



# HOMECOMING

For young architects, designing a house for their parents can be a rite of passage into the world of independent practice. Some well-known architects — Robert Venturi and Charles Gwathmey, for example — cite a parental commission as their springboard to fame. Parents can be good clients; after years of paying the bills for tuition, room and board while nurturing dreams of their offspring's suc-

*An architect found that designing a house for his parents and watching it grow was an adventure for all three.*

BY JOHN HAWKINS

cess, they sometimes become willing, enlightened patrons, ready to allow the young graduate the freedom to test new ideas. ¶ My own version of this experience came somewhat later in my career. And although the house I designed two years ago for my parents, David and Elizabeth Hawkins, did not break new ground in residential design, the 18-month project was an adventure for the three of us. The result



was a contemporary home built of wood, glass, split-face concrete block and brick that, according to its owners, fits their needs like a tailored suit of clothes.

The starting point for this project was my parents' decision to retire, after 25 years in Virginia, England and Chicago, to Chapel Hill, N.C. — the place they most considered home. They had originally moved to the area in 1952, when my father became an instructor of psychiatry at the University of North Carolina Medical School, and lived there until 1968.

My parents remember this as a very happy period in their lives. It was a time when they cemented friendships with a close-knit group of fellow faculty members and spouses over Manhattans at sweltering cocktail parties, swam at the Navy Pool, and bought everything they needed on Franklin Street — still a favorite gathering place, although no longer a major shopping area. They witnessed the growth of Chapel Hill's inner core, known as the "village," through the 1950s and '60s until they left, with some regret, to take up career opportunities at other universities.

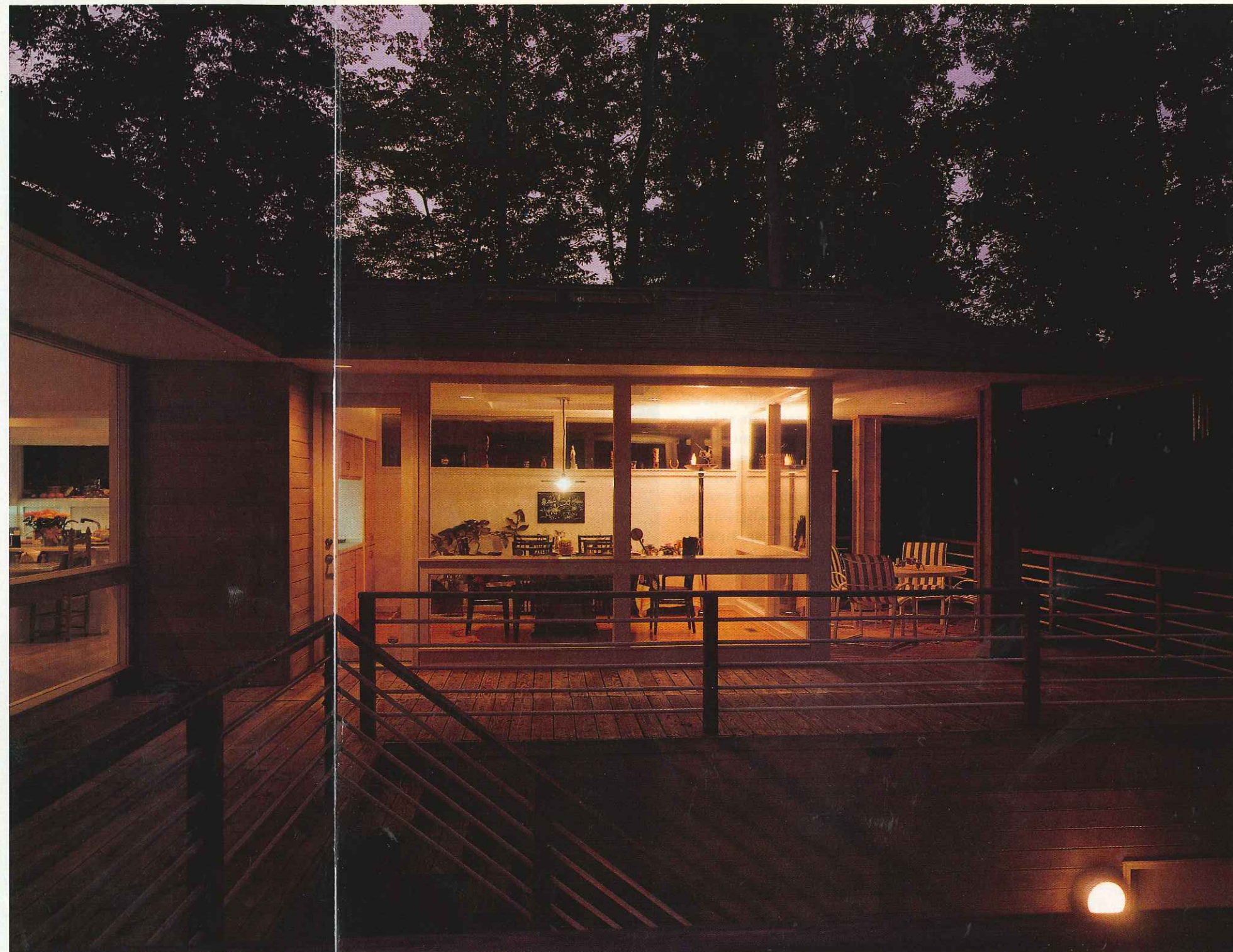
Though Chapel Hill is now considered to have a relatively transient population, there is still a significant core of longtime residents and people, like myself, who left and then returned, drawn back by the charm of this quintessential college town. My parents envisioned a comfortable home in which they could entertain and become reacquainted with old friends, but a three-month search failed to turn up an existing house that met their requirements. Their

need to have all the primary living spaces on a single level to avoid climbing stairs reduced the field of candidates considerably. Eventually, I convinced them to build their own home — and to let me design it for them, to their specifications.

My father and mother were intrigued by the memory of a period of uncompromisingly modernist home construction in and around North Carolina's Research Triangle (Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill) during the 1950s. This trend was influenced and sustained, no doubt, by the innovative design work of the then world-famous faculty of the School of Design at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Notable examples of these houses can still be found, often half-hidden by the forest around them, in Chapel Hill neighborhoods like Morgan Creek and Lake Forest. My parents chose a wooded site in Franklin Hills, a newer neighborhood close to town.

Over the years, they had lived in a number of quite different homes, including a Palladian-influenced 18th-century farmhouse designed by Thomas Jefferson's favorite nephew, Peter Carr, and a high-rise apartment on the "Gold Coast" of Chicago, overlooking Lake Michigan. In architecture, as in food, art and music, their tastes were eclectic. But at this point, my parents were drawn to the idea of a contemporary house, similar to the 1950s homes they remembered so well. Those houses typically had an open plan, a variety of ceiling heights and large expanses of glass that allowed extensive views.

A few key design principles determined the basic appearance of the house as it



**Previous pages: From the street, the house that Chapel Hill, N.C. architect John Hawkins designed for his parents presents a long, low profile, with windows that introduce light while affording privacy in the living areas. Above: In contrast, floor-to-ceiling windows in the rear dining room and kitchen offer full views of the wooded site. Opposite page: the living room.**

The Prairie flavor in front was also furthered by my decision to forgo conventional stock windows in favor of walls of glass block, horizontal ribbons of colored, leaded glass (installed 6 feet above the floor, for privacy) and pairs of 8-foot French doors. The expanses of glass are balanced by massive concrete-block piers, which frame the long panels of colored glass.

Although the front of the house presents a wide, low profile to the street, the rear is U-shaped, with floor-to-ceiling

glass walls surrounding a generous deck. These offer full views of the wooded site, which drops down dramatically to a stream.

The entry foyer, glazed front and rear, acts as a window through the structure, allowing a view from the street to the green canopy beyond. To the left of the foyer lie the public spaces: living room, kitchen and dining room. To the right is the private wing: family room, my mother's study, and master-bedroom suite. Lower-level spaces which include my



took shape on the drawing board. My parents' requirement for placing the primary living spaces on one floor, combined with my own practical inclusion of a long, shallow-pitched roof with deep overhangs to control the admission of sunlight, gave the front elevation a flavor reminiscent of the "Prairie School" houses popular in the Midwest in the early 20th century. This association was reinforced by the addition of long, narrow clerestory windows, which flood the living spaces with extra light from above.



father's office, a guest suite and a garage, are positioned not directly below the main wing but slightly to the rear, to follow the natural slope of the site. Their flat roofs become the decks that serve the main level above.

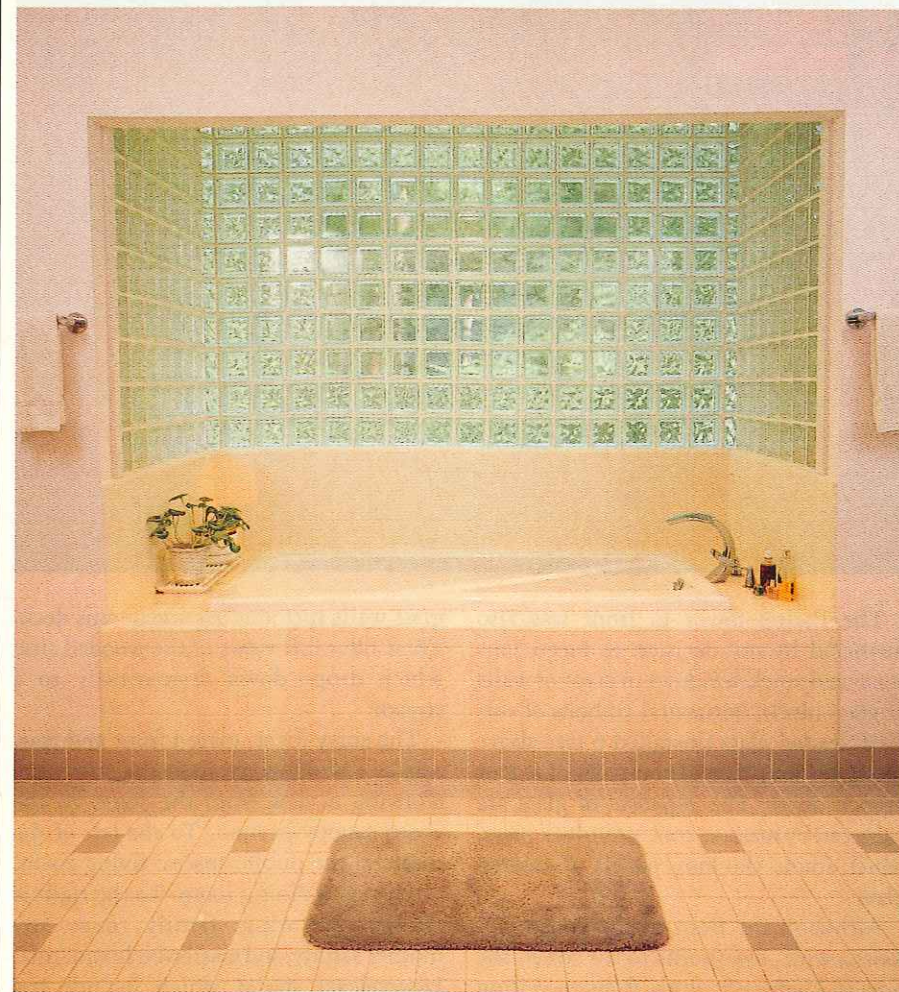
WORKING WITH FAMILY MEMBERS AS clients was a new experience for me, but in this case, one that tended to enhance rather than compromise the design process. We shared a liking for such details as built-in shelves and cabinets, generous groupings of skylights, a large, well-equipped kitchen (long a favorite family gathering place) and wood floors almost everywhere. I knew without having to ask that my parents would wish to have these features in their new home.

We weren't spared all of the common miscues, however. When the plans were nearly finished, my mother decided she wanted to expand her study from the "closet" she had first requested into a well-equipped home office, three times its original size. Curiously, coping with such last-minute curves seemed to improve rather than weaken the plan.

The characteristics that the home shared with Prairie-style houses were not

lost on one of my parents' good friends, who, with tongue in cheek, dubbed the structure "the Frank Lloyd Hawkins house." I was amused and pleased rather than offended by the reference; the long, horizontal, ship-like elegance of Wright's style has amazingly broad appeal.

For me, the most exciting part of construction was watching the framing crew erect the superstructure. My heart would race as, en route to my daily inspections, I rounded the last bend in the road, anticipating the sight of another piece of completed work. Usually, it was fascinating to see what had recently been a two-dimensional drawing now transformed into a built reality, with an infinite variety of looks, depending on the vantage point. But occasionally I discovered a detail that did not conform to the plans, such as a picture-window mullion in the dining room that did not align, as it was supposed to, with an identical mullion on the opposite side of the room. Then a tense process of reckoning, negotiating and problem-solving with the crew would follow. In the case of the misaligned mullion, the solution — moving a pair of studs several inches — was simple, since we were in the early framing stage.



For my parents, the most enjoyable part of the project was the moment when they first walked into the newly finished structure. It felt immediately familiar and homelike to them from the hours they'd spent poring over the plans. Still, there were many discoveries to make — such as the brightly colored patterns cast across the floor by late afternoon sunlight passing through the leaded-glass windows, or the subtle change in feeling experienced on passing from a lower to a higher ceiling within the same room.

**The lower-level spaces to the rear of the house, above, include a study for the architect's father and a guest suite. The flat roof of the study does double duty as the deck to the master bedroom. Opposite page: The whirlpool tub in the master bathroom is enclosed on three sides by glass-block windows that diffuse the light.**

Despite the long and often arduous process of getting the house designed and built, my parents became enthusiastic proponents of home-building. Says my mother: "There is no doubt that this is not for the faint-hearted. The anxiety associated with making so many important decisions and coping with the daily crises that arise during construction is trying, but the joy of witnessing and participating in this creative act — which then becomes part of your everyday life — is something very special."

There are many valuable lessons to be learned from this experience, such as the importance of getting to know and trust a builder *before* signing a contract and including in the construction budget a 3 to 5 percent contingency fund for unexpected — but inevitable — extra costs. Like other people who have undertaken the challenge of building their own home, my parents have been asked many times if they would do it again. And they always say yes, adding the qualification, "but differently." ♦