions are often bloated as well. Bob's architecture, on the other hand, keeps getting lighter, and his roofs keep getting thinner and thinner on each project, as he and his team discover new ways to fit and fix materials together. Structure can and should look light here, where snow is almost non-existent and the biggest energy bill is air conditioning in summer. "We'd figured out a system of two layers of 3/4-inch plywood that will cantilever off 3 feet," says Bob. "But on our most recent project, Holly Hill, we devised a way to do a 1 1/8-inch thick cantilever that can extend nearly as far."

While Bob's LEED Platinum RainShine



Left: Robert M. Cain, FAIA.

Below: The LEED Platinum RainShine House has a butterfly roof that harvests rainwater and collects power from a photovoltaic array.



Photo: Paul Hultberg Photography

PRO-FILE DESIGN

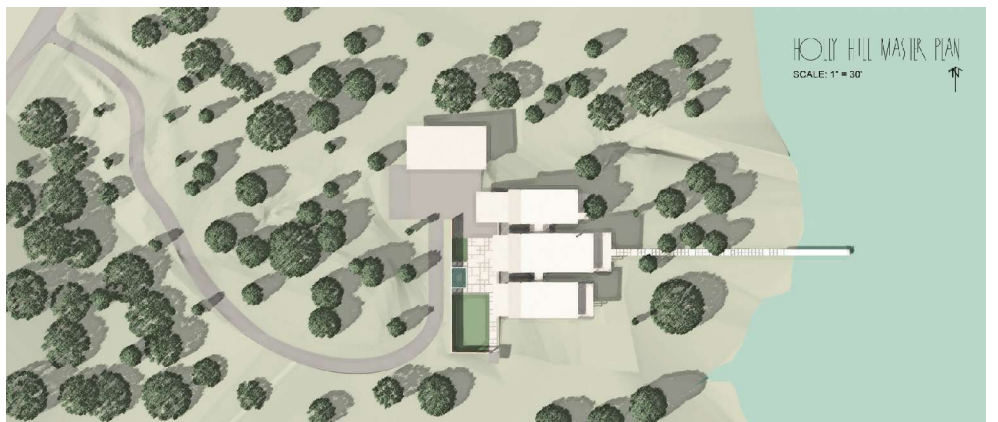
house and Briarcreek Farmhouse have already won him acclaim, his new work rises to even greater heights of grace and skill. Holly Hill is the project that's presently consuming the lion's share of firm attention. Located in North Georgia's rural Piedmont, it's compelling for a number of reasons. Not only are its rooflines ultra slim, but the whole house is designed to touch lightly on its lakeside property. Bob attended architecture school (Auburn) in the early '70s, when architects were just beginning to question the dependency on mechanical heating and cooling and other active means of dealing with climate conditions. "I don't like to just plop a house on the land," he says. "It should work with it, too. We rely first on passive means—siting and shading." While these seem like basic measures, they are largely neglected in the region.

The other unusual aspect of the house is its floor plan: It has separate, flanking bedrooms for the clients—a commercial architect and an engineer—joined by bridges to a central living, kitchen, and dining space. There are also screened porches, covered porches, and decks. There's plenty of room to come together and room to escape. The house, which is under construction, is one component of a 10-acre master plan that may ultimately include several additional buildings.

Master plans for rural properties are becoming somewhat of a special sideline for the firm. They allow clients who have a piece of land to develop it in a coherent way over time, while also pacing the financial outlay. Mason Branch Farm (nearly finished construction) and Ruffwood Farm (in design development) share this phased approach. Both are designed for clients who plan to raise specialty crops for Atlanta's booming restaurant market. Co-



Photo: Frederik Brauer



Top to bottom: Mid-Century Remix is a skillful redo of a Kenneth Johnson house; Mason Branch Farm boosts efficiency with passive orientation; Holly Hill harnesses its scenic setting with porches, decks, and patios.

Renderings: Courtesy of Robert M. Cain, FAIA

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Top to Bottom: Cain is planning Ruffwood Farm in phases. Eventually the 70-acre property will include a main house for the owners, an agriculture business, and a combined barn, guest house, and event space. [And yes, the mountain backdrop is borrowed from the Mason Branch project.]

incidentally, both are also novice farmers, buoyed by Bob's practical experience and design expertise and drawn to his seasoned idealism. "I'm from rural roots, so I understand what they're after when they come to me," he explains. "Ruffwood is one of those 10-to-12-year-long projects. It's out in the middle of nowhere, where land is cheap, but it's beautiful and less than an hour's drive from Atlanta. You don't have to go far to find places like this here."

In fact, Bob has his own chunk of beautiful rural land undergoing phased development: "It's 40 acres with a river and a 50-foot waterfall in North Georgia." As time and funds allow, he and his business partner are renovating a 200-square-foot mill on the property into Airbnb "lodges." When funds free up from some adaptive reuse projects he owns and is trying to sell, he plans to build a community of tiny houses on the land as well.

Bob is no stranger to hands-on development. He and his wife, Molly Lay, got into real estate speculating in Asheville, N.C., buying and rehabilitating old houses in a neglected neighborhood now known as the Montfort Historic District. "We started buying houses and renovating them with sweat equity. We helped establish the neighborhood." In Atlanta, Bob has bought and adapted a series of buildings into residential multifamily and mixed uses, drawing on his background as a design architect for large commercial firms along with his considerable residential savvy. He's designing for other developers, too, although he often chafes at what they choose to "value engineer."

All in all, his five-person firm couldn't be busier, and that's the way they all like it: "If it's an interesting project, I'm not going to say no. We'll find a way to do it," he says. —*S. Claire Conroy*



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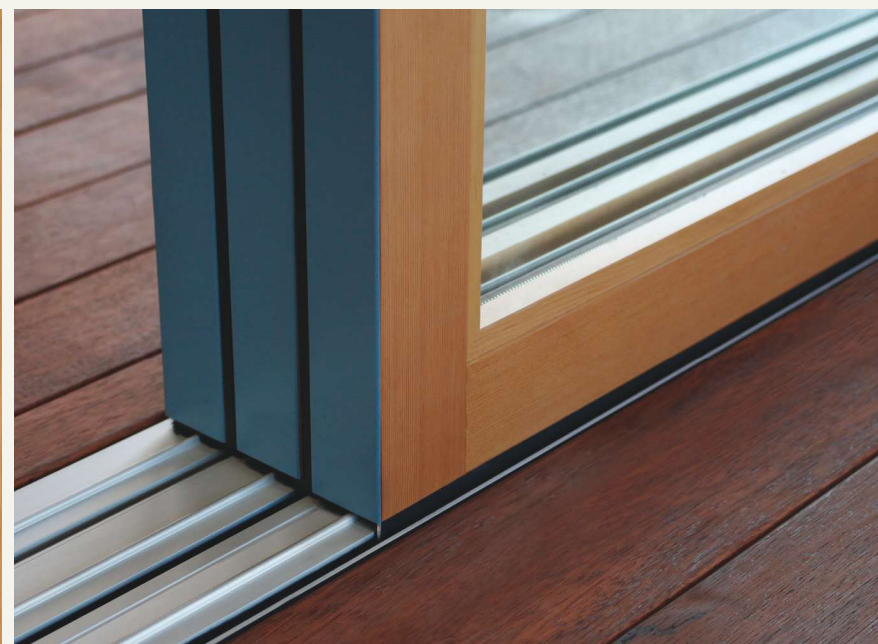
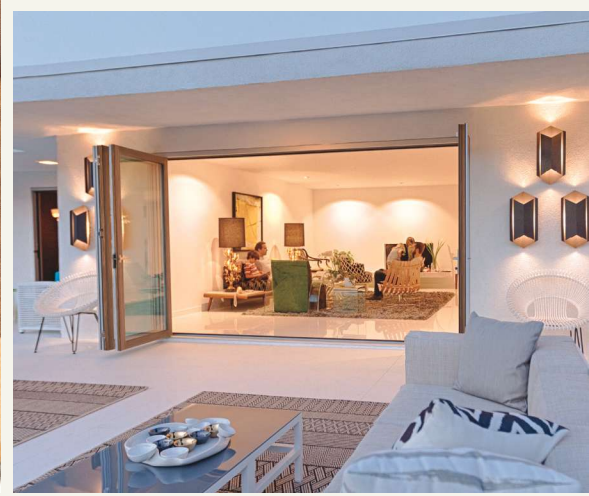
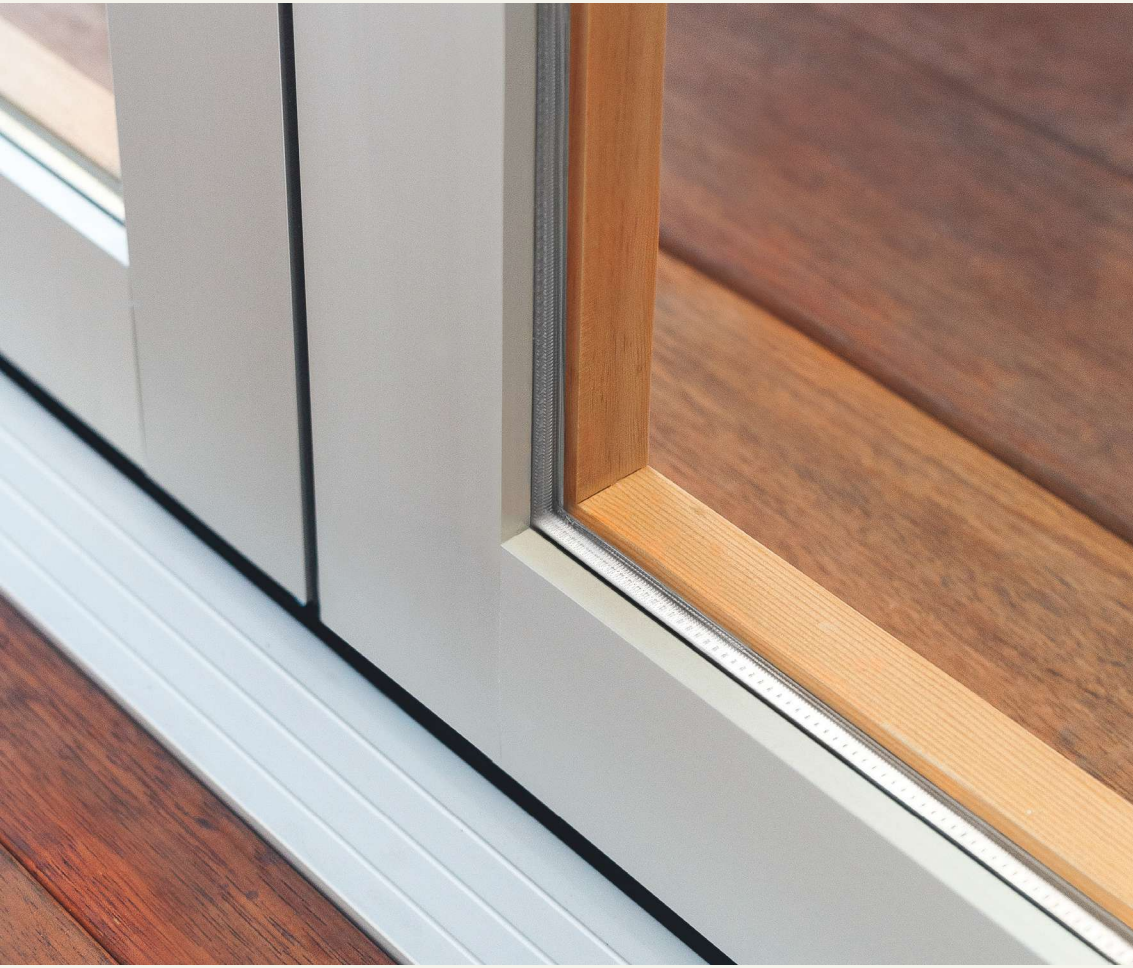
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CROFTON, MD.

Residential architects are used to congregating as a monoculture with each other—for learning, networking, and soaking in fresh inspiration in new locales. Last fall’s sold out Custom Residential Architects Network Symposium (CRAN) in Sonoma, Calif., was replete with such congregants, gathering continuing education credits and honing their design chops. CRAN, a group within the American Institute of Architects known as a knowledge community, focuses on the concerns of architects who practice high-end residential work. So, it was a bit of a surprise to find an executive from a high-end custom homebuilding company in attendance. In fact, it was rather intriguing. The builder was Horizon Builders of Crofton, Md., just outside of Washington, D.C., and they didn’t just send a representative, they were a sponsor of the event. The plot thickens.

Horizon is well known in Washington’s custom residential market as a builder focused on excellence, especially with respect to building performance and the execution of rigorous residential design. The company works at the very top of the food chain in the region, with more work and project inquiries than they can handle. But, as we learned from Susan Sapiro, the Horizon business development manager at the CRAN event, the company has set sights even higher. Not quite as high as world domination, perhaps, but certainly dominance as a builder of the biggest and most demanding houses in the eastern United States. Says Susan, “For us, it’s really been organic growth based on what we’ve achieved. It’s catapulted us into even bigger and larger projects.”

And the key ammunition in the catapult, the company believes, is their relationships with architects, the primary source of the very best projects. That’s



Photo: Paul Warchol Photography



Photo: James Kegley Photography



Photo: Jonah Koch, Kochfoto LLC

Above: Designed by Dynerman Architects PC, the Chalon Residence in Bethesda, Md., comprises an in-house basketball court and a dining room that seats 36. Far left: Joe Bohm and George Fritz. Left: Susan Sapiro.

what brought Susan to Sonoma in support of CRAN, along with the obvious attractions of Northern California wine country.

The new math for Horizon means they are no longer accepting jobs in the \$800,000 to \$3 million range, as they can’t underwrite the intensity of the company’s production process. Instead, the team is working on a \$40 million, multi-year project in upstate New York, and that’s the new high water mark it aspires to. It’s opened an office in Greenwich, Conn., to service the New York job and others in an area so rarefied, it makes D.C.’s wealth

seem like a poor relation. The leadership hopes to penetrate the suburban New York market, but also the top jobs in Manhattan. It’s not snobbery fueling Horizon’s push for more expensive and expansive projects, it’s the company’s drive for perfection and excellence in homebuilding.

As Joe Bohm, who runs the business side of Horizon, likes to say about his partner George Fritz, “He’s probably one of the top three builders east of the Mississippi. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of not just one thing, but of everything.” Everything construction related, that is. Like any

Horizon Builders

PROJECTS UNDERWAY: 6-7

HEADQUARTERS: Crofton, Md.

EMPLOYEES: 35

RELATED ENTITIES: Alliance Builders,
Horizon HouseWorks

PRINCIPALS: Joe Bohm; George Fritz;
Susan Sapiro



Photo: Robert C. Lautman

Above: Horizon Builders' talents extend from new modern work to additions and alterations to historic buildings, such as Muse Architects' St. Mary's Manor.

strong organization, the principals have complementary skills. "I can't swing a hammer," says Joe, "But George can't balance a checkbook." Susan has a Bachelor's degree in architecture and a Master's in engineering to balance out the mix.

That eye for the missing but critical piece is important. It drives the way the company runs construction projects, always searching for what could go wrong, how a system might fail, or, especially, how water might infiltrate the house—George's special calling. In business, the principals have weathered 30-plus years of construction storms, including the deep downturn in 2008 and subsequent years. There was a time when those \$800,000-to-\$3 million jobs kept them afloat, albeit on a starvation diet. It wasn't necessarily that the client base didn't have the money to build at the highest end anymore, but that they didn't

feel secure enough to loosen the purse strings.

Once the market returned, Horizon's management thought about how the company could operate more deliberately and strategically, capturing the very high-end jobs that were returning, pursuing even larger ones further afield, but also not completely relinquishing the smaller projects they might need if or when the market slows again. So, the principals looked at all the work they wanted to or needed to retain and their longtime employees and executives of the company, and they divided up the pie into separate entities. Joe and George lead a newly reminted Horizon; longtime executive Abe Sari now runs a new company called Alliance Builders that handles those \$3 million and under major projects, and Geary Deptula spearheads Horizon HouseWorks, a repair

and maintenance company that also takes on remodeling jobs under \$300,000 or so. The companies continue to reside in the same Crofton offices, and Joe and George retain a stake in each and contribute advice when called upon. "We are silent partners," says Joe.

The new structure allows each business to optimize its organization and processes to best serve its target market. "Now we can do projects from \$100 to \$50 million," says Joe. "We're a total construction solution."

Horizon employs the largest complement of people, but the companies can sub to each other—with special synergies between Horizon and Alliance. "We do our own insulation, waterproofing, flashings, framing, interior and exterior trim, and we have our own painters, plaster guys, excavation, demolition, and backfill," says



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PRO-FILE BUILD



Photo: Erik Kvalsik

Piedmont Farm, a new house designed by Muse Architects and built by Horizon, is already a timeless piece of architecture .

George. Backfill, too?

“Backfill is critical,” he says. “We can do our own grading plans and silt control. We have our own dumpsters in-house, and they’re on wheels. So if the neighbor complains, I can move it in two hours. They’re tagged, so I can park them on the street. And I can start each job on time. That’s customer service.”

Among the three companies, all those tasks add up to about 65 people. Horizon has about 35, Alliance and HouseWorks about 15 each. And, given the amount of work that’s coming in, they can’t grow fast enough—especially Alliance. “If Abe could hire 10 people right away, he would. He doesn’t even have a website, and he can’t stop the work from coming in,” says Joe.

Finding good people, particularly ones who can build at the Horizon level George

has set, is more than a challenge these days. “There’s just nobody out there,” says Joe. “They say they have 20 years’ experience, but what they really have is one year of experience 20 times over. And with the amount of detail that goes into our projects, that just doesn’t cut it.”

George concurs, “Our job is to build a damn near perfect house.” The ability to hit that mark repeatedly is what keeps architects coming back to Horizon and clients recommending them to friends. And that’s what will solidify the company’s position in those new markets they’re pursuing.

Says Joe, “We’re at the pinnacle of construction; everyone wants these artisan projects. But it’s so tough to do these; there’s no leeway; the details are crushing. But you have got to get them just right.”

—S. Claire Conroy



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FOR MORE INFO CIRCLE 14





On the Verge

A modest modern nests between two Blue Ridge peaks.

BY S. CLAIRE CONROY

ARCHITECT: RICHARD WILLIAMS ARCHITECTS
BUILDER: ABRAHAMSE & COMPANY BUILDERS
LOCATION: WOODVILLE, VA.

On an overcast day, a milky sky draped heavily over the mountains, pierced here and there by a tracery of hardwood branches shedding fall leaves. This is Virginia's Piedmont, which undulates gently from the portion of Blue Ridge Mountains within Shenandoah National Park. The Blue Ridge is part of the ancient Appalachian Mountain chain that contains the highest peaks east of the Mississippi. Rappahannock County, which abuts the central section of the park, is just 90 minutes southwest of Washington, D.C., but it feels a continent away. In Umbria, perhaps, or Tuscany.

The park and its peaks form a natural boundary for the county and a pristine backdrop for acres of rolling farm and conservation land. Some of it is home to natives whose forebears were pushed out of family homesteads when the park was established in the 1930s. And some of it is weekend getaways for Washingtonians seeking to disconnect from their high speed lives.

Equidistant from D.C., Charlottesville, and Richmond, Rappahannock is far enough away from the hustle of city life without being marooned from civilization. The nearest full-size grocery store and clearest cell phone signal are 30 minutes away, but a two-star Michelin restaurant (the famed Inn at Little Washington) is just a quick jaunt along scenic Route 211. Many weekenders, as Barbara and Matthew Black once were, are drawn to the unhurried pace of life, the protean



Above: The courtyard formed by the guest house (left) and the main house is planted with crabapple trees and kept closely groomed for visiting grandchildren.

beauty of the area, and the comradery of other likeminded city escapees. Some find they can't bring themselves to return to real life on Sunday nights anymore, and they decide to make the place their fulltime home.

The Blacks, however, followed a somewhat more original path to Rappahannock. Although they had a weekend cabin in Flint Hill within the county, when it came time to retire they first decamped across the country to Seattle. It was a total reboot of their lives—different scenery, different people, different everything. It was far away from everyone they knew in their Washington, D.C., lives—and far away from the all-consuming job Matthew was trying to leave behind. And they loved it. But they found they were beginning to put down roots even though the experiment was meant as a lark. They

decided they needed to be more “intentional” in their choice of where to settle permanently. And ultimately, given that the critical mass of their friends and family resides in the D.C. Metro area, they realized they had to return home. Not to just any home, but one that they made deliberately, intentionally, and with the utmost sensitivity and care.

“The kernel of the idea was our old cabin, a sweet little Hansel and Gretel place outside of Flint Hill,” says Matthew, of the hilly little village in Rappahannock. “We thought, wouldn't it be great to live here full time? Away from the city. And ground ourselves here where it's open and spacious.” Adds Barbara, “We still have our house on Capitol Hill, but we got to have a new life in coming out here—to live out the last season of our life in a rural setting.”



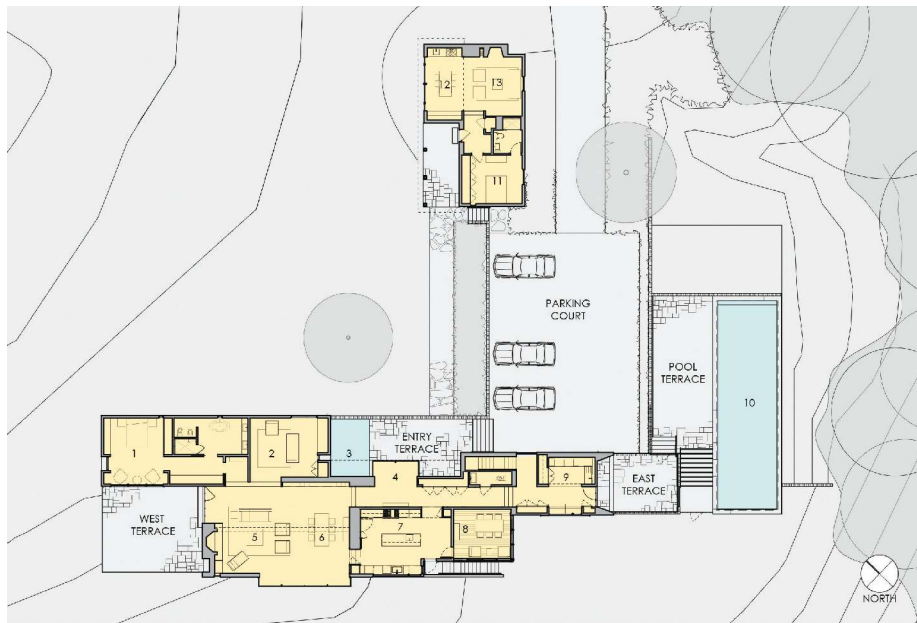
Above: The central axis of the house runs west to east linking views of two nearby mountains. Steps up from the great room lead to a study (left), a central hall, and the kitchen (right)

The Dream Job

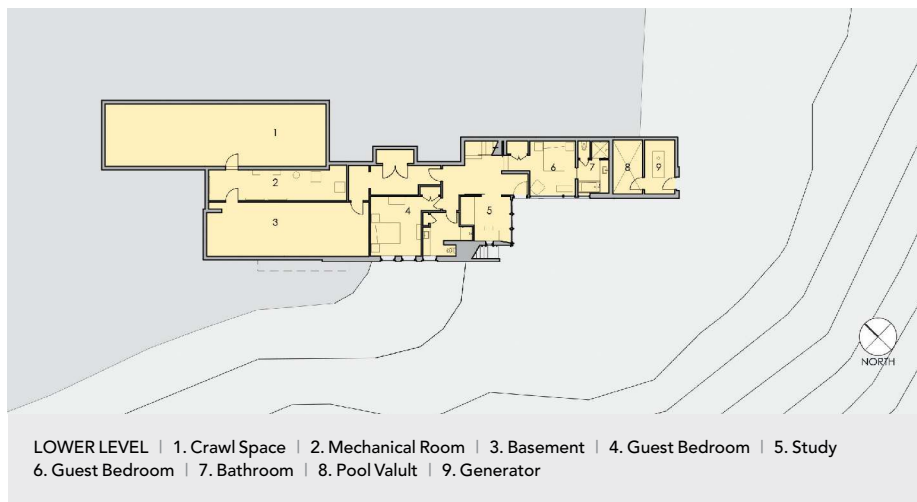
And so began what the architect, custom builder, and clients say was one of the best experiences of their lives. Really. Together, on a verge between two mountains and the meandering Thornton River, they created Fletchers Mill—a new, nearly 5,000 square foot house, a guest house, a studio building, and a swimming pool.

Even more surprising was that this “dream job” began at the tail end of the housing bust. Perhaps that wasn’t such a surprise, after all, says Washington, D.C.-based architect Richard Williams, FAIA, “How often is it that a project gets the full attention of the principal architect, the owner of the building company, and the complete focus of the clients?” This project was just big enough and exciting enough to capture everyone’s time and imagination—and it shows.

When the Blacks started thinking about the project, they were not wedded to a certain style. But they were drawn to a certain quality of building elements. They were sure, for instance, that they wanted steel windows, because they evoked for



UPPER LEVEL | 1. Master Bedroom | 2. Study | 3. Fountain | 4. Entry | 5. Living Room | 6. Dining | 7. Kitchen | 8. Screen Porch | 9. Mud/Laundry Room | 10. Pool | 11. Guest Bedroom | 12. Guest Dining Room | 13. Guest Living Room



LOWER LEVEL | 1. Crawl Space | 2. Mechanical Room | 3. Basement | 4. Guest Bedroom | 5. Study | 6. Guest Bedroom | 7. Bathroom | 8. Pool Vault | 9. Generator

Plans: Courtesy of Richard Williams Architects

them the old houses of Provence in France—practical, enduring, and romantic. “They’re Old World and they’re industrial,” says Barbara. “They were the one thing we really knew we wanted.”

Otherwise, they had no laundry list of must-have products or bells and whistles that Richard or builder Dale Abrahamse, of Abrahamse & Company in Charlottesville, Va., had to accommodate. Indeed, both Richard and Dale say they couldn’t have conjured more sympatico clients. And what was especially unusual was their openness

to exploration and improvisation. They were equally happy to have the house end up more traditional in style or more modern, or even a hybrid of the two. Fortunately, all are in Richard’s wheelhouse. He and his firm are just as adept at restoring and gently upgrading a house by Hugh Newell Jacobsen or Frank Lloyd Wright as they are renovating a centuries old equestrian estate. They’ve won awards for all of these, and for their new construction modern houses and their traditional work, which is often infused with subtle modern cues and crisply pared details.

Sites and Sounds

Where do you site a house when you have 45 acres of pasture land to choose from? It helps that there were a few givens on this land, which was carved out of a 92-acre property: the river at the south end, Red Oak Mountain to the east, Turkey Mountain to the west, and a driveway built by the Blacks to the north.

Says Richard, “The starting place for the design of the house was the screened porch. The screened porch is usually an afterthought but we said, no, let’s get that right first. Once we nailed that down, everything else kind of fell into place.” The screened porch aligns with the longest view, across a field of wildflowers to groomed meadow and beyond to the Thornton River, which winds along backyards, farmland, and towns throughout Rappahannock. After a heavy rain, a ribbon of fog hugs the river and traces its contours along the property. You can hear it burble from the porch on a dry day, or rush along after a heavy storm.

Once the screened porch was anchored, Richard targeted the mountain views to the east and west. The central axis of the house runs between those two close-by mountains, each a bit over 1,000 feet tall. A long corridor links the views, terminating at each end in floor-to-ceiling Hope’s Windows. It begins at the east terrace entrance and leads past the tidy mudroom, thick storage walls paneled in Douglas Fir, the front entrance (also framed in Hope’s and looking out to the courtyard), the kitchen, more storage walls, a hidden powder room, and ultimately spills down a couple of steps into the great room and over to the west terrace window wall. That storage wall continues into the great room as well, opening into cubes of bookshelves and artfully hiding air returns.

The articulation of the storage wall doors and great room bookshelves serves an aesthetic purpose, beyond challenging Dale’s finish carpenters. “We like introducing a little bit of stick-



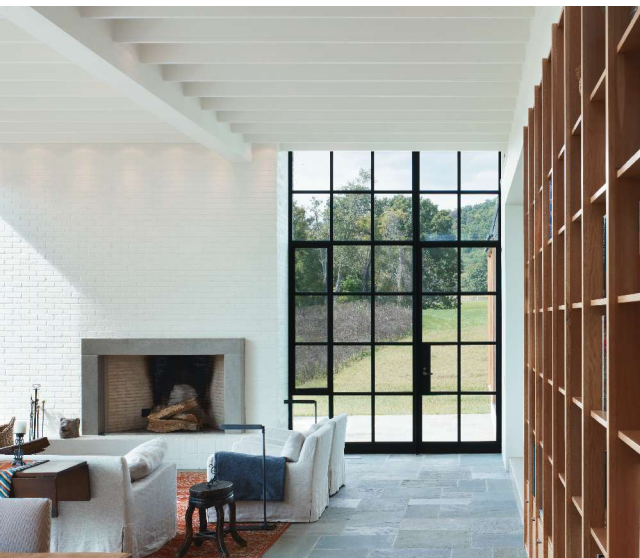
ing that catches light in a certain way,” says Richard. “All these offset pivot hinges kind of became a theme in the house. The thick walls are this substantial thing. The whole plane all the way from the mudroom door is lined up like a gun site to that notch in the meadow to the field. And holding that line so that these slight little protrusions, like the master bedroom window or this bookcase, deviate from that pure plane is really what the house is all about. But overall, we wanted the house to be simple, intimate, and legible.”

The Extra Mile

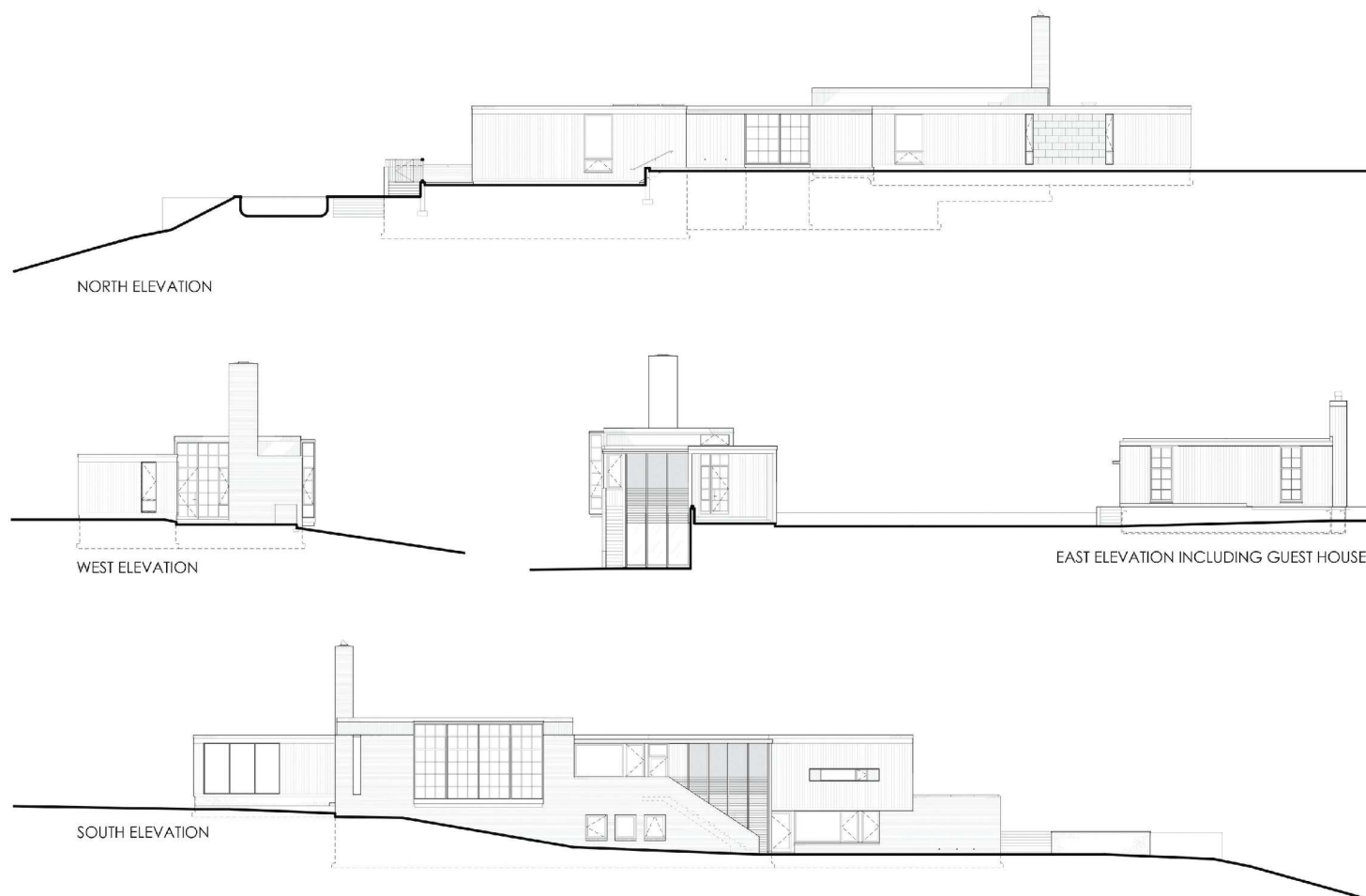
Such tight design tolerances are tough to execute under the best of circumstances, when a builder comes from an already demanding market and has many seasoned subs close by to choose among. But when a builder from a considerably smaller market has to put together a team that can go the distance—55 miles each way to be exact—that’s another hurdle to overcome. Here’s where the slow economy gave Dale a boost. “We had a little hesitancy in the beginning about whether we could get the subcontractors we wanted on the project,” says Dale. “Because of the timing, we were able to get our best subs. Everybody was very interested in working on a project like this.”

It also helps that Richard thinks of custom builders as true partners on the project. He had worked with Dale before on another lovely rural modern house in

Above left: A large kitchen window overlooks a wildflower meadow and the meandering Thornton River. A hidden door in the threshold to the great room conceals a bar. Above: Walls part for a sliver of light and views in the great room.



Clockwise from the top: The bank barn and studio; the east-facing screened porch; view from the mudroom entrance; steps from the parking court to the front entrance; the great room and view to Turkey Mountain.



Courtesy of Richard Williams Architects

Madison County, closer to Charlottesville, and convinced him this project was worth going the extra mile. “I listened to a lot of books on tape,” Dale quips. But more seriously, he adds, “Richard is such a sensitive person, and he just wants to deliver a great product. He’s always open to listening to ideas. We like to be involved in the design. We don’t affect the aesthetics much, but there’s so much design that happens behind the scenes—architects can’t draw every connection and every move.”

Nor does modern design leave any margin for error. “Personally, I like contemporary design,” says Dale, despite the added difficulty it may cause his team. “Here, the sheetrock goes right down to the floor—there’s no baseboard, no shoe molding, no nothing. We always try to frame as though we will be finishing it. That’s the kind of work we like to do. You can’t just trim over bad framing. We do plenty of traditional work as well. Good workmanship is good workmanship.”

Right From the Start

Good workmanship begins at the foundation, of course, and if that goes in straight and true framers don’t have to com-

pensate for problems. For this project, Dale recommended a system he’s used before with great success: Superior Walls of Central Virginia, a precast, insulated concrete wall system made in the factory and craned into place onsite. The company touts its 5,000-plus psi concrete mix as moisture resistant enough not to require “additional damp-proofing.” Says Richard, “They do amazing shop drawings. The most unique thing about them is they are their own footing. It saved a lot of money and it saved a massive amount of time. You do your slab almost like a garage floating above, and then there’s an internal perforated drain. The precision was so much better than cast in place.”

“We’ve used it extensively. I think it’s an excellent system,” says Dale. “This was the most complex installation that I’ve worked with, and the most complex the sales rep had done. With careful excavation and working closely with the installation, we got it pretty much nailed. Of course, we still poured a lot of concrete out there—retaining walls and concrete floors.” Indeed, the floors in the lower level are polished concrete, with radiant heating.

Fletchers Mill

ARCHITECT: Richard Williams Architects, Washington, D.C.; Richard Williams, FAIA, principal in charge; Justin Donovan, AIA, project architect.

BUILDER: Abrahamse & Company Builders, Charlottesville, Va.

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Gregg Bleam Landscape Architect, Charlottesville

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: 1200 Architectural Engineers, Alexandria, Va.

PROJECT SIZE: 4,900 square feet (main house); 850 square feet (guest house)

SITE SIZE: 45 acres

CONSTRUCTION COST: \$350 a square foot (approx.)

PHOTOGRAPHY: Tom Arban, Toronto

KEY PRODUCTS

WINDOWS: Kolbe & Kolbe, Hope's Windows, VELUX Skylights

PRECAST FOUNDATION: Superior Walls of Central Virginia

INTERIOR DOORS: TruStile Doors

DOOR HARDWARE: HOPPE, Colonial Bronze, Sun Valley Bronze

TILE: Daltile, Design Tile

PAINTS AND STAINS: Benjamin Moore, Farrow & Ball, Sansin, Coronado

KITCHEN APPLIANCES: Wolf (wall ovens and cooktop); Sub-Zero (refrigerator); Miele (dishwasher);

SINKS AND FAUCETS: Blanco, Grohe, Duravit

LIGHTING: Contrast Lighting, Bruck, STENG LICHT, Tech Lighting

LIGHTING CONTROL AND SHADES: Lutron

GEOTHERMAL HVAC: WaterFurnace

The site's gently rolling topography allowed the team to create that lower level mostly above ground. It contains Barbara's office overlooking the meadow; secondary bedrooms, each with an en suite bathroom; extra storage; and an impressive utility room. "Even with the amount of glass and steel window frames we had, we made a great effort to make this house energy efficient," says Dale. "It has a high performance, geothermal heat pump, whole house dehumidifier and humidifier, radiant in-floor heating on both floors, and an ERV. The house is very tight, but has great air."

Aging in Grace

Tucking in that lower level took the program burden off the first level and eliminated the need for a second floor. "You don't need a whole lot of topography to nest a two-story house," Richard explains. "It's about a six or eight foot drop that we accentuated a little bit on one side and graded a bit on another to get a full story difference, out of what for most people would be a really gentle slope."

"Nesting" the lower level allowed the house to stay low in the landscape, giving marquee billing to the mountains and natural setting. "We wanted a house with modesty and humility," says Barbara.

The main level holds all the rooms Barbara and Matthew need for daily life, enabling them to age gracefully in place. Their master bedroom is at the west end of the house, overlooking the west terrace and wildflower field through one set of windows and Turkey Mountain through another. The room steps up and back from the great room. So it's close by but still at a discreet remove.

Right: The pool rises four feet above grade and reaches into the meadow view. A pool equipment room, clad in copper panels, tucks under the house.

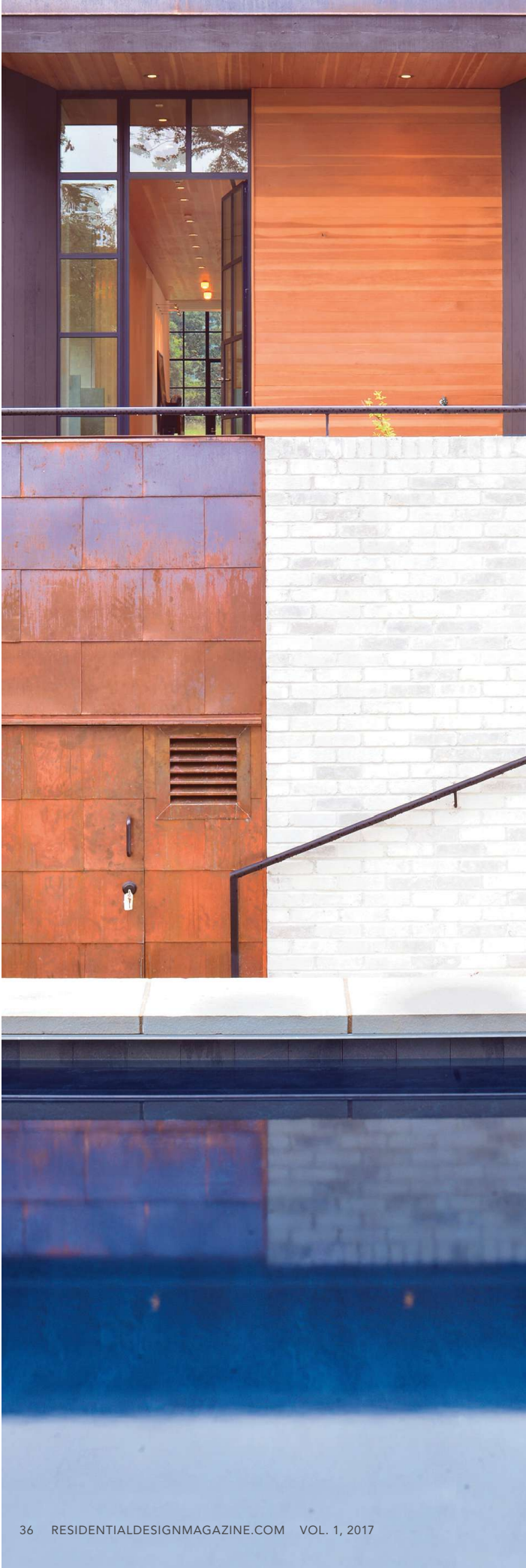
Also a couple of steps up from the great room is a sitting room/office with an elegant Doug fir paneled barn door. It slides closed to provide visual and acoustic privacy for occupants, or open to borrow the great room's window wall of light and views. The room doubles as an additional bunk room for house parties. And, like, the master, it too has a secondary view to another lovely part of the property—in this case, the crabapple tree-lined courtyard designed by Gregg Bleam, who apprenticed with renowned landscape architect Dan Kiley.

Everywhere he could manage it, Richard introduced another window or skylight, ensuring that every important room draws in multiple sources of light and landscape. Interspersed with all those the steel windows are wood-clad windows by Kolbe & Kolbe. Part of what makes his modernism so warm and welcoming are all the carefully placed natural materials. The main hallway has Doug fir ceilings and FSC white oak floors; the screened porch also uses Doug fir. The exterior cladding is western red cedar coated with Benjamin Moore's Iron Mountain. Not quite gray, brown, or black, but somehow all of those colors at once, the house takes on the hue of surrounding trees. Elsewhere, lock-seam copper cladding begins its metamorphosis from pristine to patina.

Compound Interest

The main house is about 4,900 square feet and a showstopper in many respects, especially as viewed along its southern exposure where its full size and complexity are discernable. But a tiny companion dwelling gets nearly as much attention from visitors. At just 850 square feet, the guest house sits perpendicular to its big brother and





Left: An earlier photo shows the copper weathering. Copper, Douglas Fir, blue stone, and cedar will patina over time. Right: A view across the wildflower field takes in the full breadth and drama of the house.

completes the boundary of the parking court.

Its program is pared to essentials—an open living/dining/kitchen, a bedroom and full bath, and a covered terrace. The main house largely turns its back on the guest building, so it is also reasonably private. Barbara’s sister, Darien Reece, lives in it full time. “Everyone wants my little house,” she says. A gifted painter, she also shares the sweet board-and-batten studio building in the wildflower field with Barbara and Matthew. She is the permanent artist-in-residence.

“The guest house has the same palette as the main house. It’s really a miniature version,” says Richard. “It’s a little bit inspired by the Jefferson dorm rooms on the quad at the University of Virginia”—right down to the cozy Rumford fireplace and tidy stack of wood for cool country evenings.

The main house, guest house, and parking area, which is lowered behind a retaining wall, form the entry courtyard. It’s here Gregg Bleam planted the crabapple orchard, and it’s an area the Blacks can keep closely mowed for the grandchildren to play. They’re all under four right now, but a principal delight is the prospect of them romping freely across the acreage.

“We weren’t looking to do a fabulous landscape,” says Matthew. “We just wanted to get around the structure of the houses to the road and the trees. We planted more than 150 trees, but you would never know it—to fill in the gaps.”

On the other side of the parking area, just off the east terrace and behind a trained hedge of hornbeam, is the swimming pool. Because of the topography, it’s partially above ground behind a retaining wall. It has the best view on the property—across the meadow to the river. Propped on elbows at the deep end, the Blacks often gaze out across the expanse and watch the wildlife pass by.

Across the wildflower field is a roughly mowed path that leads to the studio building. Its pitched roof suggests an existing building that was found on the property and restored. Board-and-batten siding is barn red for a reason: It’s also a bank barn with a lower level workshop space and room to park the tractor in winter. On the main level is a big open area used for Darien’s painting, Michael’s photography work, Barbara’s crafts, and community gatherings. There’s a small kitchenette and a half bath, so it can function as a rudimentary guest house as well.

Living Well

The mountains in the Blue Ridge were once as tall as the Rockies, but nearly 500 million years of erosion has worn down their tallest peaks. Still they retain their dignity as an ever-changing stage for displays of climate and shifting sea-



“We started this house in the downturn, but I have to say I’m a little wistful about that period. The whole experience was such a treat.”


—Richard Williams

sons and the curiosities of country life.

Beginning in the fall and continuing through very early spring, the Rappahannock Hunt crosses the Fletchers Mill property, the riders looking natty and anachronistic in their scarlet coats. Suddenly, it’s Le Corbusier meets Downton Abbey, and the machine for living gives way to the living well.

“We started this house in the downturn,” says Richard. “But I have to say that I’m a little wistful about that period, because we are so busy now. This was a good time for me and for our office to devote focus to this project. The whole experience was such a treat.”

And for Dale, who has just recently retired (a move the housing bust put on hold for a few years; see Master Class on page 50 for that story), the project takes on a heightened poignancy. “This was one of the most enjoyable experiences of my career,” he says. “What was gratifying to me is I always thought Matthew and Barbara really appreciated what we were doing and believed we were going to deliver a superior product.

“I think a lot of people start out thinking a house is going to make them happy. But happy people end up being happy with their house. Great projects take great clients.” 

Great Prospects

Three atypical floor plans put views front and center.

BY S. CLAIRE CONROY



The Public/Private House

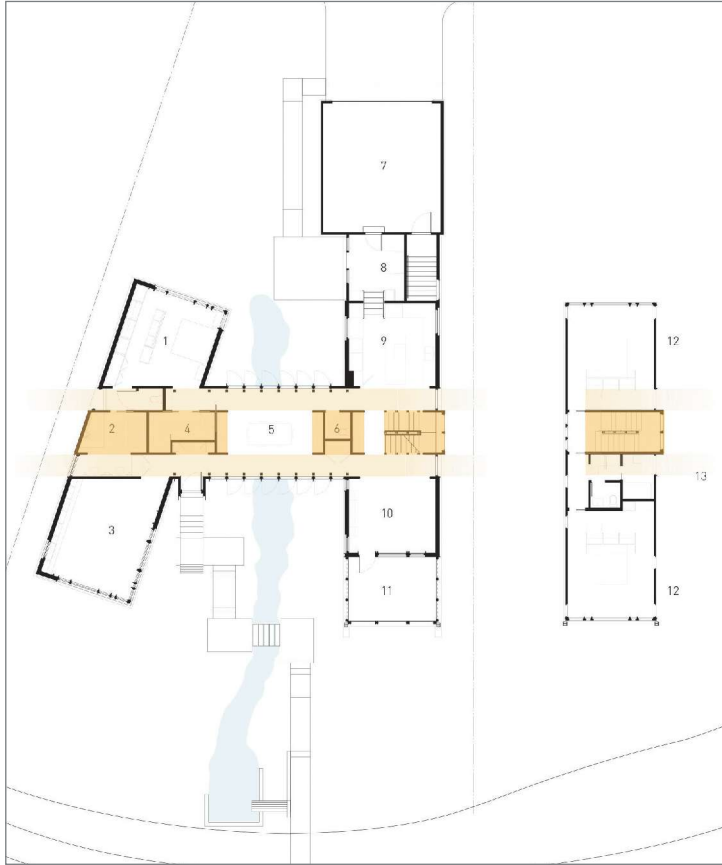
It's no surprise that David O'Brien Wagner, AIA, knows how to get the most out of a problematic building lot. His professional pedigree includes time at Cutler Anderson Architects and Olson Kundig in Seattle, firms known for highly specific, artful responses to site conditions and client desires. And his current firm, SALA Architects, has a distinguished history

of honoring Minnesota's craft-intensive building traditions and human-centered design. For this house on one of the more popular and proximate of Minnesota's 10,000 lakes, his biggest challenge was to harness the energy and excitement of this beautiful recreational area, while still insulating its occupants from harsher aspects of the hustle and bustle.

When the clients first approached

David, it was with a major remodel to a 1950s split-level house on the property. But David, proceeding with caution, decided to run some tests. "Based on another experience, I thought we should get some soil borings. We found nothing but organic soils to about 100 feet deep. That led us to say, if we're investing a certain amount of money, we'd better start from scratch. That way, we could make sure we had the proper

FLOOR PLAN



1. Couple's Bedroom
2. Couple's Bathroom
3. Living Room
4. Laundry
5. Dining Room
6. Half Bath
7. Garage
8. Mudroom
9. Kitchen
10. Family Room
11. Screen Porch
12. Bedroom
13. Bathroom



Opposite and top: Pulling apart the floor plan enabled view corridors where they were needed and facilitated a second level for guest rooms over one of the “bars” of the house. *Above:* The lake, with the house peering from behind the trees.

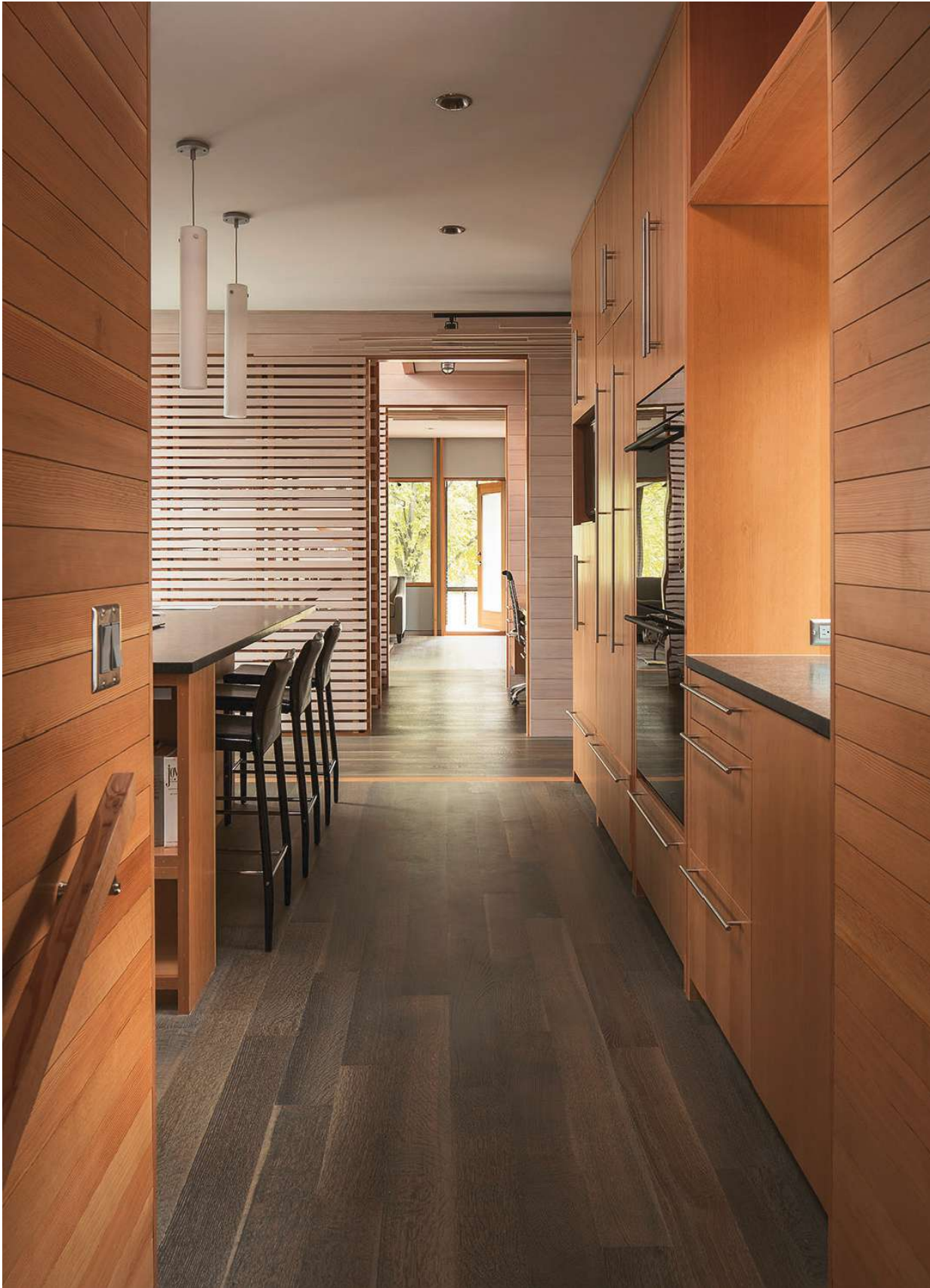
piers underneath the foundation.”

Rebooting the entire project made sense on many levels. Primary was capturing the long view across the parkway and down the length of the lake—not just for one principal room, but for all the important rooms in the house. And that was the catch. The clients did not want an open plan—no massive kitchen/living/dining arena. “It was liberating,” says David, “but perplexing.”

So, there was no solving the view challenge once and for all with “one big expressive space,” as David typically does for his clients. It had to be solved again and again—for the formal living room, the formal dining room, and the screened porch. Public rooms had to have the big view at the front, private rooms needed a measure of seclusion and protection at the rear. The pie-shaped lot seemed at first an impediment to the program goals, but ultimately was a facilitator. “The house unfolded as this idea that by going with the wedge shape, we could get way more exterior perimeter at the front. Lots of corners and ways of viewing out,” he explains. “And that led to the idea, what if the house was a couple of bars pushed to the edges?”

The other twist was a natural water channel right through the center of the property. It either needed rerouting or harnessing. David’s solution did the latter: a center “bridge” element connects the two splayed bars and serves as a view corridor for the formal dining room. “Jim Cutler did a house that was essentially a bridge. I was very inspired by that.”

David wanted to leave the bridge pristine, but Minnesota codes required him to locate the front door there. “They don’t let you put a front door on the side



Left: View from the rear entrance through the kitchen. The clients wanted a kitchen separated from entertaining areas.



Above: The dining bridge viewed from the rear of the house. The lake is visible underneath. Right: A screened front porch overlooks the hustle and bustle of lake activity.



Lake City House

ARCHITECT: David O’Brien Wagner, AIA, LEED AP, SALA Architects, Minneapolis
BUILDER: Mike Hartman, Hartman Homes, Inc., Hudson, Wisc.
INTERIOR DESIGNER: SALA Architects
PROJECT SIZE: 4,300 square feet
SITE SIZE: .25 acre
CONSTRUCTION COST: Withheld
PHOTOGRAPHY: Troy Theis, Troy Theis Photography

KEY PRODUCTS

WINDOWS: Loewen
ROOFING: Certaineed, Firestone
SIDING: James Hardie Artisan
DOORS: Simpson Door Company
CABLE RAIL: Feeney
WALL TILE: Daltile
PAINTS AND STAINS: Sherwin-Williams, Cabot, Rubio Monocoat
CABINETRY: Legacy Cabinets
FAUCETS: Grohe
TOILETS: Toto

of the house,” he says. So, he tucked it into the bridge and designed a light connecting stair, almost like a gangplank to a floating vessel. An elevated foundation and skillful landscaping by Damon Farber, FASLA, nudges water where it needs to go.

Inside the house, rooms are layered in Douglas fir trim, both whitewashed and natural. Floors are rift and quartered oak. Structure is exposed or lightly screened.

“The screen overhead in the circulation corridors and in the stairwells suggests movement,” says David. All of it carefully crafted by Mike Hartman’s team at Hartman Homes. “There was nothing about the house that was traditional,” says Mike. “David drew details that had never been done before.”

But Mike is undaunted by such challenges. “We came in at the concept stage

of plans. We’re not afraid to take those sketches and guesstimate what it might cost. And we came in at or about what the clients were expecting.”

To hit the numbers, Mike relies on estimator Chad Maack. Says Mike, “We really had to be thinking far in advance on this job, with its level of precision. There wasn’t an outlet placed without a bunch of thought.” And that is as it should be.

The Upside-Down House

Seattle's housing market is one of the strongest in the nation, and developing there is not for the faint of heart. But Kevin Eckert, LEED AP, had a few super powers at his disposal, chief among them was the ability to design and build the project himself. As founder and partner in the Seattle design/build firm Build LLC, Eckert has spearheaded many custom projects and a few speculative projects as well, both single-family and multifamily. His firm views the speculative projects as an opportunity to research and document ideas about planning, construction, and energy management. And many of them end up as housing for members of the staff.

Indeed, when Kevin found the 5,000-square-foot piece of land that became this house, Case Study 2014, he and his family were living in the Park Modern, a multifamily project developed by the firm during the housing boom in 2007. But he, his wife, and his growing sons were increasingly pinched in tight quarters and were ready for a bit more room. It was still in the depths of the housing bust when this overlooked urban lot became available. "It's in a very intriguing neighborhood," says Kevin. "One with untapped density potential near one of the new light rail lines in northeast Seattle. It's going to be robust."

It was the right time and right place for Kevin to build a house for his family. To make the most of the elevated site, which had the potential for commanding views of the city, Kevin determined quickly they needed to flip the floor plan. The views were only available from upper levels, so he placed a future apartment space and garage on the street level, four bedrooms and



Above: Hidden at garage level is a future dwelling unit. Bedrooms are on the second level and living spaces on the third. Left: The stair wall was custom painted by a family friend. The wood gridded cabinet conceals media storage.

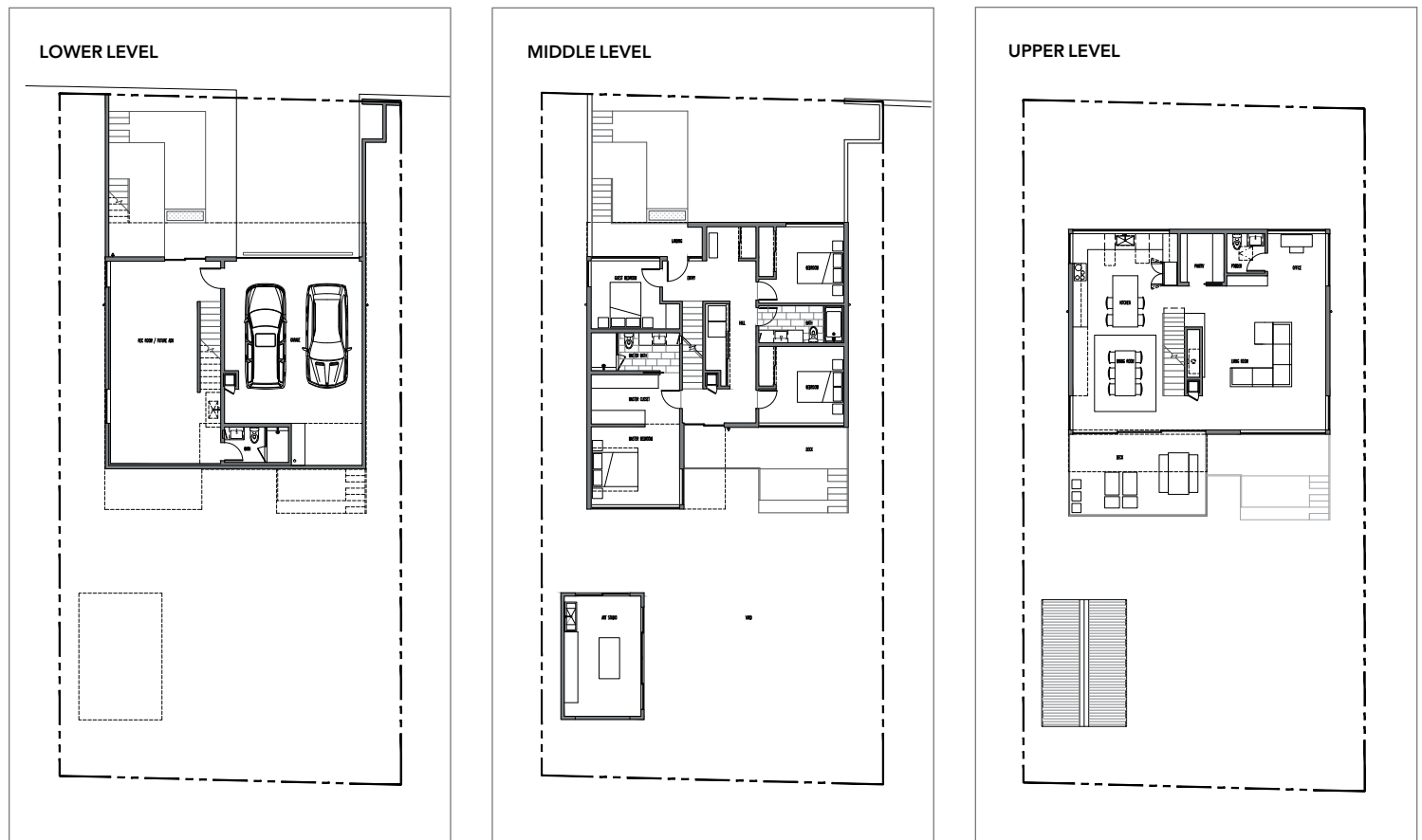


“We thought, ‘hey, we make an effort to go on 10-mile hikes, it seems silly to worry about climbing a few stairs.’”
—Kevin Eckert



Top: The best views are from the roof deck: The panorama reaches to the Olympic Mountains. Code dictated the green roof to control water run off. *Above:* Stacked stairs reaching up to the roof effectively ventilate the house in warm weather. *Right:* Kevin converted an existing garage into an art studio for his wife, Erika. Footprint and roof pitch had to stay.

FLOOR PLANS



main entry on the second level, and the living/dining/kitchen space on the third level. There's also a terrace off the dining area and a roof terrace at the top of the house. "The roof terrace was something we were going to just frame, but you could see 360 degrees—you could see mountains. So, we decided to just get it done," says Eckert. "We're happy we did."

The downside of the plan? The uphill climb to enter the house. Imagine carrying groceries up multiple flights of stairs (city codes don't allow dumbwaiters or other conveyances.) "We thought, 'hey, we make effort to go on 10-mile hikes, it seems silly

to worry about climbing a few stairs,'" says Kevin. "But we did try to make a lot of the climb disappear—to make that entry experience enjoyable. There's a transition from stone to concrete to warm wood to a glowing front door. Even though we usually go for a darker wood palette in our houses, we decided everything here needed to be light."

Another part of the project was an art studio for Kevin's wife, Erika. An old garage on the property was converted for the purpose. Not only does it allow Erika to work from home, it also supplies some privacy for the backyard.

Since this project was a research experiment of sorts, Kevin ruminates a bit on lessons learned. Here, he placed the stair at the center of the house to create a division of function for living spaces on the top floor. The pro is that the roof hatch acts as a heat chimney, effectively ventilating the house in hot weather. But Kevin thinks a fully open plan would be more commodious and is designing a current project with the stair to the side. The other do-over is no human door to the garage. The result, says Kevin, "is we use the garage door all the time to get into the house. We're fixing that in the next project as well."



Case Study 2014

ARCHITECT/BUILDER: Kevin Eckert, LEED AP, BUILD LLC; Charles Caldwell, project designer; Bart Gibson, project manager, Seattle

PROJECT SIZE: 3,442 square feet, including garage; 198 square foot art studio

SITE SIZE: 5,000 square feet

CONSTRUCTION COST: \$237 a square foot

PHOTOGRAPHY: BUILD LLC

KEY PRODUCTS

WINDOWS: Marlin Windows

SLIDING DOORS: La Cantina, Milgard

ROOFING: Esary

SIDING: Alex panels

KITCHEN APPLIANCES: Jenn-Air, Imperial

LAUNDRY APPLIANCES: Electrolux

FAUCETS AND FIXTURES: Kohler, Brizio, Graff, Toto

CABINET HARDWARE: Mockett

DOOR HARDWARE: Karcher Design

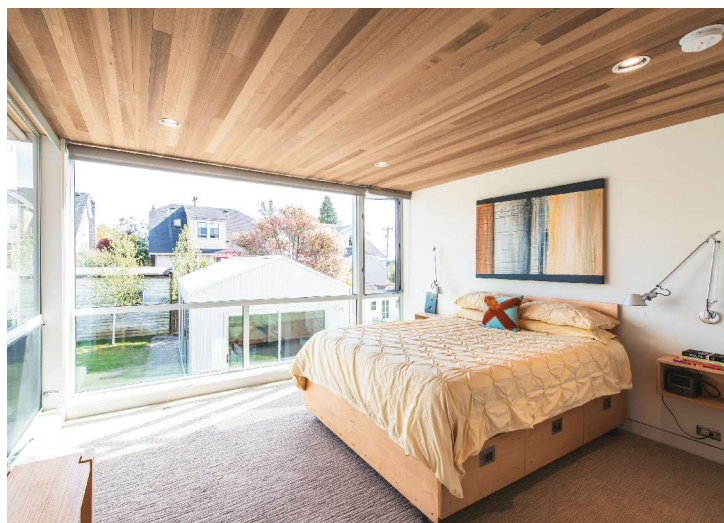
LIGHTING: Philips Lightolier, Juno, Tech Lighting, Artemide, Thomas Lighting, Aamsco

BATHROOM COUNTERS: PentalQuartz

TILE: Parc Botticino, Daltile

PAINT: Sherwin-Williams

Above: La Cantina doors open to expand the living/dining space onto the terrace. After-market, motorized screens control heat gain and light when needed. Right: Kevin aligned the dining table placement with the kitchen island for large dinner parties.



Left: Although the firm tends to favor a darker palette, Kevin felt the house needed the warmth of lighter woods, such as the light stained oak shown in the master bedroom.



At the front, the house is a lightly detailed box. At the back, it's essentially a big screened porch.

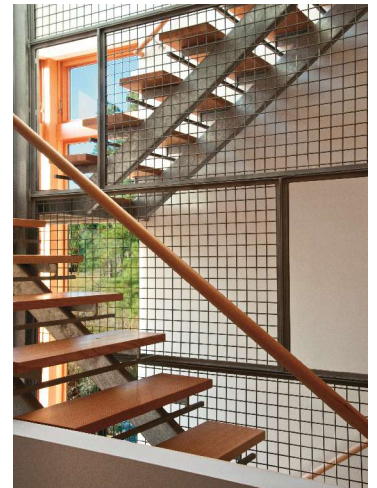
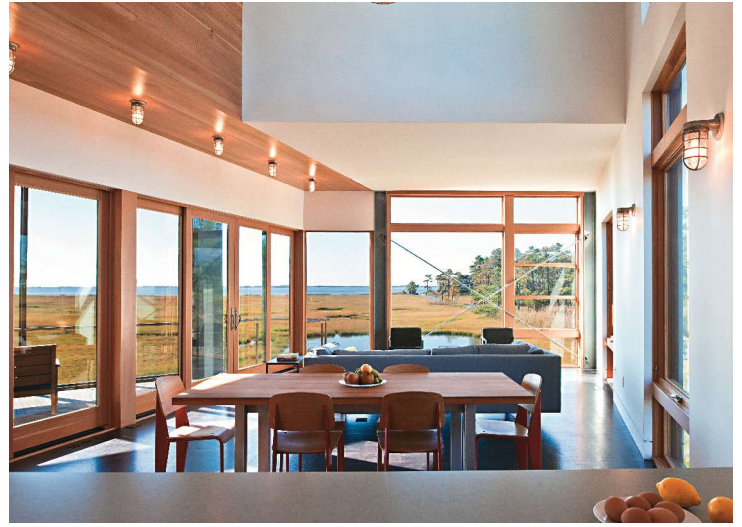
A House of Her Own

Rehoboth, Del., is a popular Atlantic oceanside escape for major cities along Interstate 95 from Washington, D.C., to Philadelphia. And for 30 years Boardwalk Builders, lead by Patty McDaniel, has built and remodeled some of the best custom beach homes in the area. But, until recently, Patty herself lived five miles outside of town in “a completely boring ranch house,” she says. “Although I did put in a nice kitchen.” After all those years of toiling in a vacation mecca, it was her dream to have her own house on the water. She says, simply, “I wanted a place with a view and with a breeze.”

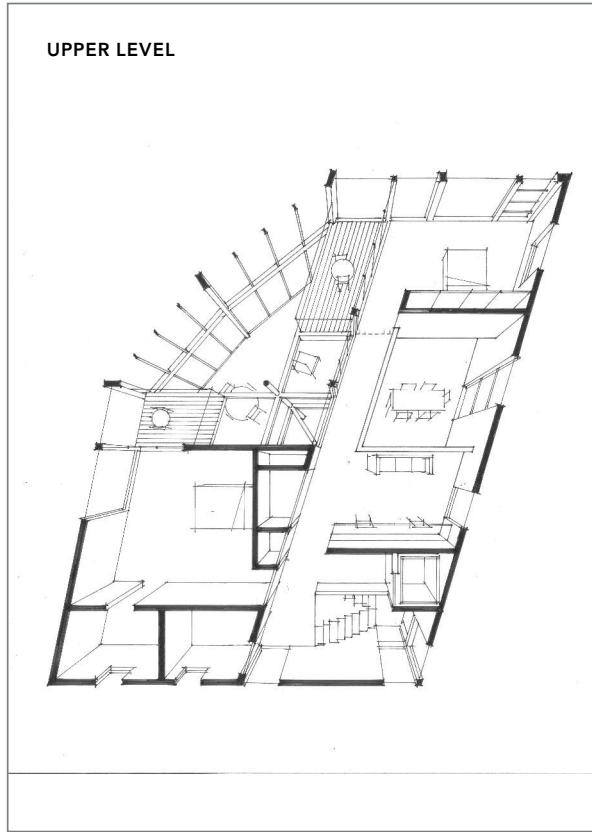
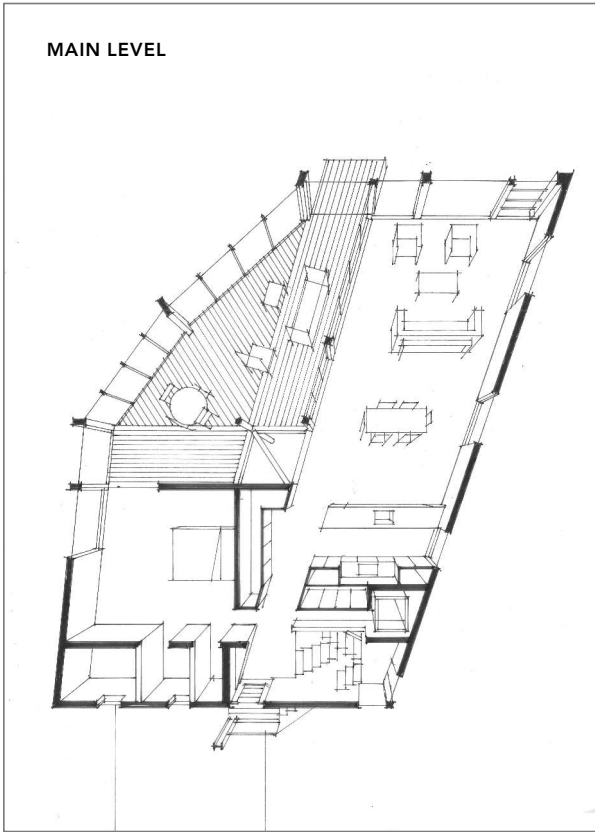
At long last, the opportunity arrived. She found a slot of buildable land abutting a marsh and leading out to the ocean beyond. It was a very tricky site, and making the most of it was going to take the efforts of a talented architect. Patty knew exactly whom to call: Mark McInturff, her friend and sometime collaborator of more than 20 years. “Mark’s work has this internal consistency to it. We work really well together,” she says.

The admiration is mutual. “Patty is just so savvy and smart and ahead of the game,” says Mark. “She works amid the cowboy builders on the coast, but she went to M.I.T. She’s just a gem of a person.” Mark helped keep the fees affordable, broad stroking the design and handing it off to Patty to make it work, and answering questions or revising as needed. “Great execution doesn’t require lots of money,” he says. “It requires a great relationship. If I could do this kind of thing for the rest of my life, I’d be happy.”

Mark took Patty’s request for breezes seriously, and the design is essentially a



Top: The great room overlooks an ever-changing canvas of marsh and ocean. *Left:* A breakaway garage level protects precious space from storm surge, as do the natural wetland grasses. *Above:* Exposed structure celebrates the building arts.



Below: The great room connects to and borrows views from a double-height screened porch. An office loft for Patty is above the kitchen area.





Above: The height of the screened porch keeps it from darkening interior rooms. Bedrooms on the upper level have their own terraces within the porch.

double-height screened porch with a house attached to it. The ground level is break-away, in case of storm surge. The second level is the main floor containing all the rooms Patty needs for daily life, including the master. A third level comprises a loft workspace for her use and a couple of bedrooms for visiting family, each with its own terrace onto the screened porch. (Like box seats in a theater, says Mark.)


Although from the street side the house looks like a fairly simple box, it was no breeze to build. “The wetlands official came out and staked where we could build. And we ended up with a shape that was 17

degrees from the orthogonal, so everything was 17 degrees off square,” says Patty, still reeling somewhat from the memory. “That was mind boggling. And because we were dealing with contemporary and structural elements left exposed, everything had to fit together just so.”

Those exposed elements were functional and aesthetic at the same time. “Lateral bracing and structural steel is very important that close to the ocean, but also when you build with a builder you want to show off their stuff,” says Mark, who was not trying just to bedevil his old friend.

Even with all that steel, the house feels

the weather. Says Patty, “It’s a box in the wind. I don’t have any rooms without windows.” There are no regrets, though. It was her dream to live in the elements: “One of my favorite times is after dark when there’s a moon. It’s like you’re there in the marsh. Osprey, eagles, deer, fox—there’s a constant parade of wildlife right in my yard. No photos can do justice to what it feels like emotionally to be in that space.”

“The grasses are in constant motion, like a sea of grass. The calmness of the place is just amazing,” says Mark. “It might be the most beautiful site I’ve ever built on.” 

McDaniel House

ARCHITECT: Mark McInturff, FAIA, McInturff Architects, Bethesda, Md,

BUILDER: Boardwalk Builders, Rehoboth, Del.

PROJECT SIZE: 3,048 square feet, including screened porch

SITE SIZE: 6,822 square feet

PHOTOGRAPHER: Julia Heine, McInturff Architects

KEY PRODUCTS

WINDOWS: Marvin Windows

SIDING: Boral TruExterior

SHINGLES: SBC

RAILINGS: AGS Stainless

KITCHEN APPLIANCES: Sub-Zero, Fisher & Paykel, Bosch

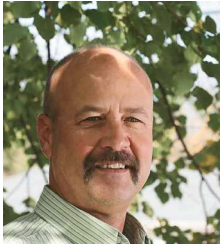
FAUCETS AND FIXTURES: Kohler, Toto, Moen, American Standard, Delta

COUNTERTOPS: Silestone

DOOR HARDWARE: Omnia

LIGHTING: Philips Stonco, Philips Roughlyte

PAINT: Sherwin-Williams



Top: David Abrahamse.
Above: Ted Marss.
Right and opposite:
Mountain Estate,
Madison, Va., by Richard Williams Architects.



Portraits: Courtesy of Abrahamse & Company Builders; photos: Courtesy of Richard Williams Architects

Successful Succession

ABRAHAMSE & COMPANY BUILDERS
CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA.

When the Great Recession hit the housing industry, it blew up a lot of plans. One of them was custom builder Dale Abrahamse's carefully conceived plan to retire. He had already groomed his successors, including second-in-command Ted Marss, and then came 2008. Instead of a graceful exit, he found himself having to double down to keep the business viable. Not only was he chasing projects again, he was also managing them hands-on. Both of these circumstances offer important lessons in building company management.

Based in Charlottesville, Va., Abrahamse & Company Builders, has been known for high-end custom residential and light commercial construction for more than 40 years. It's one of the go-to high-end builders in the scenic university town, nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The company's specialty is special houses, ones that are rigorous in architecture and in building science. Abrahamse has built projects under the most demanding perfor-

mance standards, including Passive House, EarthCraft, and the American Lung Association's Healthy House program, to name a few. But even the houses that don't carry certifications or other labels typically employ advanced building technologies of some sort.

Always stretching to meet new goals and to learn new techniques and systems has kept the company at the top of its game and at top of mind for architects. But it demands Herculean effort on the part of every employee and every sub to work at such a high level so much of the time. There's a ton of field work to get everything installed or built correctly, of course, and hours of back office time as well, sourcing and pricing materials.

One project that helped Abrahamse & Co. pull out of the economic slump was the Case Study house on page 26. The Fletchers Mill project is in Rappahannock, Va., more than 1½ hours away from Charlottesville along winding mountain roads. So



Abrahamse & Company

EMPLOYEES: 30

PROJECTS UNDERWAY: 38

TARGET MARKET: \$800,000 to \$2 million projects

PERCENTAGE RESIDENTIAL VS. COMMERCIAL: 50/50

even in a recession, the economics had to work. The project had to be large enough in scope and quality to support Abrahamse's attention. And it was: more than 6,000 square feet of new construction in three buildings on 45 rural acres, and all the attendant infrastructure to make them function.

The company got the commission on the strength of another new house project it had built previously in Madison, Va., for clients of architect Richard Williams, FAIA, based in Washington, D.C. "The Madison residence was a similar project—also very detailed with very involved clients," says Dale. "And we worked pretty far along on another project with Richard that didn't move forward. So, I feel like we've done three projects together."

But none as special as Fletchers Mill. "That was one of the most enjoyable experiences in my career," he says. "Great projects take great clients," he says.

Well, yes and no. They take great builders, as well, to make everyone happy with the result. And that requires three essential traits on the builder's part:

Be Willing to Collaborate

The Fletchers Mill project was a journey of discovery for architect, clients, and builder. That means decisions took time, thought, and research to make. There was a fair amount of "what if?" pursuit, exploring different kinds of products and

systems, all while keeping the project timeline under control. Dale's diligence in giving the owners the right information in a timely fashion so they could make solid decisions was paramount. Dale also brought knowledge to the table of different building technologies for Richard to consider, providing him with the data necessary to incorporate them into his plans. A case in point was the factory-built foundation system from Superior Walls of Central Virginia that saved both time and money on the project. "We enjoy the collaborative process," says Dale.

Treat Co-Workers and Subcontractors Well

"We believe in building knowledge and cultivating values," says Dale. "And sharing in the fruits of the business." Ted, his successor, has been with the company for 22 years. And others have been there for a similar length of time. The secret to keeping good people? Says Ted, "We offer flex time, we pay for education, and we encourage independent thinking."

This sense of fair play extends to the trades the company relies upon to execute their high standards. The key here, say Dale and Ted, is to value their time as you would your own. "We try really hard to schedule properly and be ready for them," Ted explains. "Jobs are organized so it's a better place to work. We're partners with them just as we are the clients."

Honor Clients' Money As Your Own

Nailing down costs is always critical. But if there's value engineering to be done, builders can't lose track of what value means on the project. In the Fletchers Mill project, Dale delivered various choices to the clients with clear information about what each path would cost and what benefit it offered.

That information sometimes resulted in the clients going with a highline decision and sometimes not. Yet, in the end, the clients felt shared ownership in all the important selections. "To keep that trust level up, you have to do careful cost accounting. And we deliver a high value for the money spent," says Dale. "We supervise our projects well, spend the necessary time and energy on managing the paperwork part, and we take it very seriously. In the end, our clients know where every cent went."

Fletchers Mill was built on a cost-plus basis with a guaranteed maximum. Abrahamse & Company brought the project in under the maximum. No bad surprises.

He's finally retired now, although he still has a stake in the business and meets Ted for coffee most Fridays. Ted says those dates are less and less about work these days and more about what Dale is doing with his new-found free time.

"I bought a table saw, a mitre tool, and spent the summer remodeling my brother's house in Vermont," says Dale. "It was fun—just like when I started in the business. Full circle." —S. Claire Conroy

New Year's Revolutions

1. CLEAN SLATE

True Residential expands its True 48 refrigerator line with a new "Pearl Slate" finish. The 48-inch side-by-side claims 29.4 cubic feet of stylish, antibacterial cold storage.

www.true-residential.com

Circle 101 on inquiry card.

2. OLIVE STORY

It's not quite as insouciant as Pantone's Greenery color of the year for 2017, but BlueStar's Matte Moss Green is a cheerful evocation of the classic Olive color of bygone days. A collection of eight lushly matte hues is available across the company's appliances.

www.bluestarcooking.com

Circle 102 on inquiry card.

3. NO HANDS

Grohe's popular commercial-style K7 kitchen faucet now has a companion foot-control device that installs in the cabinet toe-kick. Foot control is also newly offered on the LadyLux3 faucets.

www.grohe.com/us/

Circle 103 on inquiry card.





4



6

4. SWEDISH COOL

British luxury bath company Drummonds turned to Swedish designer Martin Brudnizki for the Tyburn vessel bath. Its curves suggest traditional appeal, while its stout, legless base joins the floor with modern aplomb.

www.drummonds-usa.com

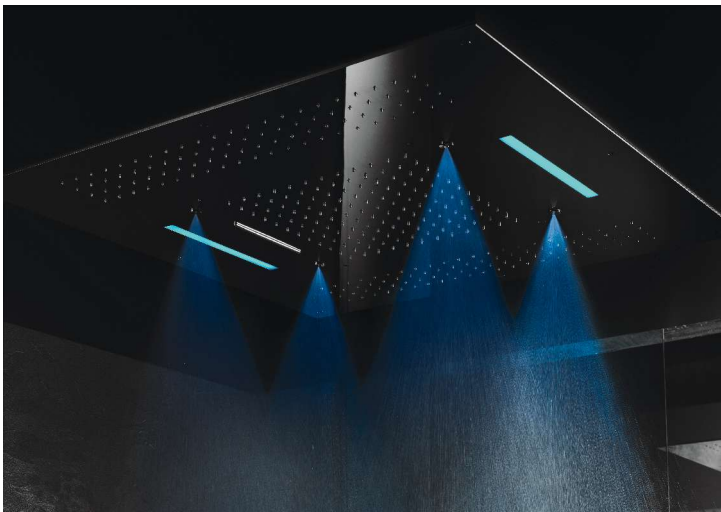
Circle 104 on inquiry card.

5. BANISH THE BLUES

We could all use some light therapy during the long winter months. To wit, MGS offers a sleek shower fixture that mists, rains, waterfalls, and administers chromotherapy—all while you get ready for another day at the office.

www.mgstaps.com

Circle 105 on inquiry card.



5

6. MYSTERIOUS GLOW

Modern Form's Escher LED Sconce is intriguing no matter the direction you gaze at it, in typical Escher fashion. Measuring 14 inches by six inches, it mounts horizontally or vertically. Its 11-watts produce a 3000k color temperature.

www.modernforms.com

Circle 106 on inquiry card.



7



9



8

7. RHYMES WITH EGG

Dressed in a color that resembles Ferrari red, SMEG's new 36-inch dual-fuel range promises to cut as much as 50 percent of preheating time. The cooktop is gas; the oven is electric and the range also comes in olive green, orange, anthracite (a charcoal-like color), stainless steel, black, and yellow.

www.smegusa.com

Circle 107 on inquiry card.

8. ANY STONE TURNED

New from Caesarstone this year is a 13mm quartz that overlays existing stone counters. Called "Transform," the collection includes such popular tonal mixes as "White Attica," with swirls of black and gray on a white base. The company aims to take the demolition and delays out of upgrading counter materials.

www.caesarstoneus.com

Circle 108 on inquiry card.

9. SOLID LIQUIDS

Designed by Aybars Asci, AIA, LEED BD+C, of New York's Efficiency Lab for Architecture PLLC, "Liquid Form" is the newest concrete tile shape in Walker Zanger's Kaza Collection. The 3D patterned tiles are made in three dimensions suitable for residential and commercial applications.

www.walkerzanger.com

Circle 109 on inquiry card.

Introducing the Custom Residential Architects Network

The Custom Residential Architects Network (CRAN) is a Knowledge Community within the American Institute of Architects (AIA) that specifically represents the interests of residential architects within the AIA and works to promote residential architects to our potential clients in the public realm. CRAN was the first grassroots Knowledge Community—in 2011, AIA granted CRAN Knowledge Community status after CRAN petitioned AIA.

CRAN has an energetic and committed advisory group made up of custom residential architects from across the U.S. who work hard to support residential architects through several efforts:

The annual CRAN symposium (shown in the photos) typically occurs in the fall and draws 250 to 350 members for a few days of education sessions, a home tour, and lots of opportunities for networking with other residential practitioners and product representatives. Past symposiums have been held in Austin, Texas; Indianapolis, Ind.; Newport, R.I.; Charleston, SC; Minneapolis; and Santa Rosa, Calif. Our next symposium will be held in Miami from September 17 through 20.

CRAN has partnered with ACSA (Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture) to organize a student design competition called Here + Now: A House for the 21st century for the 2016-2017 academic year.

The goal is to encourage architecture students to consider residential architecture as a career choice. <http://www.acsa-arch.org/programs-events/competitions/2016-2017-housing-competition>

CRANtv is an effort to demystify the process of working with an architect to design a home. Videos are available on our CRANtv YouTube channel. <https://www.youtube.com/user/CRANtv>

CRAN works with AIA to provide content to the AIA National Convention especially geared to residential architects. Past programs organized by CRAN include:

- Profiting From Design Build for a Residential Practice
- The NEW Collaboration Between Residential Architects and Custom Home Builders
- Developing Rock-Star Presentation Skills for Emerging Professionals!

CRAN grants is our latest program now under development for 2017 and beyond to support local communities of residential architects. Stay tuned for more information.

If you are interested in joining our vibrant CRAN community, sign up for our list serve at www.aia.org/cran. We'd love to have you join us.
—Dawn Zuber, Chair, AIA CRAN

Custom Residential Architects Network

an AIA Knowledge Community



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Paul DeGrandis
(847) 920-9510
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Midwest and West Sales Manager:

Paul DeGrandis
(847) 920-9510
Paul@SOLAbRANDS.com

East, Southeast Sales Manager:

Beth Emerich
(781) 710-4745
EmerichB@SOLAbRANDS.com

East, Southeast Sales Manager:

Joanne Naylor
(201) 891-9190
Joanne@SOLAbRANDS.com

Product Resource Section/Classifieds

Mike Serino
(630) 699-2004
Mike@SOLAbRANDS.com

Digital Programs Manager

Tim Steingraber
(847) 920-5692
Tim@SOLAbRANDS.com

Ad Services/Materials

Heidi Riedl
(847) 786-8864
Heidi@SOLAbRANDS.com

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Mountain Majesty

EYRC ARCHITECTS

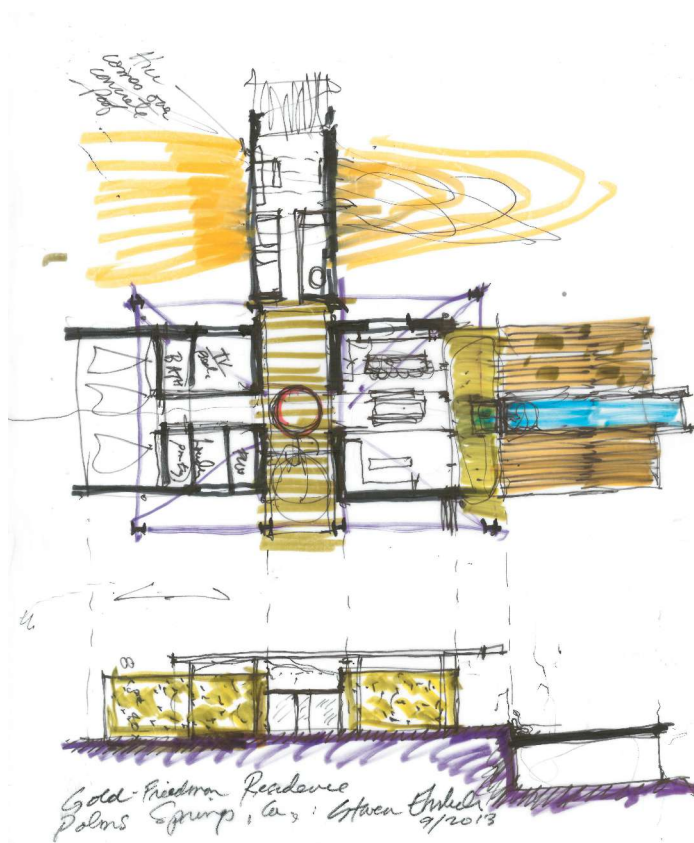
LOCATION: PALM SPRINGS, CALIF.

Architects know their best ideas usually don't emerge Athena-like from the head of Zeus—fully formed and ready to conquer the world. But there's often an early flash of intuition or creative spark that's worth fanning and feeding. An evolution of this concept drawing by Steven Ehrlich, FAIA, of AIA Firm of the Year-winner EYRC Architects, is under construction in Palm Springs, Calif., and now more closely resembles the rendering shown. "Drawings are where it all starts for me—hand sketches in books, trace, whatever I can find. And I spend significant time on site just drawing what I see," says Steven.

More than most projects the office takes on, this one has developed somewhat improvisationally. The clients are repeat customers and longtime friends, so trust is baked in. "You see things when you're on site," says Steven. "There are opportunities you want to take advantage of. Fortunately these clients don't mind that."

The biggest change from concept is the bump from one level to two. And there are other important tweaks: The guest suite (at top in the sketch) now resides in an oval pool pavilion; the disappearing-edge pool is pulled away from the house at the terminus of a bridge-like deck. But the original idea of a house that appears to grow out of its mountain site and that cleaves at the middle to showcase the view remains.

—S. Claire Conroy



Top and above: Backing to protected land near Palm Springs, this 4,500 square foot house combines board-formed, cast-in-place concrete, rusted steel, and glass to meld with its rocky terrain. Project: Ridge Mountain Residence; design partner: Steven Ehrlich, FAIA; managing partner: Takashi Yanai; project architects: Megan Lawler, Brendan Canning; drawing: Steven Ehrlich; rendering: Bolina.



MASONITE.

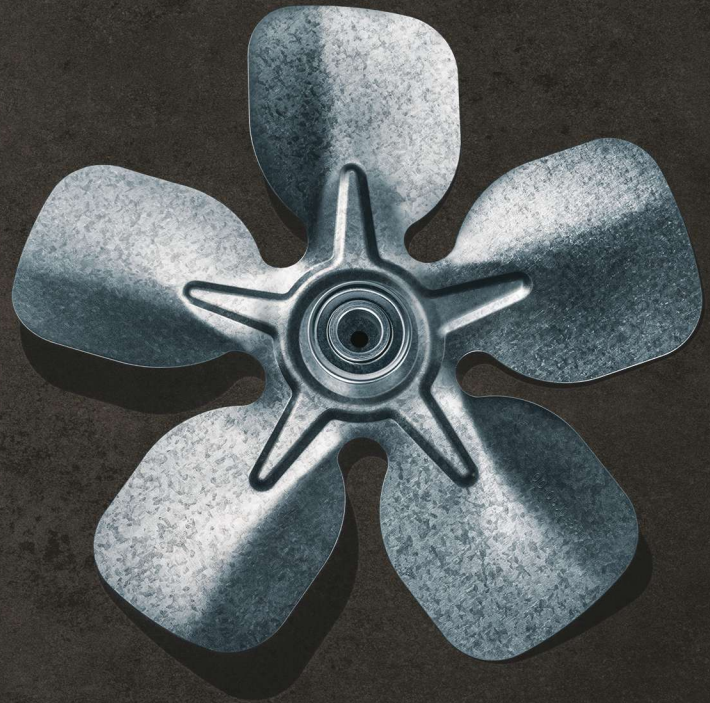
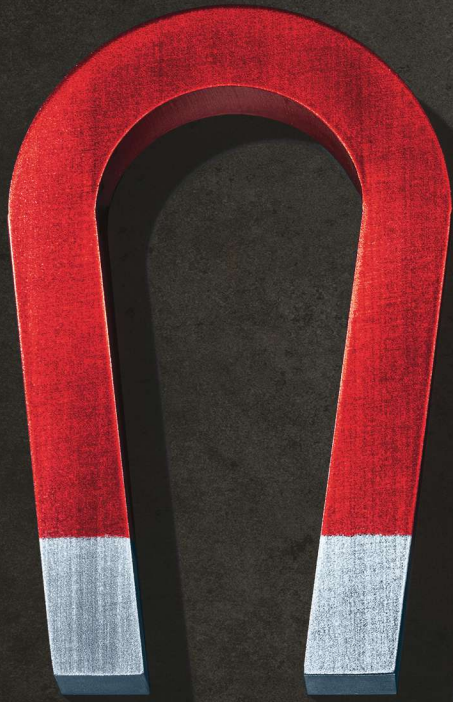
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