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Residential avatar Christopher Alexander wins this year's Hall of Fame award. Top and cover photos by Bruce Duffy/Corbis SABA. Other 2001 Leadership Award winners are Top Firm, MITHUN, center photo by Brian Smale; and Rising Star, Robert M. Gurney, above photo by Tom Wolff.

Hall of Fame... page 42
Author, educator, and architect Christopher Alexander decodes the patterns that make houses truly livable.
by Bruce Snider

Top Firm... page 52
In the high-compromise fields of production and multifamily housing, MITHUN does well by doing good.
by Meghan Drueding

Rising Star... page 58
Robert M. Gurney's mixed materials and svelte forms usher Modernism into the new millennium.
by Cheryl Weber

Doctor Spec... page 64
For fine finishes, reclaimed and recycled lumber offers timeless appeal.

Hands On... page 68
A handy baseboard chase system simplifies wiring upgrades.

Ra / q & A... page 88
Eco-friendly architect and consultant Gail Lindsey of Wake Forest, N.C., lives what she preaches.
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Circle no. 26
from the editor

today show ignores an architect

NBC broadcast a series on building a new house, but where was the architect?

by s. claire conroy

I used to think the biggest challenge facing residential architects was their reputation for arrogance. I thought people shied away from hiring architects because they were afraid they’d get a domineering Frank Lloyd Wright type—all swirling cape, budget-busting aesthetics, and dubious engineering. I still think that’s a big difficulty, but now I believe the profession has an even larger, more insidious problem: invisibility.

home show

What brought this to my attention was the “Today” show’s recent special, “Today Builds a House.” Between February 14 and May 2, the most popular morning TV show in America invited its viewers to participate in building “the ultimate dream home” in a subdivision outside of Tampa, Fla. Each week viewers were asked to make a design choice. By the end of the program, their “design choices” consisted of the Bordeaux model home, the Westchase kitchen layout, the Cozumel bath, the Tradewinds dining room, the American Review master bedroom, and the Summerdale landscape plan. Sounds more like a travelogue than a house.

The partners in this media event were NBC, home builder David Weekley Homes, OurHouse.com, and a number of home furnishings manufacturers and distributors. “Today” show co-hosts Katie Couric and Matt Lauer presided over the coverage by “regular contributor” Lou Manfredini of OurHouse.com., a home-improvement and products Web site. Manfredini, a former contractor, goes by the on-air moniker Mr. Fix-It. During the series, his Web-site colleague, Christine Dimmick, a “home decor advisor,” chimed in periodically about furniture and accessories. The series culminated in a Web auction on uBid.com, with proceeds to benefit Habitat for Humanity.

A very worthy cause, a great idea for a series, and terrific press for all the participants. Guess who didn’t get invited to this party?

missing in action

There is something seriously amiss when a hugely popular TV show doesn’t feel compelled to include an architect in its 12-week series about building a house. What’s even more alarming, most Americans don’t see it as an important omission either. To them, new house doesn’t equal architect, it equals builder.

Design decisions have nothing to do with architecture, they’re about builder options. After they’ve checked off their menu of selections, buyers feel they’ve designed their own custom home. Because they can walk through model homes and touch and see what they’re getting, the whole experience is much less frightening than designing from scratch. Builders have made the process so comfortable, easy, and telegenic. Mr. Build-It, Mr. Fix-It sound so guy-next-door. Mr. Design-It just doesn’t have the same folksy ring.

Residential architects have a huge public relations problem. And it’s not so much that you have bad PR—you have no PR. Where is your home show on PBS or HGTV? Where are your newspaper design columns? Why don’t we have a Bob Vila of architecture?

It’s really up to you to mobilize, as individuals and as a group. Demystify what you do, make it more accessible, get the word out. Contractors—and even interior designers—are so far ahead of you, you’ll have to sprint to catch up.

Questions or comments? Call me: 202.736.3312; write me: S. Claire Conroy, residential architect, One Thomas Circle, N.W., Suite 600, Washington, D.C. 20005; or e-mail me: cconroy@hanley-wood.com.
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Circle no. 23
lunker lament

An excellent editorial ("The Not So Ugly House," page 13) in the March issue. You’re right, we do need better answers for the big lunkers. Following my ex-partner’s Not So Big House, we now get clients coming to our shop saying, “Oh, yeah, and throw in some of that not-so-big stuff, too!”

You asked for ideas, and I thought I’d share one from my mentor, the late Edwin Lundie. He designed big houses to look like an assemblage of little houses. His projects remained humane through scale, proportion, and detail. Full-scale template drawings communicated to craftsmen how to bring this about.

And he was not alone. Jerome Robert Cerny in Chicago, Frank Forster in New York, Wade Pipes in Portland, Ore., John Calvin Stevens in Portland, Maine, Royal Barry Wills in Boston—all pursued the beauty of scale in their work.

We architects practicing today have had to pursue our lineage in quality residential architecture on our own, as our history courses in college rarely covered that turf.

Dale Mulfinger, AIA
SALA Architects
Minneapolis

prove it

I read with great interest your editorial “The Not So Ugly House” in the March issue. I, too, return from builders’ conferences with a little dark cloud over my head. Yes, I wish the houses were prettier, but mostly I lament the increasing lack of a licensed architect’s involvement in residential development. In this day and age, builders are selling “plan-book plans” and modifying them with $10/hour CAD draftsmen. The creative talent of an architect is now considered an unnecessary expense.

The attitude is square footage first, at the expense of aesthetics.

Solutions? Besides continued lobbying for laws requiring an architect’s stamp or design review guidelines, maybe architects need to be more proactive in the built environment. They should become active team players and financial participants, if not prime leaders, in residential development. At a minimum, we have to prove to the development machine that we as architects can add value to the process, not just additional costs.

Sig Bjornson II, AIA
Lundell/Bjornson Architects + Associates
Avon, Colo.

pipe dreams

I always enjoy your magazine—it’s inspiring and educational. One of my favorite sections is Hands On.

I’m afraid, though, that I must express my doubts that the vents in the March column (“Giving Vent,” page 98) will work, due to their limited diameter and extreme length. Without power, such as prevailing winds, there will be little air passage through the pipes. That, plus the tiny openings, make this idea one that my professor at Cal Poly would have described as “gussy-gussy, no content.”

Another problem in the pipe solution is the condensation of any moisture that might be drawn into the pipe from the crawl space. This could be mitigated by sloping the pipe to drain to the grille.

Mark Norris
Mark Edwin Norris, Residential Drafting, Design, Etc.
Salinas, Calif.

Contributing editor Rick Vitullo replies: You are correct to be concerned about the placement and subsequent effectiveness of vents for crawl spaces. However, in this particular case, the three vents described in the article face directly into the prevailing winds coming off the Pacific Ocean 150 yards away. Also, there is no danger of anything such as planting material blocking the winds since the vents are right on the property line at the boardwalk.

In addition, the other, nondecorative screen-type vents at the other side of the house have a larger free area, which further increases the overall movement of air through the crawl space.
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Circle no. 99
stars on spec

What happens when you cross an astute real estate developer with a select group of noted architects? The Houses at Sagaponack: a subdivision of designer spec homes on Long Island, N.Y. Scheduled to begin construction this summer, the project was pulled together by Pritzker Prize–winning architect Richard Meier. He drafted an A-list of 32 architects at the request of local developer Harry Brown Jr., a longtime friend. Brown bought 200 acres of land in 1994 for $1.6 million. Rather than perpetuate the house bloat rampant in the well-heeled Hamptons, he decided to create an enclave of restrained weekend getaways, luring buyers with the cachet of high-profile architects. Occupying sites ranging from 1.5 to 3 acres, the houses will vary in size from 1,800 to 3,500 square feet, and in price from $700,000 to $2.2 million.

Steven Kanner’s “transformable house” (above and right) includes large panels that pull or slide out of the facade to expose expanses of glass. “Closed down for summer, it becomes a box,” he says, “like a large cabinet that can be manipulated to take on different patterns.”

“When Harry Brown asked me to help him select the architects, I thought it would be a wonderful opportunity to create something unique that had a sense of place,” says Meier, FAIA, Manhattan. “This will be a small community where all the houses are designed by architects who have a common interest in quality.” Beyond the role of playing curator and contributing a design of his own, Meier’s involvement will be limited. Brown is reviewing plans and overseeing the work.

Lindy Roy’s design features a metal-clad box with full-height sliding glass doors that open to the garden. Below is the water zone, which houses a sauna, swimming pool, and bathrooms.

www.residentialarchitect.com
er such senior figures as Michael Graves, Richard Rogers, Steven Holl, and Samuel Mockbee with younger architects like Lindy Roy and Marwan Al-Sayed. For some, Sagaponack offers a rare chance to design an informal, modest-size house, without the constraints of a client. “We’re participating because it’s a wonderful opportunity to do a clientless house—not building a villa for a specific family with perhaps an overly idiosyncratic program,” says Deborah Berke, AIA, Manhattan. Steven Kanner, FAIA, Los Angeles, agrees. “Designing without a client can be quite liberating,” he says. “You have to be open to all the possibilities of what the house could be, but not outside the realm of experience of people who would purchase it.” The architects will receive design fees of roughly $10,000, depending on the size of the project, plus 15 percent of construction costs.—cheryl weber

focus on julius shulman

Close your eyes and visualize a Richard Neutra house. Chances are, it’s a photograph by Julius Shulman. One of the earliest photographers to specialize in architectural work, Shulman launched his career in 1936 after shooting a house designed by Neutra. Neutra liked the photos; the rest is history.

Now in his 90s, Shulman has reissued his landmark 1962 text, Photographing Architecture and Interiors. The book opens with Neutra’s original introduction plus a new foreword by Shulman and a fascinating new interview with the author by photographer/writer Mark Edward Harris. More than 200 digital scans of Shulman’s original prints illustrate the book with buildings by Neutra, Eero Saarinen, Frank Lloyd Wright, Edward Durell Stone, Pietro Belluschi, I.M. Pei, and a host of important West Coast firms.

The book remains remarkably current, particularly where Shulman sets forth his aesthetic approach. Like most his clients, he is a resolute Modernist who uses shadow and light to bring his subjects to life. He disdains trick angles and melodramatic effects. “It is all too easy to create photographic compositions which are misleading and well-nigh impossible,” he warns. And he reminds readers that “the architecture must take precedence over the photograph”—advice for which architects will want to kiss his lens.

Shulman’s discussion of tools and equipment is somewhat outdated for serious students of architectural photography. As he admits in his new foreword, much new technology has emerged since 1962 (digital cameras, for instance, which he calls “diversions”). But you won’t be reading this book for gadget-buying guidance. Instead, you will linger on Shulman’s lucid prose and luminous photographs.—susan bradford barror

www.residentialarchitect.com
unbuilt architecture submission
deadline: july 16

The Boston Society of Architects/AIA is accepting real, academic, or theoretical projects from architects, architectural educators, and students anywhere in the world. The awards jury will designate categories and grant cash prizes. (Recent awards ranged from $200 to $500.) “The River Chapel, Western Tennessee” (shown), by Jeff Blackledge, AIA, Archimania Architects, Memphis, Tenn., was one of last year’s winners. For an application, contact the BSA at 617.951.1433, ext. 221, or www.architects.org.

the idea of louis sullivan
art institute of chicago
june 9—september 23

To commemorate the reissue of photographer John Szarkowski’s 1956 book The Idea of Louis Sullivan, this exhibition features Szarkowski’s original vintage prints along with Sullivan’s own architectural drawings and models. Shown: Szarkowski’s print of the Chicago Auditorium. Visit www.artic.edu or call 312.443.3600 for exhibit information.

ihousing conference
ronald reagan building, washington, d.c.
june 12–13

This conference, sponsored by residential architect’s parent company, Hanley-Wood, LLC, will focus on software plus Internet techniques and services to help housing professionals improve communications, streamline operations, and save money. Visit www.hanley-wood.com/inperson/ihouse for schedules and registration.

a century of design, part iv: 1975–2000
metropolitan museum of art, new york
june 26–january 6

The last in a four-part series surveying 20th-century design, this exhibition will display works by such architects and designers as Tadao Ando, Michael Graves, Philippe Starck, Frank Gehry, Sir Norman Foster, and Shiro Kuramata. Call 212.535.7710 or visit www.metmuseum.org for information.

torolab
museum of contemporary art, san diego
july 1—september 25

Torolab is a Tijuana, Mexico–based consortium of designers and artists committed to improving the quality of life in the nearby border region through fine art, architecture, and design. This exhibition will include models and drawings for architecture, art, clothing, and other designs. Shown: “Living in Comfort” (top) and “Shelter,” by Raúl Cárdenas Osuna. For museum hours, visit www.mcasandiego.org or call 858.454.3541.

continuing exhibits

Allan Wexler: Custom Built, through June 24, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 415.357.4000;

Luis Barragán: The Quiet Revolution, through July 1, Design Museum, London, 212.539.1900; Trans-Fusion, through July 3, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 514.939.7026; Frank Lloyd Wright and the Art of Japan: The Architect’s Other Passion, through July 15, Japan Society, New York City, 212.832.1155; Light Screens: The Leaded Glass of Frank Lloyd Wright, through September 2, American Craft Museum, New York, 212.956.3535; Rooms with a View: Landscape and Wallpaper, through October 14, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York, 212.849.8400; Revelatory Landscapes, through October 14, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 415.357.4000.
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THE DIFFERENCE IS GAGGENAU.
ike his colleagues everywhere, Canadian architect John Brown of Calgary, Alberta, is frustrated with suburban sprawl. "There's so much junk getting built," he says. "Architects aren't as involved in housing as they should be." So, in 1997 he, along with partners Carina van Olm and Matthew North, transformed their architecture firm into House Brand Construction, a combination real estate agency, developer, builder, architect, and interior designer. They find city lots, work out a financing program with the client's bank, design a house, and then build and furnish it. "It's one-stop shopping," says Brown, who is also the director of the architecture school at the University of Calgary. "By downplaying the fact that we're architects, which can be intimidating to people, we get a lot of clients who don't care so much about the architect part of it. They just want a great place to live."

To help potential clients understand what the company can do, House Brand designed and built a prototype in an older, established Calgary neighborhood. Their "Demonstration House," aimed at buyers in the $675,000 to $750,000 price range, is an abstracted version of the 1920s foursquares that are common in the area. Its plans are adaptable to a customer's site, taste, and budget. House Brand offers both a rear garage and a front under-drive version, for example; it also presents clients with three differently priced finish packages and several interior design options.

Since the Demonstration House opened in October 2000, six variations of it have sold—and the awareness the home has created among consumers has helped House Brand triple its business.—meghan drueding
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back to the future

architect john a. burns, faia, looked back 50 years to find a house ahead of its time.

by john a. burns, faia

The windows are the first thing that attract your attention: floor-to-ceiling, 3 feet wide, 24 square feet of glass. Welcome to Hollin Hills.

My wife, Debbie, and I first discovered Hollin Hills in the Britannica Book of the Year 1952. Under the heading “Building and Construction Industry” was a photograph of three houses in a wooded setting. The caption read, “Mass-produced, low-cost housing development at Hollin Hills in Alexandria, Va., awarded first prize by the Southwest Research Institute for its good contemporary lines and excellence of site.” The homes had the familiar massing of a suburban ranch house, but the designs featured a low-slope gable roof with large overhangs, a large chimney mass covering half the end elevation, and walls of glass. We could count nine floor-to-ceiling windows in a row in the photograph. Unfortunately, there were no other clues to the homes: no mention in the text of the architect or the builder. We spent several fruitless afternoons scouring Alexandria neighborhoods in search of that most elusive Northern Virginia house type—Modern.

hills people

Several years passed, as our interest was primarily academic. Renting in downtown Washington, D.C., our needs and means did not allow us to think about a single-family home. Then, one day, I noticed the word Hollin printed at the edge of a map of the District of Columbia. We set off that weekend. Five miles south of Alexandria, in Fairfax County, we found a modest wooden Hollin Hills sign and turned in. There, in a heavily wooded setting, were the houses that had intrigued us, dozens of them. Along with the ones from the Britannica photograph were Modern split-levels, and, nestled into the more steeply sloping sites, two-story houses. Some even had butterfly roofs. We promptly got turned around and lost, only later realizing that a continuous curvilinear street pattern was another of the unique and significant features of Hollin Hills. Thereafter, we visited the neighborhood on a regular basis, keeping an eye out for open houses.

We learned that architect Charles M. Goodman had designed the homes. Robert Davenport was the developer who accepted the challenge of a difficult, hilly site and brought in landscape architects Lou Bernard Voigt, Eric Paepcke, and Dan Kiley to design the community.

The first house was occupied in late 1949, the last completed in 1971. Goodman became known as “the housing architect,” and was elevated to Fellow in the American Institute of Architects primarily for his home designs. Kiley was to become famous as a Modern landscape architect, building on the hundred plot plans he produced for Hollin Hills residents.

continued on page 28
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simple pleasures
The house designs were simple, spare, and economical in both function and material. Foundations were slab-on-grade with forced hot-air ducts under the slab. Brick was salvaged from nearby urban renewal projects. Prefabricated roof trusses spanned the width of the houses, allowing partitions to be non-load-bearing and thinner than a normal stud wall, thus facilitating later remodelings. Utilities were concentrated in the core of the house, a functionally efficient arrangement that separated the public and private areas. The plans were open, with one space flowing into the next, but each defined by wall planes and angles and changes in materials. Inside the houses, only the bedrooms, bathrooms, and closets had doors.

And the windows—the glorious Hollin Hills windows. Huge expanses of glass allowed natural light to flood every room. The first time we took our daughter Emily to see a Hollin Hills house, she crawled right up to a window and sat there, enjoying the outside world. In most homes, children have to be several years old to peer over a windowsill or must climb up on furniture to enjoy the simple pleasure of looking out a window. The wide roof overhangs protected the interiors from the hot summer sun but allowed the low winter sun to penetrate deep into the homes. Views from the windows crossed several adjacent yards because in Hollin Hills houses did not sit in orderly rows. Each was carefully sited to take maximum advantage of the topography, and oriented to create vistas past, not into, adjacent houses. The irregular siting worked with the curvilinear street pattern to make a cohesive whole. The homes—indeed, the whole neighborhood—seemed to have a variety of designs.

there, in a wooded setting,
were the houses that had intrigued us, dozens of them.”

a new addition
After the birth of our son Andrew, we finally bought a house in Hollin Hills. Our particular house was five panels plus a door long, by two panels deep, roughly 63 by 24 feet, three bedrooms, two baths. We loved it.

Nine years later, we realized that teenagers need even more space than toddlers and started thinking about acquiring more space. Being prudent, we searched for larger homes in the area but none held any attraction for us and we decided to build an addition to include a family room, laundry room, and master bedroom suite.

From the beginning, the design was to be respectful of the features, finishes, and massing of Goodman’s original design. Many architects believe Hollin Hills’ modular geometry is limiting, but I discovered that the geometry quickly gave form to the design.

To interfere with the original house as little as possible, the addition took the form of a capital T, requiring the removal of just one of the prefabricated wall panels. Adding the second furnace and laundry room eliminated the need to connect to the existing utilities, further limiting disruption of the original house. The only challenges were matching the eave line of the original house and accommodating the fact that the actual dimensions of 1990s 2x6s were smaller than 1950s 2x6s.

The plans were approved after the required review by the Hollin Hills design review committee. Once the addition was complete, the entire family squeezed into it to allow renovation of the original house, which included completely replacing one bathroom and installing a new kitchen.

good houses, good neighbors
After spending a decade and a half in Hollin Hills, our perspective on the neighborhood has evolved. We came for the architecture. We stayed not just for the houses and settings that Goodman, Davenport, Voigt, Paepcke, and Kiley designed, but for the wonderful sense of community built by a half-century of like-minded residents.

Debbie Burns

Debbie Burns

The addition Burns designed for his own house (above) pays tribute to the ideas of Hollin Hills’ original architect, Charles M. Goodman.

John A. Burns, FAIA, is a supervisory architect with the National Park Service in Washington, D.C.
My deadlines are not negotiable. Callbacks are not in my vocabulary.
So, I hire subs that use the best. This is my insulation.
by cheryl weber

In the 1980s, when architect Leslie Moldow, AIA, was mulling over a job offer from another Boston firm, she knew where to turn for trusted advice—a senior member of the firm where she worked who had taken an interest in her career. Among other things, Moldow and her mentor discussed her long-term goals and whether or not the new position would meet them. With her blessing, Moldow accepted the new job.

Another pivotal point in Moldow’s career came when she was exploring how to blend teaching with her passion for architecture. Again, a frank discussion with the mentor gave her the confidence to land teaching positions at the Boston Architectural Center and the Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. “She was a role model,” Moldow says of the seven-year relationship. “She had a lot of energy and an insatiable curiosity, and really cared about people.”

Once the purview of the old boys’ club, mentoring is no longer about power or plum assignments. The 21st-century model is democratic and grass-roots. For those who seek it out, mentoring happens partly by osmosis at residential firms. Interns work in teams with colleagues who represent a broad range of experience and technical expertise. Office design crits solicit feedback from all points of view. And in a studio setup, there’s a day-to-day, across-the-desk exchange of information, whether it’s how to detail flashing on a roof edge or how to communicate with a client or senior partner.

Rarer are firms who have formal mentoring programs. But as the still reasonably healthy economy continues to consume the brightest and best employees, that may be changing as managers are forced into higher gear. For architects, the tight market in general is compounded by another problem. “There are an awful lot of graduates coming out of school who are going into nonarchitectural related fields such as graphics and computer programming,” observes John Merkle, AIA, TMS Architects, Portsmouth, N.H., who recently lost a good employee to a dot-com. “They don’t want to intern for five or six years.”

Mentoring and a proactive approach to continuing education—call it professional development—is viewed increasingly as a strategy for attracting both employees and clients. “A lot of graduates coming out of colleges today expect organizations to have formal mentoring programs in place,” says Jan Logan, of the Minneapolis-based Menttium Corp., which specializes in mentoring programs for Fortune 500 companies. Blackridge Ltd.’s Jean Valence, AIA, Boston, has come to a similar conclusion. “Research continued on page 32
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practice

has made it clear that a practice is more profitable and more effective at retaining clients and staff if it offers a professional development process," she says. "It strengthens their own internal culture."

direct access

MITHUN in Seattle, where Moldow is a principal, has a 50-year legacy of mentoring. Its founder, Omer Mithun, was a professor at the University of Washington. "Coming to this firm, you still have that sense of the value of education and mentoring junior staff," says Moldow, who shows the ropes to three protegés. Each of them approached her for help in different areas.

At MITHUN (profiled in depth beginning on page 52), mentoring is entwined in the company culture. A written policy makes clear that one-on-one coaching is part of the responsibility of senior staff. "No one will look askance if they're spending time talking to someone," Moldow says. "It's not the business that makes it hard, but a sense of shyness on the junior person's part."

After an unsatisfactory experiment in formally pairing people up, MITHUN began encouraging protegés to choose their own mentors. But they're given help with the process. During annual reviews, for example, employees are asked to define their professional interests and goals. In the discussion, the supervisor will frequently offer to approach a particular architect about being his or her mentor.

"The protegés can ask their coaches to go for coffee, have lunch, or simply walk over to their desk when they're feeling lost about something," Moldow says. "The relationship can be about getting access to professional information, as well as a greater understanding about how the firm works."

creating the culture

Mentoring is a more fluid affair at The Miller/Hull Partnership, another Seattle firm. "The word mentor is one of those overused drones, like the word synergy," says Bob Hull, FAIA. "It sounds like you're wearing a cape and felt hat, which is not the idea. It's to transfer information and be a source for questions that come up." New hires are assigned a seasoned architect to help them get

a mentee: mithun's elizabeth macpherson

Firms that actively promote mentoring also make it easy for ambitious employees to rise in the company. Those interwoven elements are what attracted interior architect Elizabeth MacPherson, IIDA, ASID, to MITHUN five years ago. MacPherson, who oversees the interiors department, chose principal Leslie Moldow, AIA, to be a mentor. "I went to her for help in pursuing the next steps of my career, but also for help facilitating MITHUN's next steps," MacPherson says. "I wondered, what does MITHUN need to attain a higher level of interior design, and how could my skills be a part of that plan?"

MacPherson was drawn to Moldow both for the ways they're alike and the ways they're different. Like MacPherson, Moldow enjoys working on big-picture problems. "There's an analytical and a business part of our world, and she has an inclination toward that," MacPherson says. "She's a great problem-solver." But MacPherson also coveted Moldow's communication style. "She's exceedingly direct, refreshingly so," MacPherson says. "When I first came here that was something I felt like I needed to work on in dealing with other people."

A while back, MacPherson was concerned that the larger firm didn't fully understand the role of the interi-
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the lay of the land. But it doesn’t take long before knowledge gaps become more specific. Then, senior staff tries to stimulate discovery by pointing people in the right direction.

“Coaching in architectural firms used to happen mostly around technical issues, but now staff need to stimulate discovery by pointing people in the right direction. It doesn’t take long before involved,” he says. “A little intellectual curiosity is ingrained. The three partners—Tom Meyer, AIA, Jeff Scherer, FAIA, and Garth Rockcastle, FAIA—have all taught architecture at the University of Minnesota. Rockcastle currently leads the continuing education program there. “People like the blurring of the academic and practice worlds that exists here because of our teaching,” says Meyer.

Every few weeks, part of an afternoon is set aside for a small group of people to review a project they haven’t been involved with. It’s a chance for those who are new to practicing architecture to voice their ideas early on. “They often bring a voice from their academic experience that’s a little purer and more idealistic,” Meyer says, “but they also hear the more experienced voices critiquing the project.”

Teaching and learning are also inseparable at Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, based in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. “Every architect who joins us does both, imparting a point of view and their own intelligence even if they’re a junior in experience,” says Bernard Cywinski, AIA, of the Philadelphia office. Because there’s collegiality, new hires can prove themselves quickly. “It’s very interactive,” he says. “Young people enjoy that for its own sake. And seasoned architects who join us can contribute in a major way immediately.”

At MITHUN, architects at all levels also contribute their knowledge through a series of groups that meet monthly on interest areas such as technology, project management, and design. “It’s not so much teaching as a mutual discussion,” Moldow says. “The computer group might be working on a better way to set up our plotting guidelines. People in the trenches will have very good ideas about that.” Through these groups, people often find their mentors. And the process also nurtures leadership. Certain employees will rise to the challenge of taking on a project, or acting as a coach or mentor.

management skills more than ever;” Hull says. “We need to be able to talk well, listen well, and level well, especially in the public arena, where we get barraged by opinions. We may say to an employee, ‘You need to talk to Norm about getting your process down on this job.’” Nor does Hull hesitate to involve the novice architects in competitive interviews with potential clients. “It rings true with clients that you’ve got this range of people involved,” he says. “A little bit of youth adds spice.”

“It’s not so much teaching as a mutual discussion,” Moldow says. “The computer group might be working on a better way to set up our plotting guidelines. People in the trenches will have very good ideas about that.” Through these groups, people often find their mentors. And the process also nurtures leadership. Certain employees will rise to the challenge of taking on a project, or acting as a coach or mentor.

taking stock

Annual performance reviews typically formalize the discussion of an employee’s goals and knowledge gaps. But at BCJ there are few surprises. “When you have a dialogue environment all the time, these sessions tend to be a verification of what you know rather than new news,” Cywinski says. The reviews are seen as a chance to have a more complete discussion of long-term goals and personal concerns. It’s a way to document, say, an architect’s interest in going after the Rome Prize, teaching in some capacity, or taking a continuing education course.

Cottle Graybal Yaw’s reviews aren’t just top-down. Once a year all the employees write constructive criticisms of each other. During the review session they hear not just the management
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group's evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses, but comments from the entire staff. "It's a good way to improve," Cottle says. "People will then talk about the kinds of projects they want more experience with. Or they'll say, 'I don't know enough about the financial management of the firm.' A fair number ask to take courses—and there's an equal amount of steering by us.”

class time
With more and more states requiring continuing education credits for architects to maintain their licenses, architecture firms are expanding the pool of time and money for employees to earn those credits. Twice a month, NBBJ International, Columbus, Ohio, hosts brown-bag lunches covering AIA continuing education coursework. Equal time is devoted to Intern Development Program seminars. Under the IDP, even one-on-one mentorships earn points. "Although interns meet with their mentors informally, they're asked for some type of documentation on a quarterly basis," notes NBBJ's Quentin Elliot, Associate AIA. "It can be just a piece of paper that says you've talked about what you're doing on a project or an issue that relates to your career path. If you set short-term goals, it keeps you focused.”

mentoring by the book
Looking for a mentor? Check out “Initiatives,” a do-it-yourself package from Menttium Corp., Minneapolis, marketed to people at all levels of a firm. Using two books and a video, the authors walk individuals through the process of finding a mentor and growing the relationship. “Circles” is another Menttium product, designed for 15 to 25 people. It's geared toward a group of one mentor and mentees with similar objectives. Go to www.menttium.com, or call 952.814.2600.

After a year of employment at Cottle Graybal Yaw, employees are granted three days off and full tuition for outside classes, continued on page 38
The premier SmartSystem Home of the Year Awards, sponsored by SmartSystem Siding, honors beautiful homes with great elevations that feature SmartSystem products. There are four entry categories, including single-family detached homes of all sizes, single-family attached homes and manufactured or modular homes. One project will be chosen as the 2002 SmartSystem Home of the Year.

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whether it’s to learn new design or technology skills or take a Dale Carnegie course. They request permission in a written proposal; when the class is over, they present what they’ve learned.

Alternatively, Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle typically pays for tuition costs but only half the time off. “We’ve found it’s a way for them to take it seriously,” Meyer says. “It’s also a way for them to pursue their career honestly. But we’re in the process of expanding our education resources.”

James, Harwick + Partners, Dallas, is also stepping up education efforts. Rather than a scattershot approach to attendance at workshops and conventions, the firm is focusing on interest areas that match up with people’s strengths, weaknesses, and where they’re headed. Mark Wolf, AIA, says he’s figuring out how best to measure a program’s success.

“We want to get people to grade the quality of the seminar or workshop so we don’t repeat a weak class with another person,” Wolf says. “After six months, has it been productive? If not, did we not give them the right follow-up within the firm? If I send someone to a presentation workshop and put them in working drawings for the next six months, I’ve stunted the opportunities.” The renewed effort is motivated by JH+P’s goal to grow and provide more opportunities for young people to advance in the firm.

“Modern-day mentoring isn’t just a relationship. It’s a way of thinking that makes teaching and learning a priority. “In most firms, promotion is partly dependent on leadership skills, and helping people grow professionally is a very important leadership skill,” says Blackridge’s Valence. “So there’s a real incentive for people to learn to be good teachers. Those who can never make the time are probably not leadership material.”

Cheryl Weber is a contributing writer in Severna Park, Md.
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This is our editors’ choice award. This is the competition for which we, the staff of residential architect, are the jury. There are no entries, no official guidelines, no muss, no fuss. We simply select the architects we deem most worthy, based on our knowledge of their work. Above and beyond distinguished achievement, we search for architects who have been, are presently, or promise to become important leaders in their practice area. Consequently, our awards come in three shapes and sizes: Hall of Fame, Top Firm, and Rising Star.

The winners this year are Christopher Alexander, Hall of Fame; MITHUN Architects + Designers+ Planners, Top Firm; and Robert M. Gurney, Rising Star. Berkeley, Calif.–based Chris Alexander, author of the seminal text A Pattern Language, has shaped houses and architects’ minds for more than 20 years. He continues to help shape the debate about what makes beautiful, functional, soulful architecture. Seattle, Wash.–based MITHUN has managed to do what few firms have accomplished: They’ve built a large, thriving, diverse practice devoted largely to residential architecture. Bob Gurney’s triumph is his emergence as a top-flight Modernist in a Classicist’s town, Washington, D.C. If you build Modern there, you can build it anywhere.

Our winners do what you do—they balance client, site, and budget—but they do it in ways we can all learn from. That’s why they’re residential architect’s 2001 Leadership Award recipients. Turn the page and read all about them.
Christopher Alexander's theory and practice promote an architecture that nurtures human life.

What is architecture? What is the role of the architect in society? What is a good building? Should architects strive for beauty in their work? What is beauty? These are matters that every architect must ponder from time to time. But no architect of our time has explored such fundamental questions in greater depth or breadth, or with greater persistence, clarity, and originality of thought, than Christopher Alexander. As a theorist, teacher, author, practicing architect, and builder, Alexander has taken it upon himself to question everything, from construction details and the effects of color to the process by which a global species makes and remakes its environment and, beyond, to the objective bases of beauty itself.

Along the way, his work has informed, inspired, and provoked generations of architects. His most widely read book to date, A Pattern Language (co-authored with Sara Ishikawa and Murray Silverstein), has served as an essential text for architecture students, architects, and builders. Yet the book is so accessible that it remains popular among lay readers more than 20 years after its first publication and so universal that it has become a model not only for architects, planners, and homeowners but also for software developers. In his architectural practice he has shown a way to create, without being merely imitative, buildings with the richness, resonance, and life we are accustomed to experiencing only in old buildings. His analysis of the structural features of healthy communities provided the theoretical and practical underpinnings of the New Urbanism. His outspoken critique of the Modernist architectural establishment and architectural education has made him both a hero and a bete noire.

Bricks and mortarboards

This is not the career Alexander envisioned when, as a young bricklayer's apprentice, he first set his sights on the profession.

"I feel that in some ways I was like a little kid," he says. "I wanted to be an architect, I went to architecture school, I found out that what I learned in architecture school was nonsense." At Cambridge University in the 1950s, he remembers, "The air was thick with Van Doesburg" and a doctrinaire Modernism that struck Alexander, who also studied mathematics, as the height of absurdity.

"I went through the Cambridge School of Architecture almost in a state of desperation," he says. At one point, assigned to design a house and knowing that his notion of a proper building would provoke only ridicule—Alexander pulled what he remembers as a rather juvenile prank. Idly doodling "some Mondrian-esque lines" on paper, the thought occurred to him: "I'll just put a glass box around this and I'll call it a house." Summoned later to speak with the director of the department about his work, he feared he had earned himself a ticket home. But the director issued no reprimand. As Alexander remembers, "He walks up to me, puts his arm around my shoulder, and says, 'Chris, my boy, this is exactly what we want.'" When the meeting ended Alexander phoned his father and reported, "This is a lunatic asylum.

Rather than destroy his interest in architecture, however, Alexander's architecture school experiences only spurred him to dig more deeply into the matter. After graduating from Cambridge, he says, "I had kind of an instinct about the U.S. I..."
In siting a building, Alexander asks, "What is the most beautiful spot?" Then he builds around it, not on it. "You are actually shaping the garden before you're shaping the house," he says. In this and every subsequent stage of a project, Alexander insists that architecture must evolve on the site rather than on paper. "You can't have a successful building in which every part is appropriately unique unless each part has the opportunity to take shape fairly close to its production."

decided, 'I'm going to go to the U.S. and I'm going to figure this thing out from scratch.' I went to Harvard with that goal: What is architecture? And I began with anthropology, because I knew that there were so many cultures around the world that had created so many beautiful things." The work Alexander began at Harvard led to a Ph.D. in architecture, a professorship at the University of California at Berkeley, and a career-long pursuit of the universal principles of life-sustaining design.

building blocks
Alexander’s process was not merely to catalog what he saw, even the best of it. Rather, it was —and remains—to identify structures and environments that foster objectively measurable positive effects, distill from them the essential qualities that make them work, and develop systems to produce buildings that embody those qualities. It is a deceptively simple approach. Yet it has been remarkably effective at making explicit the unwritten rules that underlie generation upon generation of building around the world.

His research also shed light on what remains perhaps the central paradox of architecture in the late 20th and early 21st centuries: why, with more and more trained architects in the world, we seem less and less effective in creating an environment in which people feel comfortable, whole, and happy. A period that has produced a wealth of inspired buildings has also brought a coarsening of the common fabric. Alexander’s effort to decode the universal grammar of design was motivated by his sense that it was being flouted or ignored by an architectural profession that elevated individual artistic expression above all else.

"The idea that a few people are sort of priests of architecture has wreaked havoc," Alexander says. "It has served architecture very badly indeed." From the second half of the 20th century, academic architecture has occupied many of the brightest minds in the field in a closed conversation among architects and critics. The result has been self-consciously avant-garde or ironic work that has drifted further and further from the straightforward needs of the people who will use it. "It is the desire to be remarkable that removes things continuously from our ordinary lives," Alexander says. And because the desire to be remarkable has come to rule our built environment, "we are constantly trapped in places where we cannot be ordinary human beings."

Meanwhile, the public’s desire for buildings they can relate to is served largely by mass-market kitsch traditionalism, the architectural equivalent of junk food. Skilled architects who wish to address the needs of their clients in a direct, unself-conscious way have often had to go outside their training to do so.

In a day when architecture is viewed, taught, critiqued, and consumed primarily in the form of two-dimensional images—including photographs in magazines like this one—the photographic image exerts a tremendous influence on the actual design of buildings. But the qualities of a captivating graphic composition are quite different from those of a deeply livable environment. For more than 30 years, Alexander’s work has challenged architects to delve deeper, to serve the needs of the body and spirit in a way that photography cannot capture, a way that must be experienced directly. Architects recognize this quality in the special places and buildings in their lives, Alexander says, "but for 60 or 80 years, it has not been on the agenda. It’s a private feeling people have, but it’s not an acknowledged ‘this is what we ought to do when we build.’ It’s crazy, really, that the thing that is the core of all architecture should be, at least for our time, so elusive."

Alexander’s work has made this essential quality less elusive than it once was, and less likely to be dismissed as a historical artifact. "I think Christopher Alexander is probably the most important theoretician on architectural
In his practice, Alexander strives to set aside any preconceived images of style, working instead to render a version of what he calls "the archetypal living building. You have to carry this in your belly or in your mind as a general example," he says. To create buildings with their own sense of life, "you eliminate your egotistical desire to impose yourself on the building."
design of the present day," says architect and
educator Edward Allen, author the classic text-
Alexander’s analysis of past and current architec-
tural practice, Allen says, has been “not only
deep and important, but also largely correct. He
doesn’t bat a thousand, but he has undertaken
such a vast scope of stuff, it’s astonishing how
well he does bat.”

archetype casting
Alexander has done more than simply challenge
architects to produce better work. In his books
A Pattern Language, The Timeless Way of Build-
ing, and The Oregon Experiment, he offered sub-
tle and powerful tools with which to do so. (An
earlier book, Notes on the Synthesis of Form,
and his soon-to-be-published The Nature of Order
address the physical foundations of form and
beauty.) New Urbanist planner Andres Duany
calls Alexander “one of the most influential peo-
ple who has ever been in the design world. His
influence on us, operationally, has been enor-
mous.” Sarah Susanka, whose popular books
The Not So Big House and Creating the Not
So Big House have appealed to both architects
and homeowners in an effort to change the way
Americans build, credits Alexander as the indis-
 pensable guiding light of her career.

“I consider myself one of the first genera-
tion of architects brought up with A Pattern
Language,” she says. For Susanka, the book
came along at a crucial moment. Early in her
training she sensed that architecture had fallen
victim to overspecialization. Architects were
taught to believe that they held “special, private
knowledge,” which their clients could never
fully grasp. Young architects lived under an op-
pressive standard of “doing something nobody
has ever done before, for the sake of doing some-
thing that’s never been done before.” Meanwhile,
generational continuity in the trades had broken
down, scattering the cultural capital once invested
in the hands of master craftspeople. “Things that
were handed down from father to son and mother
to daughter for hundreds of years no longer
were.” As a result, she says, “people lost their
confidence.”

“Alexander put forth a completely new para-
digm in architecture,” Susanka says. Eschewing
professionalist jargon and arcane theories, he
spoke directly to the question of what kinds of
places support vibrant human life. Refusing to
turn his back on millennia of human experimen-
tation, he sought answers in real buildings and
real communities, and he employed a scientific
approach to discerning their effects on people.
“He was speaking a whole different language
than anyone else had up until that point,” Susanka
says. It is a language that speaks with both
authority and specificity about the constituents
of a healthy built environment—green corridors
into urban areas, small public squares, paths that
connect houses without crossing car roads, hous-
es with cave-like spaces for small children to
play in, semi-independent spaces for teenagers—
a suitable habitat, if you will. A Pattern Language
gave architects and their clients a common
ground, a vocabulary with which lay people could
identify what they wanted in a building, even if
they had never experienced it before. “What he
was doing was giving back a certain confidence,”
Susanka says, “reminding people of what they
had forgotten.”

Alexander’s critics have long dismissed him as
a nostalgic whose work has no contemporary rel-
evance. But while his work is replete with ele-
ments banished from the Modernist palette—he
champions the use of ornament, for example—he
says, “I don’t think it has anything in it that is
a desire for the archaic. I view it very much as
going forward.” The quality he seeks—a quality
amply in evidence in his own buildings—is not
the province of any style or period. His descript-
ion of a visitor center he built for West Dean
College, West Sussex, U.K.—“You feel that
you’re in the presence of a traditional architecture of some uncertain type”—could apply to any of his buildings. But the fact that his architecture feels pre-Modern may say as much about Modernism as about Alexander. Modernism and its offshoots may someday come to be viewed as a subordinate branch of architecture’s evolutionary tree; if so, returning to the main trunk to move ahead might well at first seem retrograde.

In hindsight, this champion of timeless values in building seems to have been ahead of the avant-garde from his days at Cambridge. Modernism, Alexander notes, drew much of its inspiration from industrial mass production and the scientific theory, current during the early 20th century, that all matter could be reduced to identical repeating units. This gave rise to what Alexander calls the movement’s “insane love affair with repetition.” Decades later, the scientific vision of a neatly uniform underlying structure has fallen apart. “The idea of identical repeating units was a washout from the beginning,” Alexander says. “All of this arose out of a scientific view of the world that was just wrong.” The more closely scientists observe matter, the more they see not uniformity but uniqueness.

Uniqueness is at the crux of Alexander’s vision. But it is not the uniqueness of the avant-garde, of difference for the sake of being different. He draws his parallels from biological systems and computer science, each of which employs simple sets of instructions—genetic codes or software scripts—to produce infinitely varied and unique responses to data inputs or environmental circumstances. The same genetic material for, say, a tree will give rise to a distinctly different organism in each different environment in which a tree might grow. The same spreadsheet will give a different set of output figures for every set of inputs. In the realm of architecture and planning, this means that a single set of governing principles—a pattern language—can give rise to an infinite variety of design solutions, each appropriately unique to its unique circumstances.

Today’s architectural avant-garde relies on computer technology to envision and engineer increasingly self-referential and abstractly sculptural buildings—dubbed “blobs” by architect Greg Lynn, a practitioner in the new genre. Alexander has embraced computer science and computer technology in a more profound way, as both metaphor and the medium with which to advance his vision of “rebuilding the earth.”

Alexander’s application of computer technology to architecture—to the fundamental work of design, not merely to imaging or drafting—began in the 1960s. In its structure, A Pattern Language bears much in common with the scripts that computer programs employ to carry out complex functions. Indeed, software engineers have adopted the book as a structural model with applications in their own field. In its nesting structure and links between patterns, the book anticipated the structure of the World Wide Web.

With the current widespread use of the Internet and computer-controlled production of made-to-order building materials, the world may have at last caught up with A Pattern Language. Alexander has responded to these developments with a Web site, patternlanguage.com, which offers the content of A Pattern Language—in the form of “generative sequences” for the creation of spaces—as a kind of open source code of environmental design. Anyone with an Internet connection can access the site for guidance in planning and building a variety of spaces: a garden, a small addition, a house, a neighborhood, an office building.

Web-based architecture may yet sound a bit ethereal, but Alexander’s theory—and his own practice—are deeply rooted in the nitty-gritty of construction. For more than 30 years, his Center for Environmental Structure has served as both a laboratory for his theories and an active architec-
The quality Alexander seeks is elusive—"As far as I know, it's never been described in print," he says—but it makes itself known by the feelings it engenders in people. In the built environment, as in every sphere of life, "There is music that is distant from the people who hear it, and there is music that gets everyone singing and dancing."

From its base in Berkeley, Calif., CES has undertaken projects ranging from town and community plans to individual houses in the U.S. and as far afield as Peru, Austria, and Japan. From this experience Alexander has derived one iron-clad imperative: The architect must direct the construction process. "The unification of design and construction—the willingness of the architect to take responsibility for construction and not just drawing—is probably the single most critical issue," he says. He has pursued this approach in crafting a series of buildings that express, even through the limited medium of photography, a rare emotional depth.

"The architect as artist is the core of our activity," Alexander says, "and I mean an artist in the sense of making beautiful things." For architects to realize their full potential as artists, he maintains, "the love of buildings has to become a love of building."

It is the love of both buildings and creating them that has animated Alexander's career. But while every love bears a core of mystery, Alexander has been unwilling to let the mystery rest. By delving deeper into how the things we build can support us, enlighten us, move us, make us better, he has both enlarged and enriched his profession. ra

Bruce D. Snider writes for residential architect's sister publication CUSTOM HOME.
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The design of MITHUN's new office on the Seattle waterfront encourages a relaxed, informal atmosphere. Shown, from left: housing division partners Vince Ferrese, AIA, Ron van der Veen, AIA, and Steve Cox, AIA; seniors' housing partners Leslie Moldow, AIA, and Jerry McDevitt, AIA; and housing partners Jim Bodoia, AIA, Bill Kreager, AIA, and Lisa Folkins.

Scratch the surface of any large architectural firm—say, one with 150 or more employees. Chances are, you’ll find a major office and retail component. There’s also apt to be an institutional division, a hospitality specialty, maybe a medical facilities branch. In fact, the big firms tend to specialize in everything—everything, that is, except for housing.

That’s where the 50-year-old Seattle firm MITHUN Architects + Designers + Planners, known until last April as Mithun Partners, comes in. In a genre where the majority of large architecture firms might do a couple of custom homes or an apartment building per year, MITHUN has built a national reputation for well-designed, regionally appropriate residential work. But it hasn’t done so at the cost of its other specialties—among the most highly praised buildings to come out of its 150-person office recently are the award-winning REI flagship stores in Seattle and Denver, and the Seattle headquarters for Planned Parenthood of Western Washington. Current high-profile projects include the $35 million Puget Sound Environmental Learning Center on Bainbridge Island, Wash., and the $200 million Pacific Northwest Aquarium in Seattle, which MITHUN is designing with London’s Terry Farrell & Partners. The firm’s increasing success in the residential market, which makes up 50 percent to 60 percent of its practice, only seems to have enhanced its performance in other arenas.

Most Improved
When Omer Mithun founded the firm back in 1950 in Bellevue, Wash., he intended it as a teaching practice, where young architects could learn on the job. The Norwegian immigrant and professor at the University of Washington initially wanted a residential firm, but he soon became interested in other project types. He realized he needed someone else to nurture the residential arm of his business, and in 1967 he hired Bill Kreager, a young architect who’d served in the Peace Corps and worked at NBBJ in Seattle. “He told me to take the housing division and run with it,” recalls Kreager, AIA, now a partner at MITHUN.

Throughout the 1970s and ’80s, the housing department of Mithun Partners turned out a number of perfectly respectable production projects, mostly single-family communities. The firm established solid relationships with Seattle’s home builders and developers, and learned to infuse production homes with character by paying more attention to detailing and scale than was customary at the time. “We refer to this style as ‘Bellevue French,’” says Kreager, tongue in cheek, of a mid-80s, MITHUN-designed neighborhood called Kempton Downs. The lots in the project are fairly large for the area, about a quarter of an acre. The garages are turned in towards the homes in an unusual pre-New Urbanism attempt to de-emphasize that part of the house. “It’s nice-looking,” he adds. “But it’s still sprawl.” MITHUN specialized—it still does—in designing communities with several different elevations but only a few floor plans. It’s a strategy that endeared the firm to both builders, who could save money by paying for fewer plans, and consumers, who could choose from an eclectic, but always contextual, array of house styles.

By the late 1980s, Omer Mithun had passed away. The remaining owners decided it was time to shake things up a little, and in 1990 they moved Mithun Partners across Lake Washington, to Seattle. “It was a big step for them,” says Tom Kuniholm, AIA, a former employee who now has his own Seattle-based practice. “Being in Seattle
MITHUN draws on a deep bag of tricks to handle the effects of high density. At Highland Parc (left), in Redmond, Wash., careful massing and stacking de-emphasizes the attached nature of the units. At Amberleigh (below, left) in Mill Creek, Wash., varied materials and elevations help the close-set houses stand apart. Bright colors and playful roof lines distinguish St. Anthony Village (below, center), a seniors’ housing project in Portland, Ore. And the courtyards at Poulsbo Place in Poulsbo, Wash., (below, right) give the residents of this very dense, single-family community direct access to semi-private green space.

Kreager and his team were also raising the bar on their own designs. And Kreager started a planning and a landscape architecture division in 1990 and 1998, respectively. “We needed more control over the execution of our projects,” he says. “What better way to have that than to bring planning and landscaping in-house?”

Along with Calthorpe Associates of Berkeley, Calif., MITHUN co-planned Northwest Landing in DuPont, Wash., a well-publicized, Neo-Traditional town for the Weyerhaeuser Corporation. More and more, the firm began to take on mixed-use and infill residential projects, marking them with the same attention to detail and willingness to experiment that had distinguished their suburban predecessors. MITHUN re-established a name for itself during the 1990s, this time for innovative, high-density work, and national housing awards began to pile up in its offices.

going with the flow

The firm’s growing concentration on higher-density housing was no accident. Urban sprawl hit the Pacific Northwest in a big way during the 1990s. And in 1996 the state of Washington developed a growth management plan that mandated higher densities in almost every county. MITHUN saw this law coming, and started marketing itself as a player in the infill and mixed-use markets. “When we market, we pursue urban, multifamily, anything that serves the growth management issue,” says Kreager, who’s spent the past 15 years on the NAHB and AIA lecture circuits, talking about ways to make density appealing to buyers. Though the firm designs about six projects under way in Washington, Oregon, Utah, Idaho, Canada, and Japan, and dozens of design awards under its belt. As usual, though, the firm was looking ahead. Its offices on five floors of the historic Times Square Building in downtown Seattle were comfortable and attractive. But they didn’t promote the social, information-sharing atmosphere that MITHUN’s leaders felt would be necessary in the years ahead. “The last straw for me was when I asked someone in the elevator if he was new,” recalls Kreager. “It turned out he’d been with MITHUN for a year and a half!”

The company leased an old warehouse building on Seattle’s waterfront and set about renovating. They moved into their new offices in April 2000 and, according to employees, the difference in atmosphere is palpable. The studio takes up one gigantic, loftlike floor. Everyone from intern to principal sits at desks out in the open, not shut away in offices. Staff members sit in project teams; when they complete one project, they may change desks, depending on the team they’re assigned to next. Wheeled filing cabinets and document draw-
Contextuality is a key theme for MITHUN. The brick facades, bay windows, and steeply pitched roofs of Victorian Townhomes (left and top) reference the project’s neighbors in the Queen Anne Hill section of Seattle. A stepped site plan and natural materials help tie a custom home to its sloped, wooded site (above).

In addition to fostering a more interactive atmosphere, the studio showcases one of MITHUN’s major initiatives for the next century: sustainability. Reclaimed lumber and engineered wood provide structural support, and a passive cooling system eliminates the need for air conditioning. Recycled carpet and wheat-board furniture use fewer resources than conventional materials do, and low-VOC paints and low-toxicity adhesives make for better indoor air quality. An expansive view of the snow-capped peaks surrounding Puget Sound remind staff and visitors why sustainability is so important in the first place.

The entire setup takes full advantage of MITHUN’s interdisciplinary prowess. Because project teams, rather than divisions, sit together, it’s very easy to assign architects from different divisions to the same project. “Our diversity has proved to be a great strength,” Kreager says. “When we’re doing mixed-use, for example, we have the ability to grab an architect who specializes in retail and a housing architect and a landscape architect, et cetera, and put them all together.” Like a well-designed Web site (which MITHUN also has—www.mithun.com), the office provides a one-stop, comprehensive look at how the firm functions and what it produces. Don’t look for the firm to be going anywhere soon, either. Should the number of employees grow, there’s a chunk of additional office space in the building, currently rented out to a high-tech company, into which it could expand.

**Taking Action**

While a sparkling new office is certainly a drawing point for Seattle’s brimming talent pool, MITHUN isn’t putting all its eggs in that basket. Since the days of Omer Mithun, the firm has been known for mentoring young architects (for more on this, see Practice, page 30). The current 15 partners continue to emphasize professional education, organizing an annual company trip to places rich in architectural heritage. Past destinations for the trip have included Italy, Spain, Japan, Washington, D.C., and England. The partners have also made efforts to foster interdisciplinary learning. January 2001, for example, saw both Landscape Architecture Week and Interior Design Week at MITHUN, in which displays and exhibits from each department lined the office’s central, open-air walkway. “These weeks are designed to educate the entire staff about what each department does,” says marketing associate Kipepeo Brown. The MITHUN arts and crafts show, held in February, allowed employees with artistic hobbies to bring in and display examples of their work.

Like more and more firms these days, MITHUN offers a flexible work schedule. And a sincere social consciousness permeates its general office culture. On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, callers on hold hear excerpts from the civil-rights leader’s speeches, rather than standard hold music. Kreager and some co-workers recently started up a group they call MAHI, or MITHUN Affordable Housing Initiative. “Bill Kreager at MITHUN has really been mining this issue of affordable housing,” says Mark Hinshaw, FAIA, the head of urban design at the Seattle firm LMN Architects. “Speaking to groups, almost doing advocacy work. It’s unusual for a design firm to take that kind of role.”

Kreager is also fresh from a stint as head of the AIA’s Housing PIA, where his work on behalf of residential architects resulted in the launch of an annual residential design awards program. It represents a step up in stature for residential architects and for the firm. Poised for a broadening of its national profile and professional scope, the former Mithun Partners has rethought its image and its name. It’s now officially MITHUN Architects + Designers + Planners. “Everyone already called us ‘Mithun,’” says company COO Bruce Williams, AIA. “We were building a new office and it was a new century, and it seemed like as good a time as any for a new name and logo.” The punchy new moniker, along with a bold, graphic logo replacing a rather stodgy old one, expresses the firm’s ever-growing confidence and capabilities.
For 10 years now, architect Bob Gurney, AIA, has been asking clients to clear away the encrustation of the past. When they envision their homes, he wants them to see—well, nothing in particular. Just a dwelling that will be a spontaneous response to the site and the way they really live.

Gurney is thoroughly at home in the modern world. He’s never liked duplicating details 100 years old—or 50, for that matter. His buildings are not about the coolness of mid-century Modernism, with its mute materials and sparse details. They’re about color, light, texture, and form. His work is edgy and abstract in composition, and as sumptuous in materials and details as it is clean of line. It hasn’t been easy honing that aesthetic in Washington, D.C., a city that worships the past. Nevertheless, as Gurney ends his first decade of practice, his talent is drawing notice. He’s been rewarded with increasingly substantial commissions. And this year one of his projects won an AIA national honor award for excellence in design—one of 30, only four of which were residential.

Classicism dismissed

Gurney’s market—primarily the nation’s capital and its prosperous suburbs—consists of clients who have typically demanded stylistic elements, such as a Palladian window or some twist on Postmodernism, that will help sell the house down the road. That’s changing lately. “It doesn’t seem like there’s a style everyone is a slave to right now,” Gurney says, “so there’s a lot more openness to everything you do. It frees you up in terms of client expectations.”

Case in point: the Fitch/O’Rourke residence completed last year, a kinetic design that received widespread publicity, the national AIA award, and a design award in this magazine, too. All Gurney designs have a certain look—bold geometric shapes, a precise sense of organization, and artful, meticulous details. But this is probably his best work to date. In it, the architect transformed a row-house wreck with a complex puzzle of diagonal lines and curves that trace back to a theoretical center point 28 feet east of the house. The second floor pares away along those lines to pull light into the center of the house. Throughout, intersecting planes of concrete, rusted steel, polished mahogany, corrugated metal, and shimmering copper wire cloth play up the house’s concept as a piece of Modern sculpture.

“Gurney’s architecture has a very strong sense of order,” observes noted D.C. architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen, FAIA. “In the Fitch/O’Rourke house, he used so many materials in one room. But because his order was so strong it carried the day.”

The project was a defining moment. After a decade designing renovations and additions that struggled to be Modern while respecting the historical context, he was finally given a chance to cut loose. The positive publicity it garnered helped Gurney land larger-scale commissions, including a 12,000-square-foot house in Great Falls, Va., and a 4,000-square-foot residence in the mountains of Prince William County, Va., both currently under way.

Gurney’s success might also be measured out in design awards—36 at last count. A high percentage of design competitions Gurney enters, he wins—a factor that has given his work confidence. “When he loses, you watch him shift,” Jacobsen says. “The only people who can really look at architecture are your peers. When they give you an award, it means something.” The recognition has also helped attract ambitious clients who actually want what he does—clean, Modern design. They’re more trusting now, and
In the Fitch/O'Rourke living room, Gurney juxtaposed raw materials such as rusted steel and board-formed concrete on the fireplace wall with refined Brazilian cherry and maple floors. The rear facade (opposite, top)—a combination of Kalwall, steel windows and doors, and glass—brings light and energy to a formerly static space.
more open to the ideas he proposes, than they were five years ago. In turn, his work has matured, from axially organized kitchens and room additions to more sculpturally complex custom homes. “I’m subscribing more to the philosophy now that things can be balanced and organized without being symmetrical,” he says. “The work is a little looser.”

**modern mentor**

Born on Staten Island, N.Y., Gurney, 43, is the son of a builder. His father constructed the house he grew up in. “I was always exposed to building sites,” Gurney says. “I liked that.” He also loved to draw, and it became clear to him early on that he would be an architect. Gurney received his bachelor’s degree in architecture from Catholic University in 1980 and continued on to earn a master’s two years later. “I liked the way we learned about architecture there,” he says. “It was a design-oriented school as opposed to technical or theoretical.”

About that time he met his future wife, Thérèse Baron Gurney, an interior designer. One of the couple’s earliest collaborations was their own tiny Capitol Hill row house, a gut renovation they did on a shoestring. Upon completion in 1989, it promptly got published in the Washington Post “Home” section. And the interest it generated helped launch Gurney’s practice the following year.

Every career needs a guiding light or two, someone to look to for inspiration, advice, and encouragement. Another fortuitous event for Gurney occurred in 1988, when Thérèse signed on as the staff interior designer for Hugh Jacobsen and his ultra-high-end clients. “Jacobsen was one of the few local architects doing real Modern stuff, and he was getting a lot of exposure for it,” Gurney remembers. “Once Thérèse began working for him, I got to know him very well. He was a good source of inspiration, and someone who could advise you on the practical level—whether to rent office space or work from my basement—as well as the architectural level.”

Gurney says Thérèse also exerts a considerable influence on his work. “No one has been more helpful than she has,” he says. “Thérèse works on my projects from the very informal level of bouncing ideas about materials around, to being hired as the interior designer on a good portion of them. She has a great eye.”

Even Gurney’s loosest sketches include furnishings, ensuring that the living space will accommodate, say, the fireplace, the television, and a seating group oriented toward the view. Cabinetry, wall surfaces, and stair rails are also integral to Gurney’s designs. “I spend an incredible amount of time thinking about those materials and working out those details,” he says. For example, his office created some 50 study models for the island in the Fitch/O’Rourke kitchen.

“When you create architecture and interiors simultaneously, you have less of a need to have a strong impact with the furniture,” he says.

In that sense alone, Gurney’s steady collaboration with Thérèse is a powerful one. Fabrics, carpets, and furniture are usually chosen to create a seamless composition. “Thérèse realizes the furnishings are background to the architecture,” he says. “Whereas a lot of interiors people just want to leave their stamp and ignore what the architect has done, I’m not competing with her on who’s going to have an impact with the project.”

The more formalized Gurney operation consists of three other people occupying part of a town house in Old Town Alexandria, Va. It’s a size he’s happy with for now—not so large he can’t be actively involved in every project, but big enough to serve the firm’s 25 or so active clients, with commissions ranging in scope from custom homes to kitchens to pieces of furniture. He still likes mixing up the small and large. “On large projects you can manipulate space and volume but quickly forget about the details,” he says. “The smaller projects make you rely on details and materials and how things are put together. Working at both ends of the spectrum has made the projects better.”

And in an age when most architectural firms have a computer on every desk, Gurney still thinks best with a pencil. “When I’m doing a
David Atterton

Gurney designed the Welch residence, with its simple geometries, in the early 1990s (left). Sited on a river near Annapolis, Md., the house’s gridded windows bring in woodsy views (below, far left). A family room added to a traditional house in the mid-1990s (second from left) blends the classic and contemporary. Gurney renovated his Capitol Hill row house (third from left) in 1989. The Lindenberger/Schutz home (model shown below) is currently under construction.

set of construction documents,” he says, “I’m putting the building together both in my head and on paper at the same time.”

**passionate perfectionist**

One of the buildings currently being put together is for Ben Schutz and Joanne Lindenberger, a married couple who are both psychologists. Like other Modernist architects, Gurney’s focus in this house is on adapting tried-and-true building materials such as concrete, wood, and metal to contemporary concepts of form, color, and space. The house, on a wooded hillside in Prince William County, takes advantage of river views to the east and a sloping ravine to the west. It’s essentially two volumes—one a rectangle, the other a trapezoid—connected on the main floor by a wood and glass circulation space. An elliptical piece pops out of the bigger volume, which shelters the main living areas. It’s rotated toward the best views and natural light. Inside, it defines an intimate seating area around the fireplace. The house has three different skins—ground face block, corrugated steel, and oxidized corten steel panels, which will take on the color of the surrounding earth.

Gurney says clients who hire him want to be surprised. They like not knowing what to expect the building to look like. That was the case with these owners. Says Schutz, “I’m an incredible control freak. But I also understand there are areas where I have no talent. I’m not so hamstrung by my need to be in control that I can’t let go and have someone else have that degree of freedom. In a million years we couldn’t have come up with what he did.”

A 20-page questionnaire, however, does draw out the more mundane aspects of clients’ lives, such as how many people sit at the dining room table and how many pairs of shoes they have. Gurney also sometimes asks if there’s a picture in a book or magazine that shows the character and spirit of a space they like, whether it’s high-ceilinged and light-filled or low-ceilinged and intimate. “But generally,” Gurney says, “I like to go into these projects without a lot of preconceived notions of what the building will look like, and respond more to the context.”

In choosing their architect, Lindenberger and Schutz delved into more than Gurney’s design portfolio. They were also interested in his knowledge of construction. Gurney’s complex, detailed drawings and assurances from past clients that he was a frequent presence on the site gave them the sense that this wasn’t a guy who designed and then “disappeared.” “The references all talked about him in a multidimensional way,” Schutz says. “He has a passionate perfectionism and cares deeply about getting a house built exactly as he designed it.”

What excites Gurney most about architecture is experimenting with such proven materials as copper, stainless-steel wire cloth, and rolling library hardware. “Finding new ways to use these things is always a lot of fun,” he says. His formula for success also includes an obsession with craft—putting materials together in such a way that they’ll look just as good in 20 years. “I’m not the kind of architect who will invent some new form,” he says. Rather, Gurney gravitates to both the rational and the theatrical, carefully choreographing light and movement, and orienting rooms toward certain views. “I’d like to think my work is ordered, well thought-out, and rigorous,” he says. “There’s usually something that’s guiding all the decisions, whether it’s some intellectual idea I’m trying to carry through or a certain geometry.”

And when he succeeds, the finished effect clicks with clients in an emotional way. Remembering the dramatic moment when Gurney unveiled the three-dimensional model of their new home, Schutz offers perhaps the highest praise an architect can hope to hear. “Bob’s very first response to our program was so astonishingly magical that we thought, ‘Aren’t we smart?’” Schutz enthuses. “He took not only our dream but our way of living—ideas we’ve had for 25 years—and got them all in there, and in such a perfect way. We’re in love with this house.”

Cheryl Weber is a contributing writer in Severna Park, Md.
noble salvage

for fine finishes, reclaimed and recycled lumber offers timeless appeal.

by nigel f. maynard

When Minneapolis-based SALA Architects set out to design the 1999 *Life* Dream House, the architects needed a material that could balance architectural aesthetics and environmental sustainability. Their solution? Handsome millwork—made not of run-of-the-mill lumber but of timber recovered from the bottom of Lake Superior.

“There is just something about that wood,” says principal Katherine A. Hillbrand, AIA, a member of the team that designed the *Life* house. “It gave a depth and a character that you normally find in older homes, yet the home was new.”

origin of species
Salvage timber has become a highly prized category that includes anything from logs pulled from the bottom of waterways to timber plucked from old barns, factories, warehouses, bridges, railroad tracks, pier pilings, and other vintage structures. The bulk of the wood comes from slow-growth trees nearly 1,000 years old, so the hard, durable boards are of the highest quality, with tight grains and extraordinary colors.

The product’s sustainability, says Tom Simmons, owner of Timeless Timbers in New Hope, Minn., is one reason it’s become popular with architects and well-informed, environmentally conscious custom-home clients. By recovering wood logs, he points out, the company helps reduce the need to harvest existing forests. But he admits the environmental benefit is only partially responsible for the wood’s rapid rise. For some people, it’s all about looks and history.

“The story behind the pieces is important for some clients,” he says. The hand-hewn white oak logs that his company sells, for example, “were cut for the king and queen of England in the early 1800s and put on a ship to take them to England for shipbuilding,” he explains. “But the ship sank in the St. Lawrence seaway and we are now recovering the cants.”

For architect Morris Adjmi, nothing beats salvage timber for interiors that come alive. “We use it for everything,” says Adjmi, president and principal of the architectural firm MAP in New York. “What’s nice about salvaged heart pine is that it has an immediate sense of comfort and coziness. It’s also very durable.”

Salvaged wood is available in many species and in enough forms for any project. Architect Paul Williger, who does primarily traditional work, likes the rustic appeal of hand-hewn rafters and barn-wood siding. “The material has a beautifully aged patina that you cannot find in new and freshly cut products,” says the principal of Appleton & Associates in Santa Monica, Calif. But you can also get finely graded antique planks for contemporary interiors. Fifteen years ago, only a handful of companies offered this precious product, but the list is growing every day.

continued on page 66
**solution** *n.* the answer to a problem, the act, method or process by which such an answer is obtained.

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Aging Stock

Timeless Timbers specializes in underwater salvage wood from the Midwest and Canada, but also sells reclaimed timber from barns and buildings. "The underwater stuff comes up as logs, so it looks brand-new," says Simmons. "But it can have different coloration because of the decomposing material in the water." His ever-changing stock includes red and white oak, various pines, red birch, red cypress, beech, and ash.

Goodwin Heart Pine, in Micanopy, Fla., offers river-recovered, 100 percent heart pine and heart cypress, salvage legacy heart pine, and Southern wild cherry. "For the carefree person, we also offer character-grade products, with nail holes and wormholes," says owner Carol Goodwin.

Susquehanna, Pa.–based Conklin's offers barn-wood siding, flooring, and hand-hewn beams—95 percent of which come from old barns along the Mid-Atlantic, says owner Sandra Conklin. Species include hemlock; antique chestnut, oak, and white pine; skimmed pine; and random heart pine.

Mountain Lumber Company in Ruckersville, Va., offers historic heart pine in various grades, weathered antique pine, granary and antique oak, antique chestnut, and antique yellow pine. It also offers specialty woods like Russian oak.

Buyer Beware

With its potentially storied past, sustainable imprimatur, and natural attractions, salvage lumber may be desirable for your next project. However, what you want may not always be what you get. First, don't let the word "salvage" fool you: The products come with a price—a high one. Expect your clients to pay at least twice as much as for regular lumber. That's because salvaging wood is labor-intensive and time-consuming.

And, because anyone can claim to be a wood recycler, the industry is fragmented, with wide price ranges based on supply, geographical region, and wood quality. It's a good idea to shop around to get the best possible product, though it might not necessarily result in a lower price. For that, Hillbrand has this advice: "Don't just sprinkle it everywhere in the house," she says. "Use the material where it counts—where it can have a larger impact and where everyone will see it."

Conklin says architects should research their potential salvage source. "There are more and more yards out there," she says. "If you aren't aware of who you are dealing with and what you are getting, you may not be getting what you paid for."

Most companies offer samples, so it's wise to request them, for your own peace of mind and so you have examples to show your client.

When shopping for heart pine, always ask for old-growth, 100 percent long-leaf pine—an older, superior wood with more of the resins that make it hard and give it its trademark rich red color, Goodwin says. Make sure the lumber has been kiln-dried (which produces a more stable product), and beware of a company that recommends ordering 15 percent or 20 percent extra. Depending on the application, 5 percent is sufficient.

A Cut Above

A final issue to keep in mind is that salvage lumber has a split personality: Underwater wood has a consistent grading system similar to new lumber, while reclaimed products have their own qualities and own grading system. "One architect might say that a highly distressed piece is A-quality, but that same piece might be undesirable for another project," says Timeless Timbers' Simmons.

So much variety means salvage lumber can satisfy many stylistic needs and some hard-to-define ones as well. Its age and patina add instant warmth and a sense of timeless solidity that's otherwise difficult to create in a new custom home. As long as you weigh the costs, know your wood, and investigate your supplier, salvage timber is a cut above many run-of-the-mill alternatives.
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The rapid advancement of electronic technology and its associated wiring requirements presents architects with enormous challenges. In the commercial sector, where both tenants and technology change constantly, plenums above suspended acoustical ceilings or below raised floors make it relatively easy to quickly rework wiring systems. In residential situations, however, the wiring is usually buried inside walls and behind plaster or gypsum board, making wiring changes difficult and messy.

In response to this problem, Florida architect Tim Rhode, AIA, has come up with an innovative and aesthetically pleasing approach to wiring for his residential renovations. His idea centers around an easily accessible, code-approved horizontal chase system that he installs behind the wall baseboard. The baseboard chase accommodates all the wiring systems necessary for electrical, telephone, cable television, fiber optics, home alarms, and Internet connections, as well as the outlet boxes.

Rhode’s system can be installed in two ways: as a recessed raceway, in which the gypsum board behind the baseboard is removed and the outlet boxes are set within the wall-stud area; or as a surface-mounted system, where the wallboard is kept in place, and everything is attached outside the plane of the wall finish.

To install the recessed system, Rhode begins by removing both the baseboard and the gypsum board behind it. He places continuous 1x2 wood blocking at the top and bottom of the proposed chase, fastening it to the wall. Any vertical space is easily used for wire chase. Recessing all of the outlets in the baseboard area gives walls a neat, uninterrupted appearance. A caveat: Before installation, check your local codes for approval of this system.

Illustrations: Rick Vitullo

Continued on page 70
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Sometimes, wiring may be unshielded or could potentially induce a current in other wires within the chase. In that case, Rhode uses a separator, such as a \( \frac{3}{4} \)-inch by \( \frac{3}{4} \)-inch aluminum angle or a wood 1x1, to create raceways for each wiring type. He attaches outlet boxes directly to the wall studs.

Next, Rhode secures a standard wood baseboard to the wood blocking with removable flat-head screws set in stainless-steel grommets, with cut-outs for the outlet boxes. He attaches quarter-round or other finish trim to the top of the baseboard and shoe molding to the bottom (rather than to the floor). This allows easy removal of the baseboard for access to the chase.

The main advantage to the recessed system is its unobtrusive profile, which extends no farther into the room than a standard baseboard.

To install the surface-mounted system, Rhode leaves the gypsum board finish in place and substitutes 2x2s for the 1x2s (to accommodate the outlet boxes). He also uses deeper trim pieces at the top of the baseboard to cover the wider chase. This approach has a couple of advantages: It prevents the raceways from being used by furry critters for their own transportation purposes, and it allows for minimal demolition mess.

In both systems, the baseboard chases connect with vertical chases that Rhode locates in closets, pilasters, or standard stud bays.

Rick Vitullo, AIA, is principal of Vitullo Architecture Studio, Washington, D.C.
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<td>877-879-SONY</td>
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<td>323</td>
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How would you describe your work?
I co-create with nature, as opposed to just creating something.

What is your architectural philosophy?
My overall philosophy is having a high-performance life and a high-performance environment. So my architectural philosophy is about making my environment high performance.

What project are you most proud of?
My house.

Did you design it?
Yes.

Does it have eco-friendly features?
Yes, it does. My husband and I looked at how can we practice what I preach. My high-performance architectural philosophy entails five elements: co-creation with nature, energy efficiency, water issues, materials use, and indoor environmental quality. For example, we sited the house for solar orientation. And inside, we used water- and energy-efficient fixtures and appliances.

If you could change one thing that architects do now, what would it be?
I would love to see architects look not just at time and budget when they are doing projects, but also at environmental, economic, and social considerations.

Will green building be a bigger part of the profession 20 years from now?
Yes. Ten years ago, I could count the houses on my hands. Today, many projects are involved.

How did it feel to be chosen as a fellow at this year's AIA show?
The category was for good service to society, so it was an honor.

What is it like being a female architect?
I do feel that when you are a minority, you have a greater responsibility to be a mentor or a guiding light to other women who would like to be part of the profession.

Has it been a hurdle?
Sometimes it's been a big plus. If the generalization is true that women are better working together and men are better working individually, then it helps being an architect who can work with a lot of people.

If you could do only one more project, what would it be?
Sometimes people think of "project" as a built work. I would say that my last project would be to influence a change in other projects.

What kind of car do you drive and why?
The Toyota Prius. I was very intrigued with it because it's a gas/electric hybrid and was the best representative of the issues I observe.

What are your fears?
Not having enough time to do what I want to do. ra

Gail Lindsey, IAA, is principal of Design Harmony in Wake Forest, N.C., and a consultant in integrated environmental design. She's working with the U.S. Green Building Council to develop a green building rating system.