

## At the Edge • In the Frame

*Marlon Blackwell*

A truly felt work of architecture is that which has been freed from dualities. Within the multitude of forces inherent in a particular condition of place it is not a question of revealing paradoxical opposites, but of directing ordering forces to cohere, to build and store energy through their interactions. Here, one and one do not equal two, but potentially three or five or...in fact the possibilities are endless depending on the range of combinations that can be produced. Shaped by this temporal formation of intensities, our empathy with the world, the world as we find it, is productively balanced within an order of change.

Of all archetypal elements that constitute architectural form, it is the edge—the vertical plane of material, the wall manifest—which most commonly conveys a sensation of space involving not only sight, but also other physical experiences. At the point of maximum tension between natural and man-made form, the wall at the edge emerges as a threshold or boundary. Attentively articulated, the space of its surface provides volumetric scale, texture, and specific gravity. Inductively its craft and detail give character to the formal qualities of place. The physical presence of the edge is then understood as a work of the hand as well as that of the eye; the tactile is elevated in relation to the visual. Like the expressive character of our faces, the edge may exhibit a carnal, even visceral, presence. The forces of nature



*Photo Kevin Latady*



Photo Richard Johnson

are embraced by it and imprinted on it. Rich and complex, its dense qualities, achieved in construction and over time, demand of us the same amount of interest throughout our engagement with it.

Space conceptualized as it is felt resists pictorial prejudices of perception and recognizes the multivalent aspects of experience for translation into immanent form. If the edge facilitates tactile experience, then it is the *frame*, cut out of the edge, that facilitates visual experience. The traditional role of the frame to provide ventilation and light is now supplanted by a preoccupation with view and the act of viewing. Interplay of these two sensory devices imbues the wall with a capacity to perceptually

inscribe the interiority of constructed space with the exteriority of landscape. Select views of landscape are compressed into the immediate frame and given proportion by piercing the wall at strategic points. A serial combination of frame and diaphragm represses extensive panorama and its tiring effects; the wall filters the view from within and from without. Perceptions of the view occur in motion through overlapping frames and provide a filmic sequence of experiential meaning. The gradient affects of sight transform our mathematical and picturesque conceptions of site. At the edge, in the frame, we are no longer spectators, but participants in the space of felt substance...nature and artifice are sensually perceived as one and many.



The Moore House, completed in 1990, is on Little Terrapin Mountain, near the town of Cashiers, North Carolina. It is a 2300-sq. ft. year-round residence for a sexagenarian and her ninety-year-old mother, with additional space for her children and grandchildren who visit occasionally.

The site, a rocky, thickly wooded terrain (4200-ft. elev.), slopes gently up from the access road to a granite ridge that traverses it and then, drops dramatically at this juncture revealing an immense valley below and spectacular mountain range beyond. Along the precipice of the ridge, the initial sensation was that of an intense downward pull into the receding spatial void of the landscape. Movement of the sun across the mountains presents an ever-changing canvas of light. Notes are made of the orientation and configuration of each mountain that falls within overlapping fields of vision.

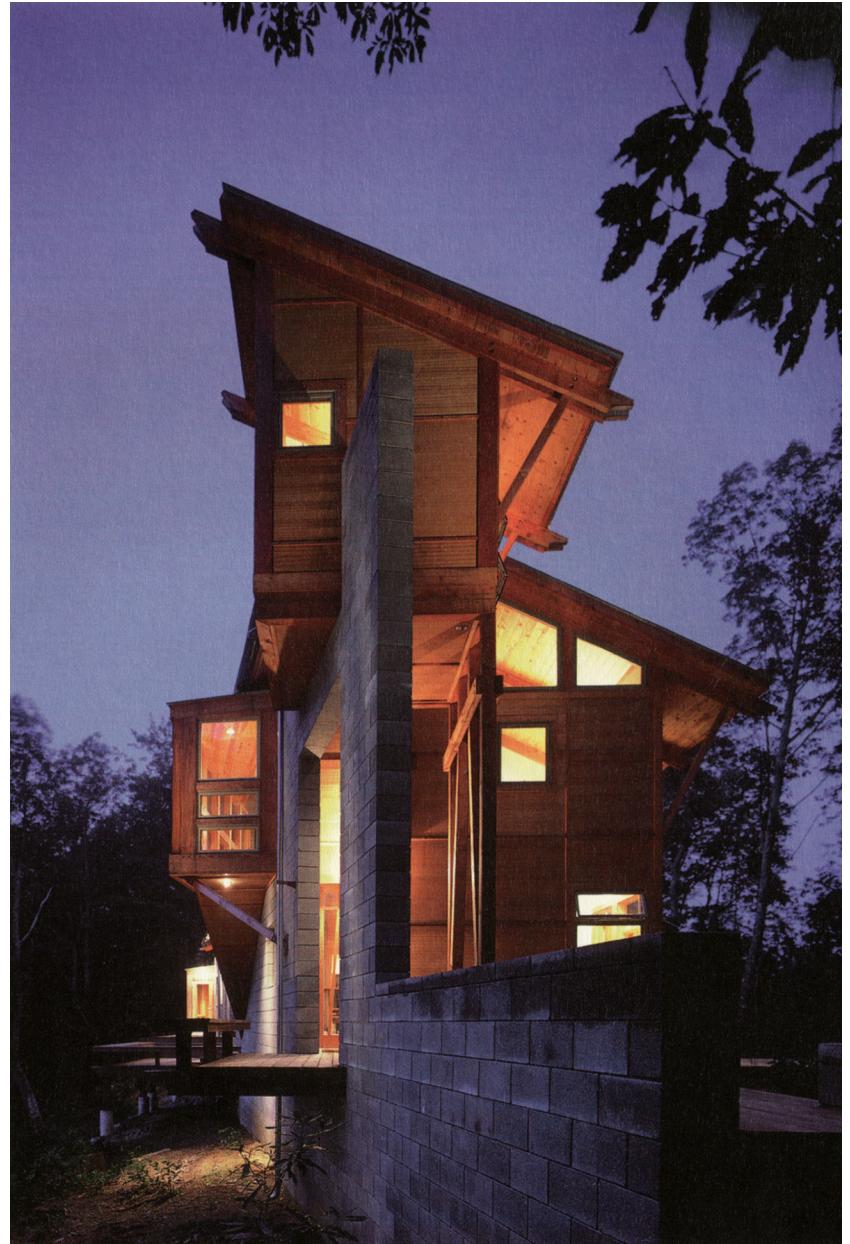
A massive concrete block wall aligned along the ridge anchors the structure, physically and metaphysically. It is intended as a formal edge between the house and the wilderness. The wall edits and reorders the expansive visual panorama into discrete views, compressing distant vistas and figures into the immediate context; perceptually resisting its 'pull,' while providing specific intensities in the frame. Site and view are inhabited simultaneously. This condition is initiated as one approaches the large opening beneath the perched



*Photo Kevin Latady*



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study tower which frames a selected view and acts as a symbolic entry into the landscape. The experience of the landscape expanding outward from this vantage is recalled upon entry into the house as the interior space expands outward and upward along the wall, through a double height central space.

Four wood-framed orthogonal volumes interactively confront the monolithic load bearing edge that is positioned at an angle along the ridge, opening onto and shaping the resultant central space. The formal

composition of vernacular forms give way to an idiosyncratic ordering of the sublime. Multiple frames and volumes that articulate the wall and direct the view provide opportunities for varied experiences with the exterior and interior 'landscape'. In particular, the stairway pushes through and around a frame at the edge, thus a sense of risk resides in a controlled participation with the wall and day to day activities of living. Continuous clerestory windows allow the roof to 'float' above the wall; framed sky and foliage remain a constant presence along the edge.



*Photo Kevin Latady*



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In 1998, I was invited back to Little Terrapin Mountain to propose an addition to the Moore House; one that would simultaneously compliment the existing structure while calling into question or even evolving aspects of its original motivations.

The owner is now a seventy-year-old beekeeper, who requires two additional structures—an apiarian structure for the purpose of processing and storing honey and, a single vehicle carport and outdoor work area. Four beehives are located in the forest just beyond the honeyhouse site adjacent to the existing residence. The prized sourwood honey produced by the bees is sold along the access road and at local markets. To protect the refined honey from

vermin and insects the honeyhouse must be disengaged from the earth, which also allows for uninterrupted site drainage.

In an effort to allow conceptual intent for the honey house to evolve from within its own condition, the ordering methods of modern beekeeping, its ongoing domestication of bee activities and behavior, was examined as an analog for the development of primary architectural elements. The modern four-sided hive box is organized as a serial condition of shallow orthogonal frames that articulate and separate the brood chamber below from the 'super' (honey chamber) above. The moveable frames allow the stored comb honey to be removed without upsetting



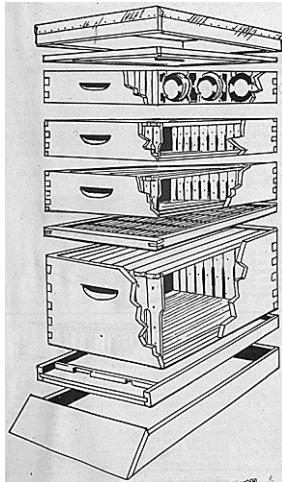
or destroying the brood chamber. While the Cartesian frames delimit the space of bee activity and make it manageable, they have virtually no effect on the constructed organic patterns of the bee colony's day to day activities. Conditioned by millions of years of building in hollows of rocks and trees, bees build combs in configurations to suit themselves. The tense interplay between the efficiency of the beekeeper's equipment, and the bee's willingness to adapt to and use it, is central to the continual production of honey and the survival of the colony.

The honeyhouse structure is a volumetric response to the confluence of natural and rational processes.

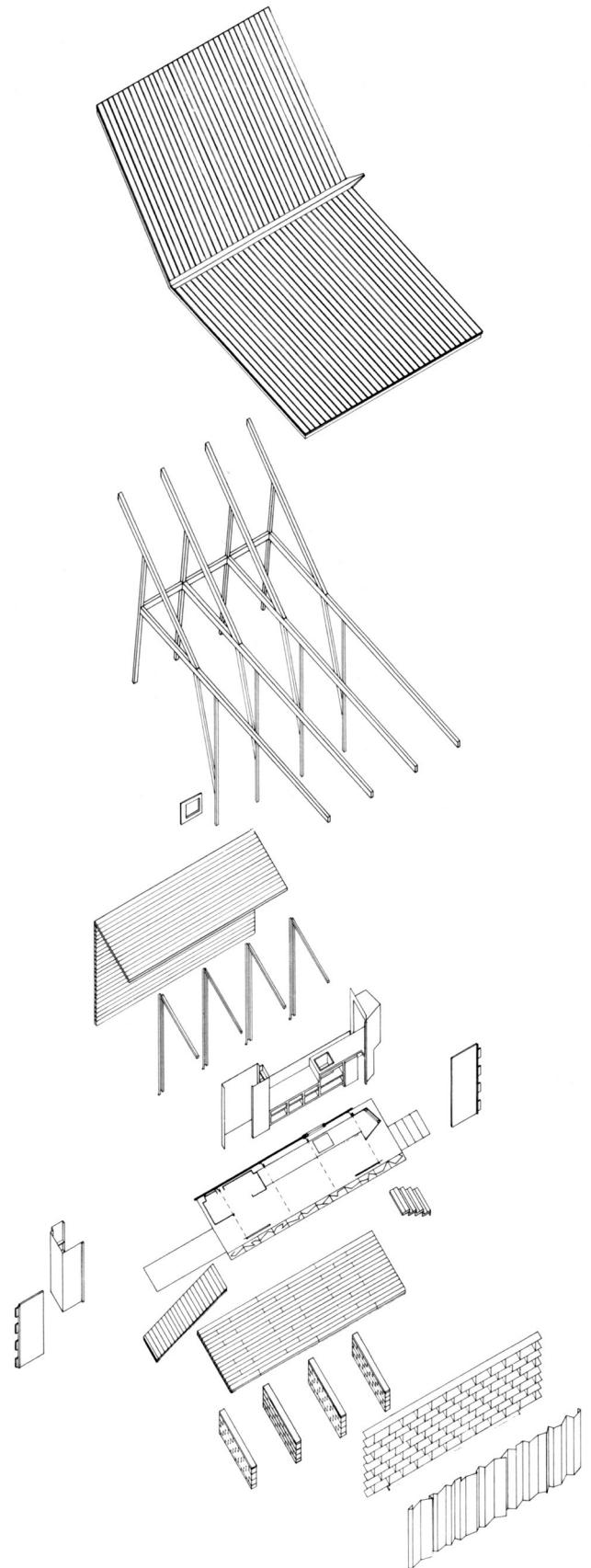
Articulated as a single workspace - a box container with multiple storage units, a work counter with processing equipment, and shelving for display, the (8' x 24') volume is anchored above the site to four concrete block piers. The inverted metal wing roof of the adjacent carport structure is intended as a counterpoint to the roof forms of the existing house and provides for an independent, yet complimentary relationship with the honeyhouse. Both structures are constructed of tongue and groove pine boards and tube steel members. With local skilled labor in short supply and a desire for craft and quality control, the primary architectural elements were conceived within a rationalized system of construction. This facilitated the fabrication of the



*Photo Richard Johnson*



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steel elements in Arkansas for shipment to the site. An on-site crew from Arkansas then assembled the entire structure in one month .

The structure's single most prominent and complex architectural element is a unique steel plate and faceted glass wall that acts to organize the display of honey, filter natural light, and provide a rich mosaic of reflections of the surrounding foliage. Oriented to the southeast with maximum visibility from the road below, the (7' x 24' x 1' wide) wall is a deep surface composed of 84-1/4" thick steel plate frames organized in a running bond pattern. A stacked configuration of angled glass plates infill

each horizontal course of framed cells, perceptually allowing the glass to act as a continuous membrane. The intersection of these two organizing systems produces multiple spatial conditions within the wall. In effect, this edge is a monolithic load-bearing wall made almost entirely of void space. Depending upon one's vantage, the season and the time of day, the wall exhibits conditions of transparency, translucency, and opacity. It's dense polyrhythmic character achieves a dynamic materiality as it embraces weathering, organic life forms, and apiarian activities. The wall as frame and edge no longer reorders the view...the frame becomes the view, re-validating the tactile.



*Photo Richard Johnson*



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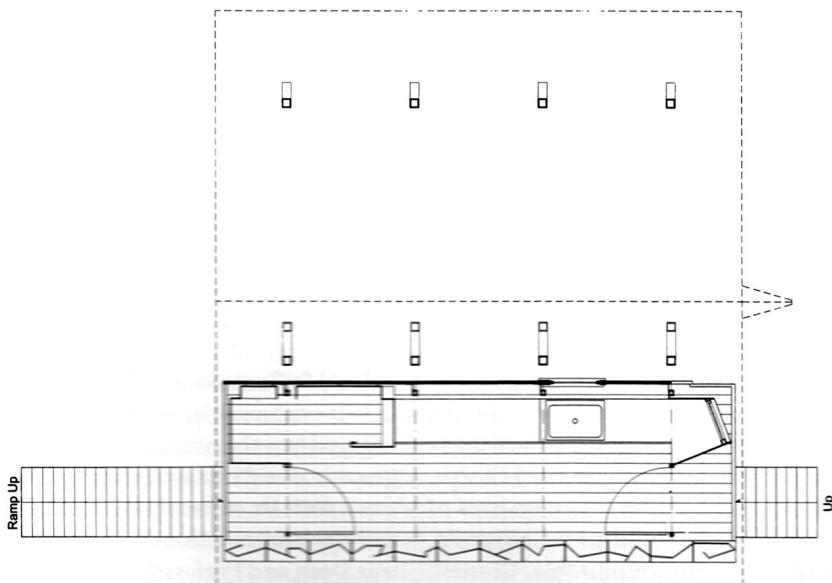
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