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Curtis & Windham chronicle classical architecture in book

By Diane Cowen

There it sits on Inverness in River Oaks, an elegant home of Texas limestone with tall double doors and equally tall stacks of windows, all fronted by a lush green lawn and rows of architectural shrubs.

From the street, it looks like a long rectangle, but it's actually a 20,000-square-foot U-shaped house, inspired by the Pavillon de la Lanterne in Versailles, an 18th-century structure used as a second home by the French president.

To any passerby, it's a statement of taste, wealth and power.

To its architects, however, it is an accomplishment — a house that makes its own mark on Houston's aesthetic.

A photo of its exterior view graces the cover of a beautiful new book — "A Vision of Place: The Work of Curtis & Windham Architects" (Texas A&M University Press) — showcasing the work of its authors, William Curtis and Russell Windham, practitioners of classical architecture.

Documenting 24 of their many projects, from a modest garage/garden studio early in their firm's history, to sprawling mansions and second homes and even a new building at St. John's School, it includes photographs, drawings and text for multi-tiered storytelling.

They were led to do the book not by marketing or vanity but for their love of books, they say.

In fact, their projects are driven by precedent, using established architectural design to inform and inspire new design and give it authority by its past use.

"Whenever we start out with an idea, if I'm not comfortable with it, I'll say, 'You have to go find some precedent.' It's like you have to defend yourself," Windham said.

For that, they dip into their collection of 3,000 architectural books, which chronicle every known technique, style and design.

Windham sums up their guiding principles simply: "Tradition is,



Paul Hester

Grass steps help sculpt the pitched site of a home on Knollwood.

there's something worth keeping. You hold onto the good parts and as things change, you let go of the things that are slightly out of date. That really is the way we look at traditional architecture.

Both are native Texans — Curtis is from Longview, and Windham hails from the Panhandle town of Lazbuddie — who came to Houston separately in 1991, met and founded a firm that has won many honors, including the prestigious Arthur Ross Award for Architecture in 1999.

Though architectural historians such as Stephen Fox compare their body of work to Houston's early residential architects — John Staub, Birdsall P. Briscoe or even Cameron Fairchild — the two say their success has been a mix of hard work and

good luck.

Curtis praised those men for creating architectural works "based in good precedent and good understanding of proportion and scale and modesty."

"When we came here and started working, we were fortunate to get into River Oaks and its client base pretty quickly," Curtis said.

He cited the city's early architects and developers as having set aside that section of the city with meandering streets and odd-shaped lots situated so that no two homes could be alike. The aesthetic they established — from the American Country House movement — continues today in many parts of the city, he said.

"We understood that Houston's early archi-

tecture was done in a more subtle way, and we were the two bright-eyed, bushy-tailed architects left in town because

everyone else was run out by the oil bust," Curtis quipped.

Through the years, they've designed many brand-new homes but also worked to update the grand homes designed by their predecessors.

One major update is the Broadacres home of Bobby and Phoebe Tudor, designed by Briscoe and built in 1924. Homes for the well-to-do then were built with different expectations for the more luxurious front of the house, where owners lived and entertained, and

spent about a decade expanding the home and transforming its gardens and grounds into a central focus.

A new L-shaped building — with an office, two guest bedrooms, family/billiards room and other living space — was placed around the back of the lot, creating nearly a ring of living space that takes in the views of the pool and lush gardens.

In the main house, an open loggia and sun room were enclosed to become a library with a geometric, plaster relief ceiling and wall-length bookcase.

Extensive work was done in the gardens, restoring the original plans of prominent landscape architect C.C. "Pat" Fleming and adding structural plantings to lead visitors from one garden to another.

Work on second homes and ranches include a pueblo-style seasonal home in Las Campanas, N.M., a stucco and masonry home in Rio Chama, N.M., a fly-fishing camp in Colorado, a ranch in Chappell Hill and a home in Seaside, Fla., that fits in with New Urbanist practices.

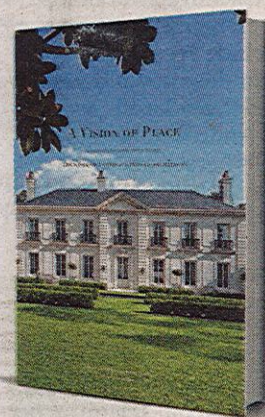
Curtis and Windham still share an office, each man working from a desk at opposite ends of the room. In the center is a seating area with a sofa and two chairs, and each man, of course, has claimed a chair as his "spot."

The two have long talked about writing a book, and it was the encouragement of other architects, including Fox, who wrote the book's introduction, that made them move forward.

Curtis said he hopes others use their book the way they've relied on other reference materials.

"We want to spark creativity, not necessarily that people will copy our design but that we offer it up visually and verbally in terms of why it exists," he said. "All of our work takes the site as its context. If people can take the journey through there, they'll find positive influence of their own."

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'A Vision of Place: The Work of Curtis & Windham Architects'

By William Curtis and Russell Windham
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Courtesy photo

William Curtis and Russell Windham's book reviews their brand-new designs and updates by their Houston architect predecessors.

ture was done in a more subtle way, and we were the two bright-eyed, bushy-tailed architects left in town because

the more Spartan back of the house, where servants worked.

In the Tudors' home, Curtis and Windham