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# durham magazine

COMPLIMENTARY

## THE 2nd ANNUAL DESIGN ISSUE

ARCHITECTURE • CARS • INTERIOR DESIGN • JEWELRY

### HERE COMES THE SUN

The late architect Jon Condoret designed dozens of sun-drenched homes in the Durham area. Here, the brilliantly lit living room of Wendy Robineau and Don Beskind. Page 58.



# M A S T E R

*The life and legacy of architect Jon Condoret*

**Jon Condoret designed this great room – now the home of Wendy Robineau and Don Beskind – to accommodate musical performances**



A photograph of a modern interior space. The room features large, multi-paned windows that look out onto a wooded area. A large potted plant stands in the center. To the left, there is a white shelving unit with a tall, narrow vase. To the right, a long wooden cabinet with many small drawers holds a lamp with a white shade and a small sculpture. In the foreground, there are light-colored armchairs and a low table. The word "CLASSES" is overlaid in large, white, serif capital letters across the middle of the image.

# CLASSES

BY MATT DEES PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIANA BROUGH

Audie remembers the basement in Durham, the windowless refuge of her refugee family.

In 1962, her parents, **Jon** and **Joany Condoret**, fled the revolution in Algeria to the subterranean level of Joany's parents' home on **Sevier Street**. Audie — that was her nickname — was 2, and her baby sister, **Brigitte**, was in utero.


"We were poverty-stricken," says Audie, known to most now as architect **Arielle Schechter**. "I mean, we had nothing. And it was very dark down





A 1999 renovation by renowned designer Fu-Tung Cheng, who is known for his innovative use of concrete. But all work stayed "within the original footprint, so the bones of the house remained true to Condoret's vision."





there. To this day, I dislike dark places. Hence the windows ..."

She sweeps her hand in a panoramic gesture toward the floor-to-ceiling windows surrounding us in her Orange County home. You know the expression "bathed in sunlight"? This room is practically drowning in it.

In a way, it's a gift from her father, one of many. A hallmark of his work was bringing as much of the natural world into a home as possible. He employed principles of passive solar, for example, situating his homes just so to maximize sun exposure in winter and to mitigate

summer glares. These ideas clearly carried over to Audie, who followed in her father's professional footsteps.

Of course, abundant light is just one facet of the signature architectural style evident in Condoret homes, which are sprinkled throughout the Triangle, often in off-the-beaten-path rustic settings.

There's the playful use of different textures and building materials, the blocky, abstract exteriors and whimsical surprises, like stained-glass windows and extra-wide fireplaces. But Audie says her father's work pales to the man himself: generous to a fault, loving and full of joy.

(His daughter isn't just looking through rose-colored glasses; Jon's *menschiness* is multiply attested.)

It's why, some two years after his death, sitting in the bright, elevated polar opposite of that basement in Durham, Audie can barely hold back the tears.

## Good Ol' Boy Network

Jon – pronounced "Jean," with a soft French "j" – was born in Algiers in 1934, the son of accomplished artisan house painters. He attended École Spéciale





There's not a right angle to be found, as you can see in Wendy and Don's daughter's bedroom



Wendy says the house seems awash in nature by day but, by night, it "folds in on itself, and Condorett's interior architectural details of line and form become strongly present. It really is two completely different visual experiences."



d'Architecture in Paris, finishing second in a national contest and, more importantly, meeting Joany, who was studying at the Sorbonne.

Their stay in Algeria lasted only a few years before they had to escape to North Carolina. Joany's father helped get him a job with Durham architect **Archie Royal Davis** at \$50 a week. Joany and Audie say his thick French accent – which he kept throughout his life – took some good ol' boys aback at first. "People may have been a little leery of him," Joany says, "but not when they got to know him."

He worked for Archie and others through the 1960s, doing mostly traditional homes. But he moonlighted on his own signature projects during that time, even more so when he struck out on his own in the early 1970s. His modernist approach – the most ready comparison is Frank Lloyd Wright – appealed to professional types at **UNC** and **Duke**.

Chapel Hill Realtor **Beth Loudon** sold two Condoret homes in the last year. "They're stunning almost because of their simplicity," she says. "They were not easy to design or build, but he made it seem easy. He just was a master."

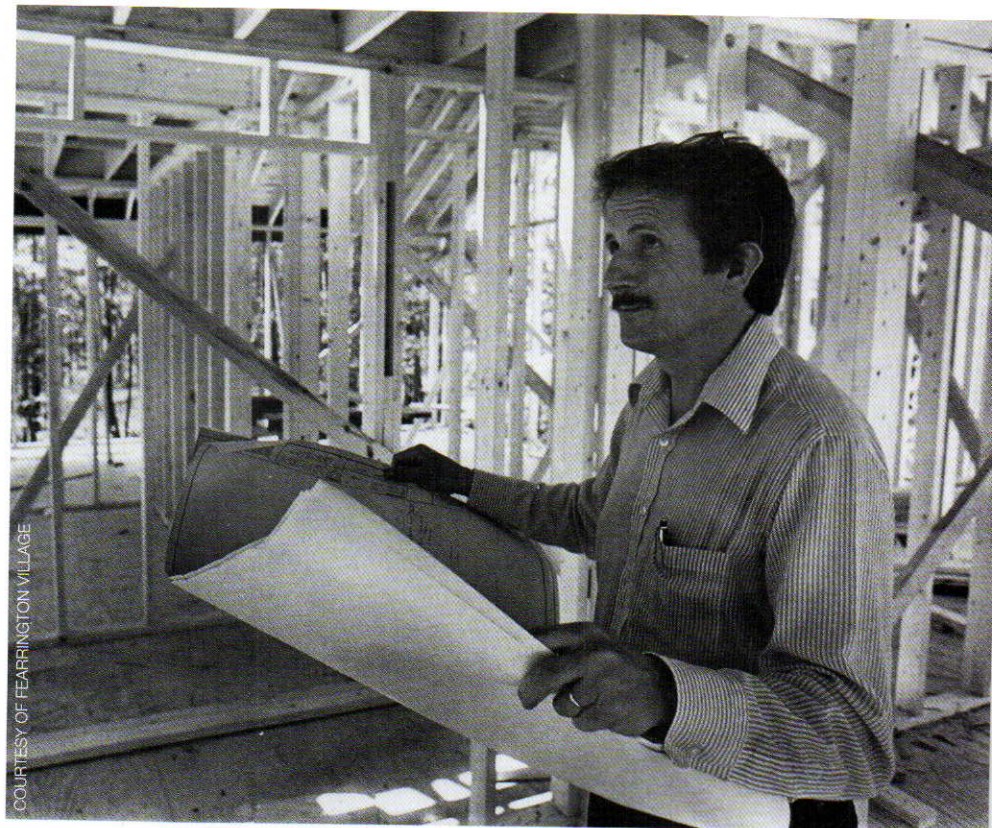
The list of admirers and satisfied customers is long. And all praise not only the end result, but the experience of working with a man whose No. 1 goal always was making the client's vision a reality.

## 'A Piece of Modern History'

**Wendy Robineau** and **Don Beskind**

loved **Arthur** and **Florence Larson**, the law professor/artist couple who had taken Wendy and Don under their wing when the young pair first moved to Durham in the 1980s.

The Larsons, by all accounts, loved Jon, commissioning him to build their house near campus in 1971.



COURTESY OF FEARRINGTON VILLAGE

So, by the transitive property ...

"I feel a special responsibility to the house because we loved [the Larsons] so well, and because it really is a piece of modern history," Wendy says.

"I literally had a sharp intake of breath the first time I walked through the front door and saw it. The living room is a large, soaring space. All the other spaces are smaller and more personal. They closely surround you in a warm, intimate environment."

Audie says this home, with its funky bunker exterior and contrasting large open spaces and hidden nooks inside, was her father's favorite of all time.

The Larsons' son reached out to Wendy and her husband, Duke law professor Don, when the Larsons passed away and it was time to sell the house. "He said, 'My mother and father told me you and Don love this house, and you're the only ones who should own it,'" Wendy recalls during a recent tour, her voice catching a bit. "This house came to me."

That's not to say Wendy and Don haven't put their own stamp on it. They commissioned visionary interior designer **Fu-Tung Cheng** in 1999 to completely renovate the house. "Our goals were to maintain the integrity of the house's original design but to make it our own,"



**Top** Jon Condoret looks over plans for the decidedly unmodern Fearington Village, a project that showed off his range

**Below** Arielle "Audie" Condoret Schechter, shown here at the home of Betty Craven and Michael Warner, which her father designed





*Linda Dickerson Interiors*

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Wendy says. "We wanted all the work to stay within the original footprint so that the bones of the house remained true to Condoret's vision. This was a challenge for Cheng's design team, but they did a beautiful job in reorganizing some of the interior spaces to function for the way we live."

## 'A Total Dream'

**Betty Craven** and **Michael Warner** went through two naysaying architects before they found Jon.

Frustrated by their attempts to find help in building their own home, the couple started looking for houses to buy upon moving to the area in the mid-1980s.

"Every house we liked was a Jon Condoret house," Betty says. "We even got very close to buying one of his houses."

So they went to the man himself.

"He was a total dream to work with," Betty says. "He would never say, 'Oh, we can't do that.' He went with us to pick out marble, to choose the wood."

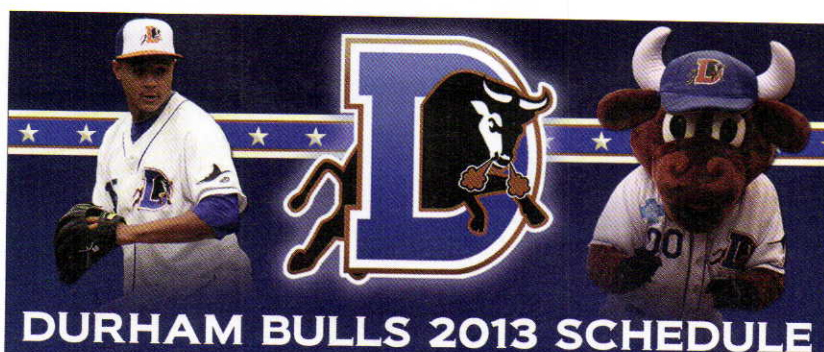
Michael adds, "We did a lot of trudging through the woods here to find just the right place. He was tireless with that, too."

The original house he built for them off **New Hope Church Road** was about 3,000 square feet. His good work was rewarded when Michael sold his software company for a small fortune in 1996. That led to a major expansion in the 2000s to a 7,000-square-foot home, a pool, conservatory and a garage for Michael's collection of classic cars, all of which occurred under Jon's leadership.

## 'A Real Friend'

**R.B. Fitch** met Jon in the late 1970s, while walking around the track at Duke. R.B. was just starting development on **Ferrington Village**.

Look at a Condoret house and then



## DURHAM BULLS 2013 SCHEDULE

APRIL							MAY						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT
				4 NOR 7:05p	5 NOR 7:05p	6 NOR 7:05p				1 OFF	2 PAW 6:15p	3 PAW 6:15p	4 PAW 1:05p
7 NOR 1:05p	8 GWN 6:05p	9 GWN 7:05p	10 GWN 1:05p	11 NOR 7:05p	12 NOR 7:05p	13 CHA 7:15p	5 PAW 1:05p	6 SYR 7:05p	7 SYR 7:05p	8 SYR 11:05a	9 SYR 7:05p	10 LHV 7:05p	11 LHV 5:05p
14 CHA 2:15p	15 CHA 7:15p	16 CHA 11:15a	17 CHA 7:05p	18 CHA 11:05a	19 NOR 7:05p	20 NOR 5:05p	12 LHV 5:05p	13 LHV 1:05p	14 ROC 7:05p	15 ROC 3:15p	16 ROC 7:05p	17 ROC 7:05p	18 NOR 7:05p
21 NOR 5:05p	22 OFF	23 TOL 7:05p	24 TOL 1:05p	25 TOL 7:05p	26 TOL 7:05p	27 SYR 7:00p	19 NOR 5:05p	20 OFF	21 NOR 6:35p	22 NOR 6:35p	23 SWB 6:35p	24 SWB 7:05p	25 SWB 7:05p
28 SYR 2:00p	29 SYR 7:00p	30 SYR 12:00p					26 SWB 1:05p	27 BUF 5:05p	28 BUF 7:05p	29 BUF 7:05p	30 BUF 7:05p		

JUNE							JULY						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT
						SWB 7:05p		1 COL 7:05p	2 COL 7:05p	3 CHA 7:15p	4 NOR 6:05p	5 NOR 7:05p	6 GWN 7:05p
2 SWB 5:05p	3 SWB 1:05p	4 IND 7:05p	5 IND 1:35p	6 IND 7:05p	7 IND 7:15p	8 LOU 6:05p	7 GWN 5:05p	8 CHA 7:15p	9 CHA 7:15p	10 CHA 7:15p	11 CHA 7:05p	12 GWN 7:05p	13 GWN 7:05p
9 LOU 6:05p	10 LOU 7:05p	11 LOU 7:05p	12 OFF	13 IND 7:05p	14 IND 7:05p	15 IND 7:05p	14 GWN 5:05p	15 ALL STAR BREAK	16 ALL STAR BREAK	17 PAW 7:05p	18 PAW 7:05p	19 PAW 7:05p	20 PAW 7:05p
16 IND 5:05p	17 LOU 7:05p	18 LOU 7:05p	19 LOU 7:05p	20 LOU 7:05p	21 BUF 7:05p	22 BUF 6:05p	21 PAW 5:05p	22 GWN 6:05p	23 GWN 7:05p	24 GWN 7:05p	25 GWN 7:05p	26 COL 7:15p	27 COL 7:05p
23 BUF 1:05p	24 BUF 7:05p	25 LHV 7:05p	26 LHV 7:05p	27 LHV 7:05p	28 LHV 7:05p	29 COL 7:05p	28 COL 6:05p	29 COL 7:05p	30 TOL 7:00p				
30 COL 5:05p													

AUGUST							SEPTEMBER						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT
				1 TOL 7:00p	2 TOL 7:00p	3 GWN 7:05p	1 NOR 6:05p	2 NOR 12:05p	3 OFF	First Round Playoffs			
4 GWN 5:05p	5 ROC 7:05p	6 ROC 7:05p	7 ROC 7:05p	8 ROC 7:05p	9 CHA 7:05p	10 CHA 7:15p	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
11 CHA 5:05p	12 OFF	13 GWN 6:00p	14 GWN 6:00p	15 GWN 6:00p	16 GWN 7:15p	17 CHA 7:15p	Championship Round						
18 CHA 2:15p	19 CHA 7:15p	20 CHA 7:05p	21 CHA 7:05p	22 NOR 7:05p	23 NOR 7:05p	24 NOR 7:05p							
25 NOR 5:05p	26 CHA 7:05p	27 CHA 7:05p	28 GWN 6:05p	29 GWN 6:05p	30 GWN 7:05p	31 NOR 7:05p							

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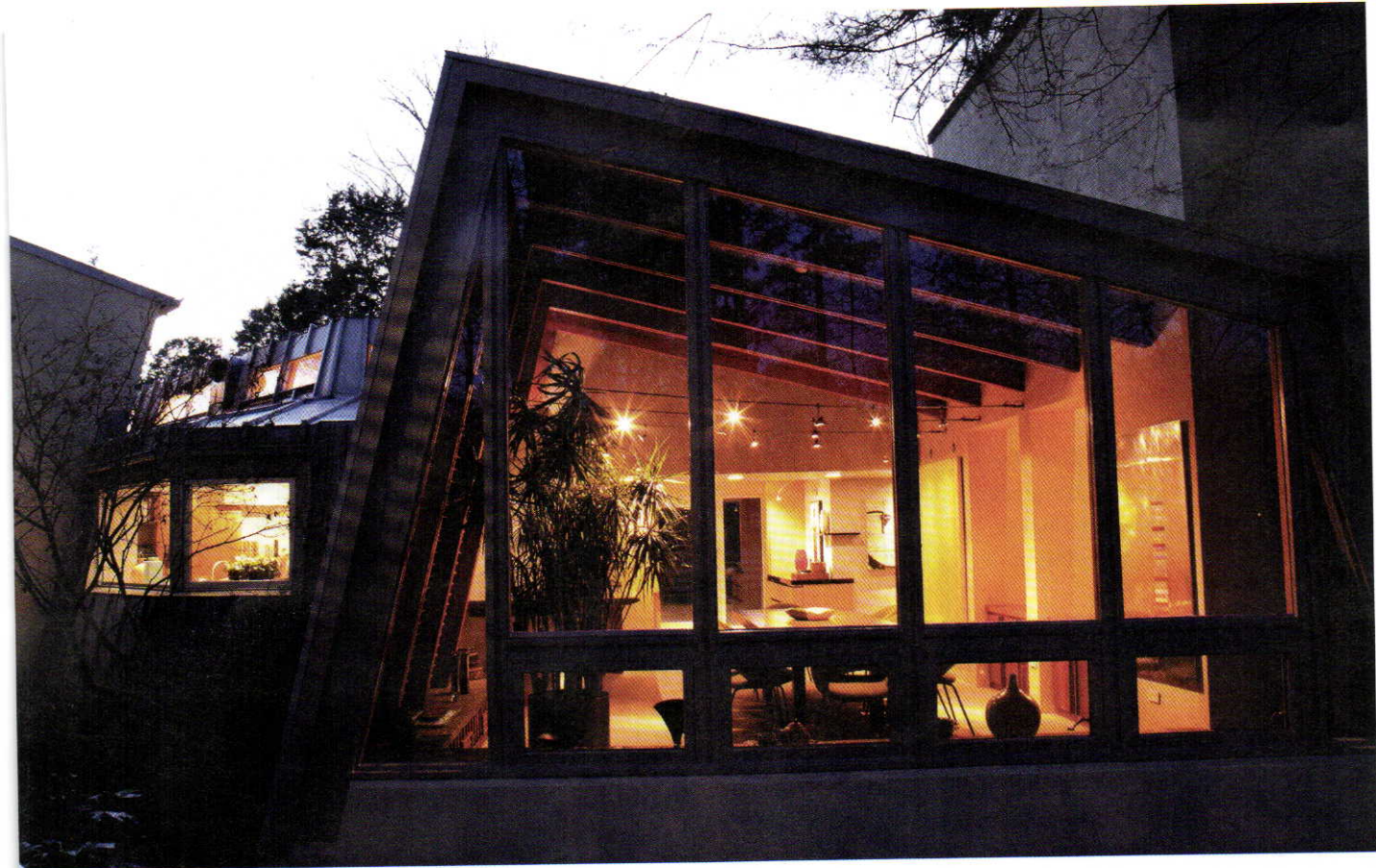
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**Looking into the kitchen at twilight**

**The renovation included his and hers bathrooms. This is hers.**



drive through Fearington now. You'd never think they were designed by the same guy. But as repeatedly stressed by many of his contemporaries and clients, Jon Condoret could do anything.

R.B. knew of Jon's modernist leanings but put him to work at Fearington in part because of his "European sense of scale." And also just because the two got along. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship and an answer to Jon's financial issues. He went to work for R.B. full time, which allowed him to focus on architecture and not bookkeeping.

"In the 30-some years we knew each other, never a cross word was spoken," R.B. says. "He was a real friend, and he was a real loss to us."

Audie says it was opportunities like the one at Fearington that informed one of the more interesting aspects of her father's personality: "He really, really loved America," Audie says. "He was an incredible patriot because he was incredibly grateful to have a place to come to."

## 'Algerian Fortitude'

Audie says, in a way, she's glad she had to fight off breast cancer. It helped her deal with the three years of painful cancer treatments her dad endured before succumbing to the illness in 2010 at the age of 75.

"I was his chemo buddy," Audie says. "It was a horrible thing to see him go through, but I was honored to spend all the time with him. He was so dignified through the whole thing — that Algerian fortitude. He never once said, 'Why me?'"

The pain of his loss "will always be raw," she says. "He was not only my dad, he was my friend."

And the two had the bond of their profession, which they could discuss for hours. "The wilder the ideas were, the more delighted he would be," Audie says. She points to a bookcase she designed, an abstracted tree. "Oh, Dad," she says to the heavens. "I wish I could show it to you. He would really get a kick out of that." **DM**