

KNOCK KNOCK

The Wade and Mary Lou Williams house

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NORTH CAROLINA MODERNIST HOUSES

"As anyone walks through and around this house, I just hope they get the feeling I intended: of open spaces that flow together without being encumbered by walls, and of the house being one with nature."

That's what architect J. Wade Williams Jr., AIA emeritus, said recently about the exemplary Modern home in Durham he designed in the late 1950s, and that he and his wife, Mary Lou, and their two daughters have loved for more

than five decades.

He calls the house on Whitfield Road, with a Durham address but in Orange County, "woody contemporary," although its pedigree is clearly Frank Lloyd Wright's "Organic Modern" architecture. Williams grins at this observation. "Mr. Wright," as he respectfully refers to the Modernist master, "had a great deal of influence on me."

At the end of a long, narrow, gravel approach road, the Williams' house welcomes visitors into a meticulously landscaped entrance courtyard and rock garden formed by the intersec-

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tion of the house's north-south and east-west volumes.

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FROM THE FRONT PAGE

Beneath deep roof overhangs and prominent fascia, the architect's use of natural materials and abundant glazing is immediately apparent. Split-block concrete aggregate stone from an abandoned coal mine in western Virginia forms the end wall of the north-south mass, at the carport, and reappears by the front door, demarcating the intersection of the floor plan's north-south and east-west axes.

Pine siding, used throughout house, features redwood staining on the exterior – a warm counterpoint to the aggregate stone. Lofty windows march rhythmically around the entire exterior, flooding the interior with natural light and panoramic views of the Williams' 19-acre property.

For the floor plan, Williams employed two decidedly Modernist concepts: Exterior materials – the concrete stone and pine paneling – penetrate the walls to reappear on the interior, and one space flows seamlessly into the next, always culminating in stunning views of the outdoors.



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A view of the front of the Wade and Mary Lou Williams house from the drive.

This indoor-outdoor connection, through materials and plan, creates a sense of harmony between the house and its site and satisfies Williams intent for his home to be "one with nature."

From the foyer, the 12-and-a-half-foot-tall living room is straight ahead, where a floor-to-ceiling fireplace is surrounded by full-sized, polished versions of the same concrete stone. A small den (a relic of the '60s) appears just beyond the living room. The dining room, kitchen and a new family room/breakfast area flow off the foyer to the left. And everywhere, the Williams' extensive art collection enlivens the interior's

neutral color scheme.

To the right of the foyer, a few steps lead up to the bedroom level, which includes their two daughters' former bedrooms and shared bath and the master suite. A continuous row of storage closets forms a divider wall between the living room and the bedroom level, yet the wall stops short of the ceiling and the exposed, laminated ceiling beams overhead.

From the foyer, another set of steps to the right leads down to a full, 800-square-foot apartment on the lower level, on grade with the side yard so that it has its own entrance and access to the outdoors. Williams planned the apartment as

a place for his or Mary Lou's parents as they aged.

Every room on the main level opens onto 400 square feet of decking that includes various sitting, dining and lounging areas overlooking the Williams' landscaped property and various gardens within stone planters. Within the deck's walls are solid and open sections, the latter to satisfy Mary Lou's desire to still see the ground below despite the decking.

Ahead of its time, as most mid-century Modernist houses were, the Williams house features commonsense principles of sustainability: (1) careful orientation on the



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A detail of one of the stone walls around the Williams house.

site and abundant glazing to maximize natural lighting, (2) deep roof overhangs, decking, and mature deciduous trees to protect the glass on all levels from the high summer sun, but allow the low winter sun to warm the interior, (3) the use of regionally available construction materials, and (4) the use of rocks excavated on the site to construct exterior walls and

planters.

To the first-time visitor, learning that the Williams house is only 1,800 square feet (not counting the downstairs apartment) is shocking. The open floor plan, natural light, panoramic views of the outdoors, and use of natural materials make the house feel much larger.

No doubt Mr. Wright would be pleased.