



the house in his head

by Sam Houston

photography by Hester + Hardaway

His concept for the house had been forming for years. It would be the third he'd built and probably the last. The first two had different priorities, based on different geography and purposes.

Architects Russell Windham, left, and William Curtis on the light-washed second floor of the midtown house they designed. Stairs open into a spacious sitting room separating the master suite from guest quarters.

He had the option to create most any scale he chose, but this *magnum opus* would have nothing to do with impressive dimensions. This was personal. It would be a good house, the best he could build—an environment that perfectly reflected his values. It would be lean, purposeful and specific.

A businessman, outdoorsman, an astute observer of places and people, his travels take him over the Americas, through Europe, Asia and the Orient. He has seen and poured over countless architectural treasures; a natural pursuit, since his love of building design prompted him to study architectural history at Yale University. Those memories bubbled up in thoughts of the house and some of them would be redefined for his own use.

His extraordinary interest in a wide range of subjects inspired a collection of more than 2,000 volumes. He enjoys art and owns a number of excellent paintings and works on paper. Good food is another passion; he likes to cook. He is also a man of direct, logic-oriented, straight-line thought in which process plays a key role in the success of any project.

It was in this context one day in 1992 that he rang up architects William Curtis and Russell Windham. He had researched the field in Houston to determine the dozen best firms with residential design among their disciplines and wanted to learn first hand the quality available locally. Meetings were held, projects discussed and design philosophies were scrutinized before Curtis & Windham were chosen.

"We described our process of working and outlined how we'd go about realizing a project that would meet his expectations, and do it in a way that's complimentary to how he works and leads his life," says Curtis. "He shared some sketches he'd made of plan fragments to help us see his own ideas. He also showed us examples of architectural details reflecting his interests and taste, both functional and aesthetic."

The residence would be built on a small midtown lot and it was clear that every square foot of the house and grounds would be carefully considered, defined and utilized. The architects were also sure the owner was going to require more than the usual attention to concept, detail and execution.

"We knew, of course, that he would be involved," Windham said. "We never dreamed he would have an intimate hand in virtually every decision to be made." Such was the personal investment made by the owner for the house in his head. They would be challenged at nearly every turn to prove the validity of their thinking.

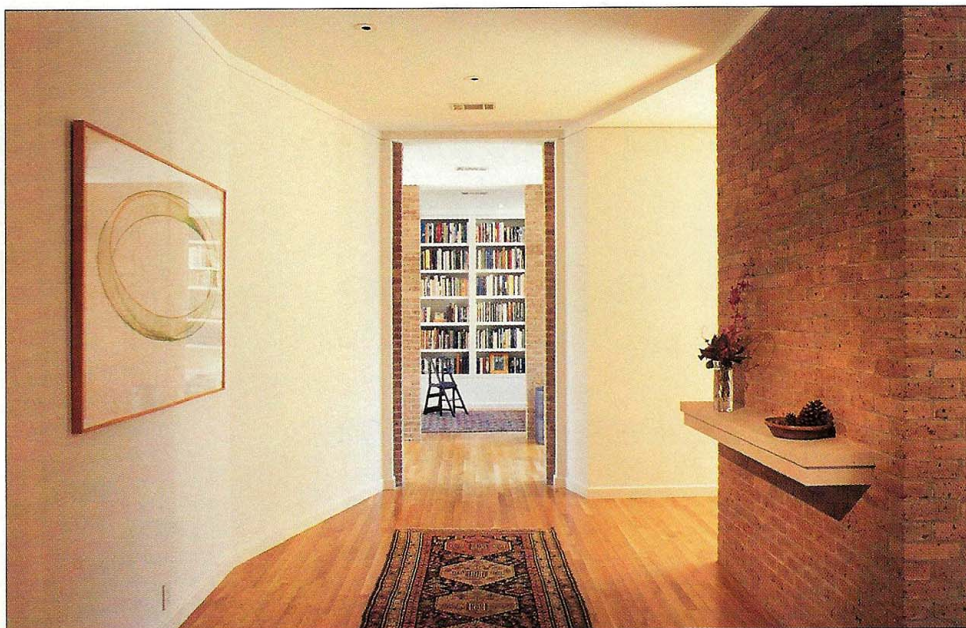
In the months of development from first conference to completion, the architects would come to know the owner well and understand how to resolve every issue that came up with the design philosophy and planning. "In the process," Windham adds, "his commission validated our mutual belief that design should express the owner's personality and way of life."

To begin with, Curtis says the owner cut away virtually every underpinning of historic reference points practiced in their five-year partnership. There would be no image created by Andrea Palladio, Frank Lloyd Wright or any other architect that has found its way into common use today.

The well-known design "vocabulary" popularized by Mies van der Rohe, virtually a standard in contemporary architecture, wasn't going to be the quick solution to problems. At nearly every

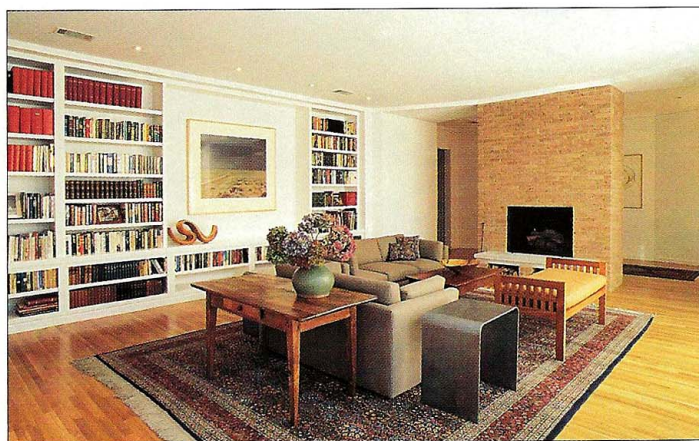
turn the owner would ask them to try again when their visions didn't quite match his. It was elusive, but they dug deeper to get answers.

"We couldn't have been more delighted," says Windham; the



Gallery is defined by back of chimney at right, and octagonal walls. Library at end is adjacent to entry hall. Virtually every space in the house is bathed in a natural light source.

Living room, with portion of owner's extensive book collection, contains mix of antiques and contemporary furnishings. Gallery is behind chimney.



adventure of discovery was exhilarating. With no preconceptions by the owner as to its final external appearance, the architects brought the myriad parts, fragments and ideas into a coherent whole. The result was their development of an architectural language specific to the project. It was exactly what the owner wanted.

"He had some caveats," says Curtis, "such as no gridded windows, for example, or the way glass might be set in the walls."

There was another concept, hard to define and harder to master, but in which they ultimately succeeded—a deceptively simple idea. "The house was meant to look strong, load-bearing and permanent," says Windham, "as strong as a rock. We believe we've given it that quality. There's a massiveness in the sense of solid construction underneath the brick sheathing."

Beyond that is an even more subtle idea. "There are also views, which, if you know architectural history, may give you a sense of ancient Italian houses—because of the massing of surface planes and the scale and placement of windows."

They had known going in that this wouldn't be your everyday house for the affluent. The owner had already exercised similar selection procedures to hire an engineer—George Cunningham of Cunningham Engineering. The same process was applied to the landscape architects, McDugald-Steele; the general contractor, Jeff Thomsen of the Thomsen Co.; lighting consultant Michael John Smith; and water treatment expert Bob Johnson.

Diane Ofner of Ofner Design Associates had created interior design projects the owner already knew and respected. She would be appointed to provide a seamless link between new pieces and the already considerable furnishings he possessed and would use.

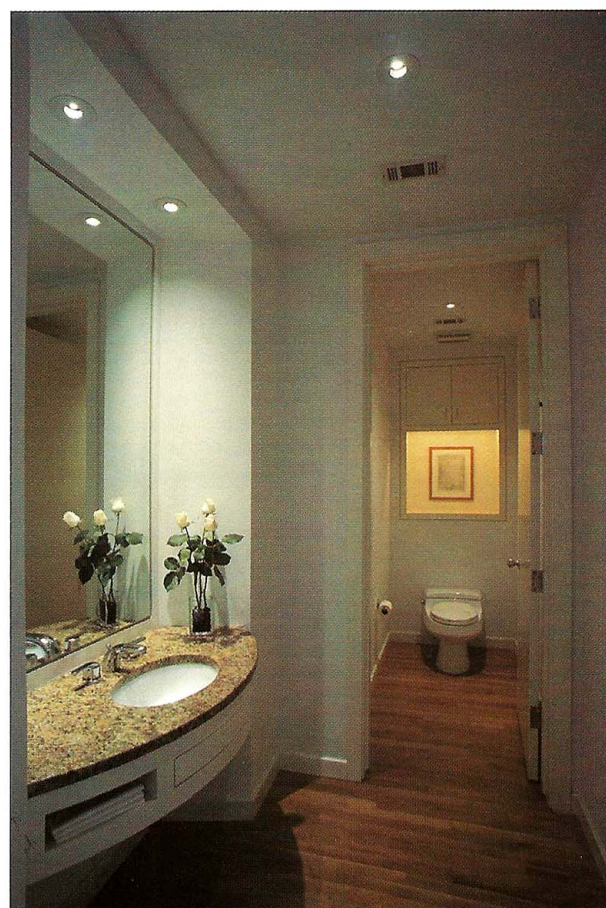
The quality level of each of the six participating players spoke reams about the integrity of the new residence.

There was also a strong message of expectations to Curtis & Windham that the final participants chosen in this project were the architects themselves and not the other way around, as nearly always happens. He'd nailed down all the variables possible. The actual creators would be his final choice.

He had a few more surprises. As an example, "He wanted a fireplace he could walk around," says Curtis. "That requirement made it conspicuous, and it produced a great plan invention that wasn't in his original program, because it made the house work better, given the specific rooms he wanted."

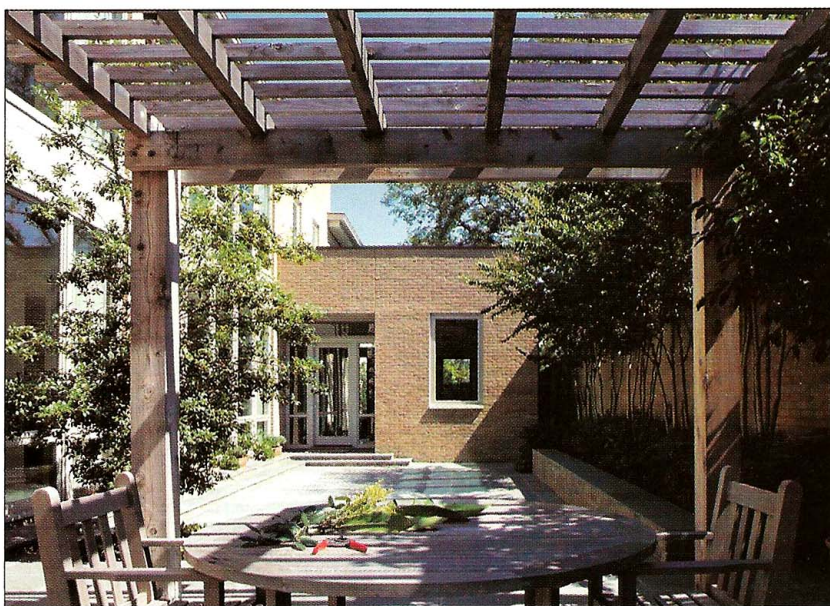
Their invention was a gallery separating the entry hall from the book-lined living room. Curtis & Windham ran through numerous design scenarios to show what would happen without the gallery before the owner accepted their solution. "Most owners arrive in their cars and come in through the wash room or kitchen or both," says Windham. "Here, he gets to enjoy, every day, the pleasure of entering his house through the gallery, since the garage opens onto it."

"By being able to walk through an elegant series of airy, well-lit spaces coming home becomes an event. It also gives him the same pleasure on enter-



Downstairs powder room has an elegant simplicity. Vanity is Amarelo Laranjeiras granite. Light box over commode allows easy changeout of artwork in owner's extensive collection.

Courtyard has the same dimensions of the living room and serves the same purpose. Pergola is the center for all fresco entertaining.





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ing the house that his guests enjoy. Some of his artwork lines the gallery walls, making the passage an added enjoyment," he points out.

Light, lots of light, was also a requisite. With generous use of glass in every direction the occupant would always move through or toward a natural light source. Light through the north wall, almost on the lot line, is filtered by glass blocks. South light, from the courtyard, is direct, through plate, as are the east windows.

The ceilings also come in for special treatment. Rather than an uninspired flat plane punctuated by a few spot and track lights, each room dimension is articulated with its own sharp-edged, dropped or raised plane to define the room and add new interest without interfering with the plan's openness.

"Throughout the design process the owner never mentioned entertaining," Curtis notes, "but he was very interested in (traffic) flow. Once the flow patterns were resolved, the amount of space available made entertaining even large crowds relatively simple."

Windham adds: "I was at a party there for more than a hundred people and everyone moved about comfortably. Dinner was served under the pergola in the courtyard, which is identical in size to the living room. The spaces are intended to be used for the same purposes and they work perfectly together.

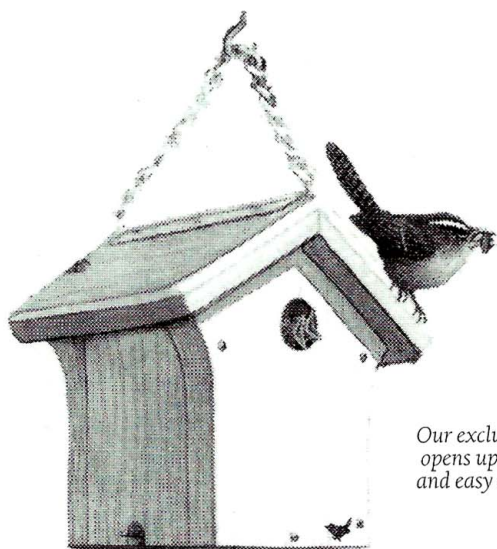
"Most of us have noticed how seldom owners and guests use benches in the gardens of their houses. Here, they are all used because they were designed and positioned to be sat on, not simply as decorative ornaments."

Surrounded by handsome greenery, both the courtyard and the small green-space in front of the house use only minimum-care plantings.

A small library off the entry is a visual extension of the gallery and was designed to allow guests to find a quiet corner in a house full of people, as well as for book storage.

Curtis points out the kitchen's purposeful layout. It is not intended as a social gathering point, unlike typical kitchen-family rooms built today. "The owner is a serious cook. He personally designed the kitchen layout and we were more or less told, in a friendly manner, that it was off-limits. Not a foot of space is

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wasted. It has all the utility of a commercial kitchen."

A room off the garage contains a remarkable water treatment system to provide filtered and softened water to the property before it ever enters the water pipes. It has gained praise by experts as a refinement in reverse osmosis water treatment systems. It not only removes particulates and chemicals in an unusually simple manner, but virtually eliminates the likelihood of pipe and appliance corrosion and mineral buildup, the owner says.

Having encountered water problems in an Arkansas country house he built, he consulted with Bob Johnson of Bob J. Johnson & Associates, who works with commercial institutions to provide highly purified water. Johnson's firm assisted in the system's design and layout.

Upstairs, rather than a narrow hall, one enters a comfortable and spacious sitting room. This separates the master suite from two other bedrooms and a large laundry room.

In recent years Curtis & Windham have become successful in the design, interest-

ingly, of houses with strong, classical elements, an outgrowth of their studies in classical architecture. But, Curtis emphasizes, "Good architecture is far more than facades. These, of course, need to be correctly interpreted if a period is reflected in the design. The basic design of a building, whether contemporary or traditional, must be honest to its purpose. If it's valid, it will look and feel right."

Both Texans were employed elsewhere prior to joining forces in Houston in 1991. Curtis was graduated from the University of Texas before working with Hartman-Cox in Washington, D.C. Projects there included a San Antonio Riverwalk corporate headquarters, as well as numerous institutional buildings in the Capital, most of which have Palladian-derived styles.

Windham, a graduate of Texas Tech, spent several years in New England working with Orr & Taylor Architecture And Gardens. He later joined John Simpson & Partners in London, where he was heavily involved at Paternoster Square, surrounding St. Paul's Cathedral, in its redesign to the classical urban fabric of 18th Century London. ♦



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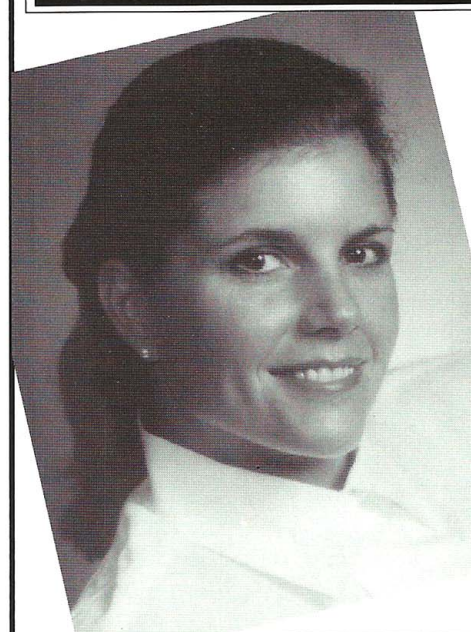
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