

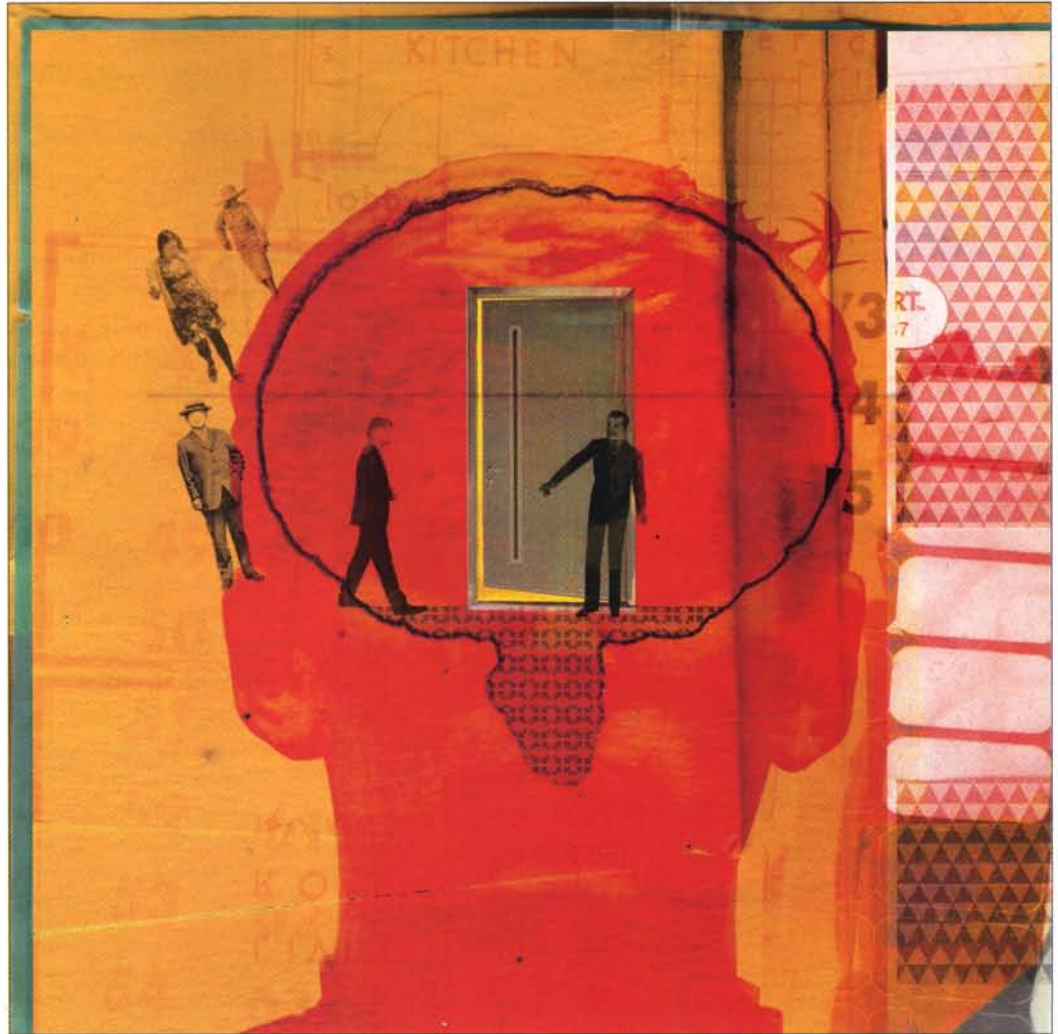
house proud

what architects learn about their profession and themselves by designing their own abode.

by cheryl weber

frank Harmon, FAIA, first got the inspiration to design his house when he was living and working in England. He and his wife, Judy, a landscape architect, fell in love with the famous English manor gardens and dreamed of designing a house and garden that belonged together. On returning to Raleigh, N.C., in the 1980s, they bought a lot near North Carolina State University and spent a year negotiating a design befitting their young family. "It was the first time we worked together directly on such a thing," Harmon recalls. "We designed it 13 times and built No. 10."

Harmon's desire was not so much to bolster his five-year-old practice by showing off his design skills as it was, as he puts it, to create a "wonderful place to wake up in every morning." And yet, directly or indirectly, an architect's home amounts to both a personal and a public expression of artistic sensibilities. If people are endlessly curious about how their neighbors live, they are even more intrigued by what architects build for themselves. Think of Frank Gehry, FAIA's deconstructivist Santa Monica, Calif.,



Stanley Hooper

home. Or the Glass House that Philip Johnson designed for his own use—perhaps his best-known work. On a grander scale, there's Monticello, where Thomas Jefferson's quirky inventiveness is still a popular draw.

Designing a personal dwelling gives architects the rare opportunity to explore their ideas of what a house should be, to experiment with materials, and to test

their vision in everyday life. What's more, they have only themselves to please. "By far it's the best thing any architect can do," Harmon says. "It's elemental in the pleasures and rewards it brings, and it's the first statement we make about ourselves and what we believe in."

calling card

For many architects, building their own house is a chance

to try things that clients would never agree to. That was the case for Mark McInturff, FAIA, back in 1978, when he bought four contiguous houses in various states of disrepair. Over time he renovated and sold one house, combined two as his own, and made the last one into the office he occupies today. He did much of the construction

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steel exterior, lime-green balcony, and position high in the air, the house is hard to miss. Beneath is the studio, which has a separate entrance. (For more on this project, *residential architect's* Project of the Year, see page 29 in the May 2008 issue.) Managing the construction boosted his hands-on confidence. "I had built enough other projects as senior architect to know how the process works, but there's nothing like having all the responsibility yourself," Trzebiatowski says. "It was an amazing learning tool—and the best way I could think of to do some experimental things to push the practice forward, like trying out details that don't get full warranty from a manufacturer or installer."

The unusual structure attracted attention even while it was being built. A film crew documented the construction process for "Desert Lifestyles TV," a local cable show. That airing produced a domino effect, including a house commission from the show's producer, and by launch time, blank studio had several projects lined up. "All the work we've gotten has come from people driving by, seeing the house published, or seeing the awards on our Web site," Trzebiatowski says. "As a new studio, we don't have a lot of built work to show, and there's nothing better than walking someone through a real project, letting them touch the materials and

"[designing and building my own house] was an amazing learning tool—and the best way I could think of to do some experimental things to push the practice forward."

—matthew g. trzebiatowski, aia

understand the spaces you can create. It also helps us be selective in the clients we take on. In our climate, we have a lot of requests for Tuscan Mediterranean things, and we're not interested in entertaining that, so it's important to put out there what you're about." And the evolution continues. The effort was so gratifying that Trzebiatowski says he is ready to flip and go again.

Gerard Damiani, AIA, NCARB, and Debbie Battistone, studio d'ARC architects, were thinking similar thoughts when they built a new live/work space on Pittsburgh's South Side. (For more on this project, see pages 22 and 64 in the June 2008 issue.) But they were trying to make a point about sustainability and community. The married couple had previously designed live/work quarters for themselves in a historic building. By building new, they wanted to show potential clients how urban streetscapes can be revitalized by filling in empty lots. Another factor in infill's favor is that loft developments, by comparison, are often false starts when they

fail zoning requirements or don't generate enough interest. "We've done a number of lofts and were always very interested in having clients build on infill lots," Damiani says. "They asked what it cost, and we didn't know because we hadn't done one."

The couple purchased their lot in 1999 and started construction in 2001, when the weak economy brought all their other projects to a halt. Damiani served as construction manager and part-time carpenter on the building, which reinterprets traditional Pittsburgh row houses with exterior materials such as Cor-Ten steel, mahogany, and asphalt shingles. In addition to attracting new clients, the venture has given them confidence to try out speculative development. "We don't have any desire to leave this place, but there's always that interest in doing another project," Damiani says. Meanwhile, they're hoping the option they've placed on a second lot pans out. With only themselves as clients, it will be another chance to leave their calling card in the community where they practice. **ra**

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"[designing your own house is] elemental in the pleasures and rewards it brings, and it's the first statement we make about ourselves and what we believe in."

—frank harmon, faia

work himself. "When I finished my house, I used to say that people should never hire an architect who isn't living in a house of his or her own design and didn't build it," he says. "I knew it shortened the list of competitors, but I thought there was something real to that idea." Without regard for resale value, he did some unorthodox things, like locating an open bath in the bedroom and creating 10 different floor levels, including a five-level office.

Early on, the project jump-started his practice as people began to see it published. Television anchor Charles Gibson toured it live on "Good Morning America." HGTV picked it up as well. It even appeared on the cover of *Metropolitan Home*. "The houses were instrumental in helping to establish my reputation," McInturff says. "You're giving people an intimate look at yourself. It gave clients more insight into who I am—and a higher comfort level." Although he's been working on the property for 30 years, he no longer gives clients tours. But what does show, when they come to the compound, is an overall

sense of his work. Last spring McInturff built a steel-framed "flying screened porch" that's 30 feet above ground and reached from the house over a 60-foot-long bridge. "If you compare this office environment—a bunch of houses in the treetops—to a downtown office, it's a different world," he says. "It's a much warmer, engaging environment, and the buildings become business cards."

Mark Hutker, AIA, uses his four-year-old Falmouth, Mass., home as a business card too. He brings clients by to demonstrate that scrappy materials such as concrete floors, exposed engineered floor joists, and acid-etched steel can be both warm and visually exciting. This is the second house that Hutker has designed for his family, and its forms and materials reference the outbuildings of a neighboring horse farm. The idea was to include a chill-out space that would become the destination of choice for his teenage children and their friends. But it was also to work out some design frustration. "When I'm working with a client, I'm thinking about solving their daily life

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patterns in the context of a specific site," he says. "You imbue the design with as many interesting and artful ideas as you can, but you're not in decision-making mode. That's the difference

in the paradigm."

Hutker has always liked the vibe of a just-framed house, because one can see how the building is working to protect its inhabitants. In addition to exposing the

floor joists and using vertical cedar siding inside and out, he painted the lateral steel beams safety-orange. After the staircase's steel stringers were laser-cut and the rough edges ground down, Hutker

liked the rough-hewn look so much that he decided to finish it with a clear sealer rather than paint over the discolored grinding marks. "Can you imagine calling the clients and saying, 'Let's keep this'? You sense that someone has touched it and cared for it. There are few architects who get to work on the purely artistic level. Designing your own house is the chance to say, 'This is what I'd do if I got the opportunity.'"

Todd Walker, AIA, co-founder of Memphis, Tenn.-based Archimania, agrees. "If you can't do something noteworthy for yourself, you have no one to blame," he says. In 2000 Walker built his Harbor Town house, close to downtown Memphis, to show people what could be done on a tight budget and a difficult site. He also wanted to demonstrate that a modern house can fit right into a neighborhood infused with history. "We were doing some residential work that was just one degree out of the norm," he says of his fledgling firm. "They weren't projects we could hang our hat on."

Although building new can be prohibitive for a young architect, professional skills provide the much-needed leverage. Walker got a good deal on the lot, not only because it was perceived as difficult to build on, but because he convinced the developer that he could show the public how a steep slope could become an asset.

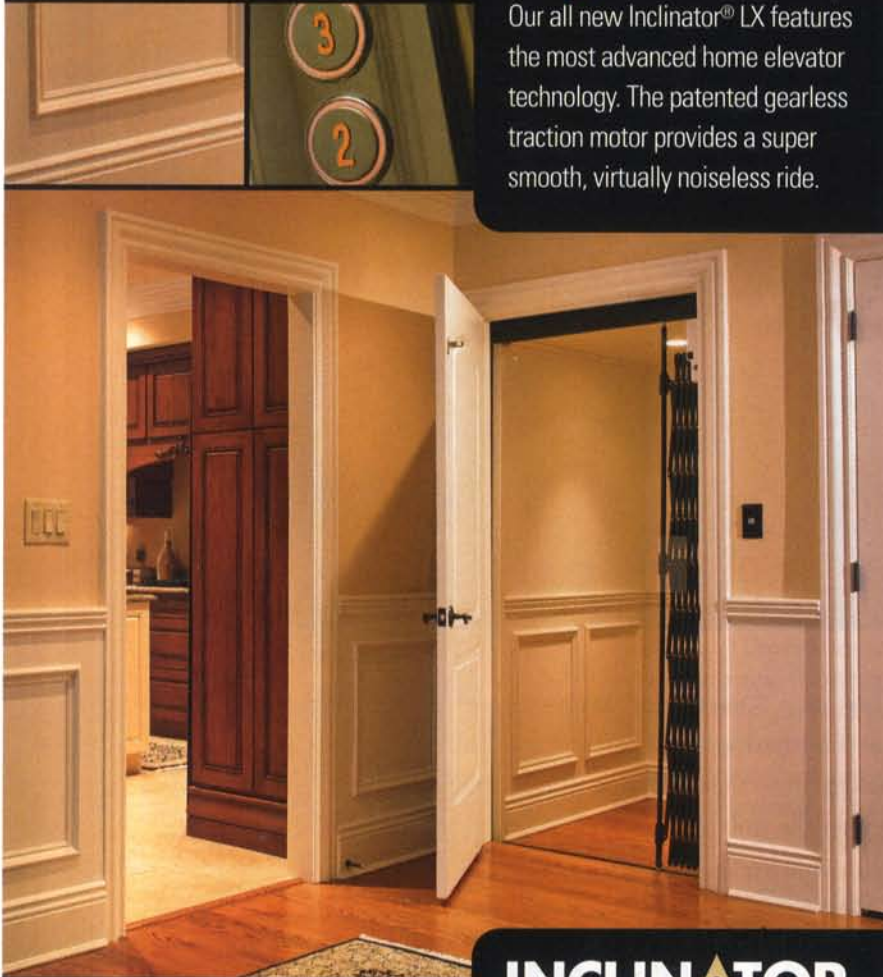
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Ignoring the advice of local Realtors to include a two-car garage, he built a one-bay detached garage that lent a cottage feel. Not only was it less expensive to frame as a separate structure, it added value by freeing up space for a patio on the small plot and minimizing the house's scale.

Walker was rewarded with a handful of design awards and national media attention. The project immediately generated new work with private clients and another developer. His business partner, Barry Alan Yoakum, AIA, LEED AP, recently built a house in the neighborhood, too, and the pair is considering building new homes for

themselves every five years to diversify their portfolio. "It's as important for the firm as it is for us personally," Walker says. "We're intrigued by the idea that you can build a little portfolio of houses you've designed for yourself. That doesn't mean your work for clients can't evolve, but this accentuates what you do and adds some diversity. You get a lot of respect from clients when they see what you've done for yourself. It adds something that's hard for other architects to compete with."

living and working

For startup firms with no built work to show, a house

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turning the tables

Everyone has heard that doctors are the worst patients. But how do architects fare as clients? Surprisingly well, at least for Dennis Wedlick, AIA. When the time came to add 110 square feet to the 800-square-foot weekend house he designed for himself and his life partner, Curtis DeVito, in 1988, he didn't hesitate to hand off the job to Hoboken, N.J., architect Jennifer Marsh, AIA, LEED AP. "In my practice I learned the importance of giving the whole family equal time, building upon disparate goals to get something unique," Wedlick explains. "I felt the best way to accommodate the things on both of our wish lists was to put my money where my mouth was and hire an architect."

Marsh is the wife of one of Wedlick's longtime employees, and her design talents were well-established. In choosing her, he also sensed she was confident enough to give honest feedback, yet lacked an ego that would get in the way of listening. Throughout, the two stayed true to their respective roles. Marsh

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practice

of one's own design can be the fast track to new business. And having an office on site reinforces an architect's presence in the community. Those are the benefits that husband-and-wife team Christopher Hays, AIA, LEED AP, and Allison Ewing, AIA, LEED AP, were counting on when they built their house and the adjacent Hays + Ewing Design Studio near downtown Charlottesville, Va.

"we're intrigued by the idea that you can build a little portfolio of houses you've designed for yourself."

—todd walker, aia

"Chris felt the house would give a certain gravitas to our work," says Ewing, who left the Charlottesville firm of William McDonough + Partners a year and a half after her husband did to

open their joint practice. By then their reputation had gotten traction from the house's awards and appearances in national publications, including *The Washington Post*.

"We use the house quite a bit to take clients on tour if it's appropriate to their project," Ewing explains. "It's really helpful having clients feel comfortable about what we'll do for them, even if what they want is quite different." Before they built it, the couple had moved 13 times in 11 years and never owned a home. Although Ewing says they did a pretty good job of anticipating the needs of a growing family, they are thinking of extending the second floor over the double-height living room to provide more recreational and guest space upstairs. "The studio was supposed to be the guest room, but Chris won't give it up," she says.

Matthew G. Trzebiewski, AIA, co-founder of blank studio, also timed his business launch to coincide with the completion of his Phoenix residence and office. It was a strategic move that he began plotting during architecture school and while employed at other firms. With its rusted

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took Wedlick's rough sketches to the next level and explored alternate ideas, drawing at least 20 iterations of a stair that had to be shoehorned in place. Another potentially tense design puzzle was a window that was rebuilt three times for the sake of 2 inches each way. Throughout the process, Wedlick never overstepped his bounds as a client. "It was nice for Dennis to be able to react to things objectively because he wasn't trying to figure them out," Marsh says. "And I could diffuse any tension between him and the contractor and absorb the emotional part of the process. It's always emotional, no matter how seasoned an architect is."

Being on the receiving end of that support validated Wedlick's belief about the unsung value of architects: how important it is to be a partner who will help clients realize their dreams, who will assure them that everything will be OK when they're afraid it won't be, and who will provide a sounding board when they chase after things that aren't fully thought-out. "I have a lot more appreciation for the crap part of my job," he says. "It's not easy listening to someone get really nervous and worrying about how they'll pay for the project. What I learned firsthand was that it's worth every penny to have someone do that for me. And it made me realize again the importance of how details are executed. If I was starting to lose some of that appreciation, I regained it by going through this."

The addition has become a marketing piece, but not in the physical way one would imagine. Says Wedlick: "When I give a sales pitch to a client, I say, 'Just to let you know, I hired my own architect.' That has a huge impact on people. Lawyers hire lawyers, and it's a resounding statement that it's worth the investment."—c.w.