

QC

JUNE/JULY 2016 EXCLUSIVE

★ THE HOME ISSUE ★

MODERNITY

A Carlton Contemporary, Whitney Powers' urban island home, Murray Whisnant's purpose, Amy Vermillion's clay creativity, Blue Ridge Mountain Club's culture of gathering, and much more.



PLUS+

Blue Ridge Mountain Club / Chef Grigo / Ivan Depeña / Comida's Margarita
Yafo / Maestro Meena / Anne Neilson / The Vendue / Maja Godlewska's Art

THE HOME & DESIGN ISSUE



I have always been drawn to unique design. That may sound typical, but I remember the first time I saw images of Fallingwater, Frank Lloyd Wright's Pennsylvania masterpiece. I immediately thought, "How could someone have designed a home like that in 1935?" I was in absolute awe. I felt that same level of astonishment when I saw Gaudi's work for the first time, and again when I circled the Pei Pyramid in Paris. These designers, along with the Eames, Gehrys and Kappes of the world are easy to extol. They strive against convention, creating beautiful works in far-off, exotic places.

When it comes to design, Charlotte isn't Barcelona or Paris, or Hollywood for that matter. It isn't nearly as old, and it isn't exotic. But, that doesn't mean that phenomenal design, in a wide variety of genres, doesn't exist here. You just might have to look a little harder for it.

Our city is home to gorgeous Tudor and Colonial Revival, as well as intriguing mid-century modern design, a booming American Craftsman resurgence, a contemporary movement on the rise, and a growing skyline featuring a plethora of styles. Notable designers like William Stoddart, Cesar Pelli, and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, just to name a few, have contributed to our city's beautiful aesthetic. Homegrown architects like Murray Whisnant, named one of the top 50 American architects by Town & Country Magazine, have shaped the city's forward-thinking design.

Today, our city is attracting major talent in the home and design industry. The folks at Liquid Design are re-

sponsible for the modern marvel that is the US National White-water Center. David Furman's Centro Cityworks has designed some of the city's most distinguished urban properties, as well as several skyline additions. LandDesign, founded in the Queen City, is a nationally recognized landscape architecture firm. On the residential side, architects and designers like Ruard Veltman, Ken Pursley, Frank Smith and many others are pushing the envelope and receiving extensive acclaim.

These are good omens for our city. We here at QC Exclusive are cautiously excited for what lies ahead and we're more than proud to be witnesses to it. I personally can't wait to see how Charlotte's architecture and design evolves, anxiously watching as the whole look of the city changes in the not-so-distant future.

In this home and design issue, we share the story of renowned architect Murray Whisnant, explore the philosophy of Liquid Design, and tour a Carlton mountain contemporary. Join us as we visit a Whitney Powers modern, meet Thierry Francois, travel to the Blue Ridge Mountain Club, and shoot sporting clays with the talented interior designer Amy Vermillion. We hope you enjoy. Until next time!

Sincerely,
Jon-Paul Grice,
Editor

★ QC Exclusive founders, Brett Barter and JP Grice walk to their office at The Foundry on Cedar Street.

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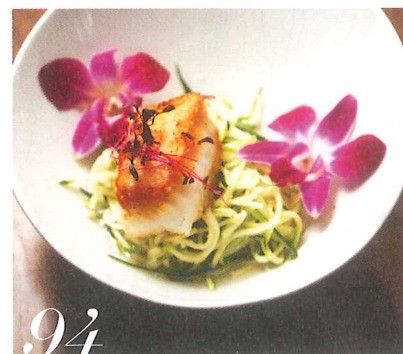
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MODERNITY







WITH PURPOSE

★ BY COREY MILLER | PHOTOS BY JAMEY PRICE AND GORDON SCHENCK ★

The Murray Whisnant Story

Legendary Charlotte architect Murray Whisnant is purposeful, very much a man of substance over style. Architect, furniture maker, designer, and artist, he dresses professionally for business meetings, but only to a self-prescribed point of practicality, and no further. There's a simplicity to his every conversation. He'll explain what a design means, but he won't needlessly praise or embellish it. It's a structure, and it "does what it's supposed to do."

Murray's "Swan Song," a huge rectangular array of 70s TV dinner trays, was made of abjectness and less-than-appetizing potato paste meals. A beautiful work of art, it is nonetheless a relic of a lonely time in his life. Whisnant, now in his early 80s, admits to having found some delight in the bottoms of those all-too-contemporary meals. "I love the forms of the TV dinners," he laughs. "They're certainly better than the food." These tin shapes, simple though they are, appeal to his modern artist sensibilities. The fact is, they're functional. They serve their purpose. Like Murray's mid-century modern masterworks, they are the solution to a problem.

Much like those TV dinner trays, Murray's current home has a purpose. The angular forms making up his house were inspired by the skeleton of a ship, but you'd never know it — this design was easily applicable to the plot of land, and it is at its fundament a work of exceptional utility. In the bowels of that ship is Murray's home studio, where he paints, channeling his Charlotte heritage through a medium not altogether unlike his architectural illustrations. A hobby taken up in his golden years, Whisnant's gargantuan square paintings of Queen City fauna were foreshadowed by his earlier "landscapes." Slightly less colorful (but hardly less detailed) leaf motifs frame his beautiful drafts of some of the most angular and modern commercial buildings in the Charlotte and Triangle areas. His old drawings are browning now, exuding a retro sort of elegance, but they're merely estimations of the real thing. Murray's work, both commercial and residential, has helped define the modern landscape of North Carolina architecture, and he can't imagine having done otherwise.

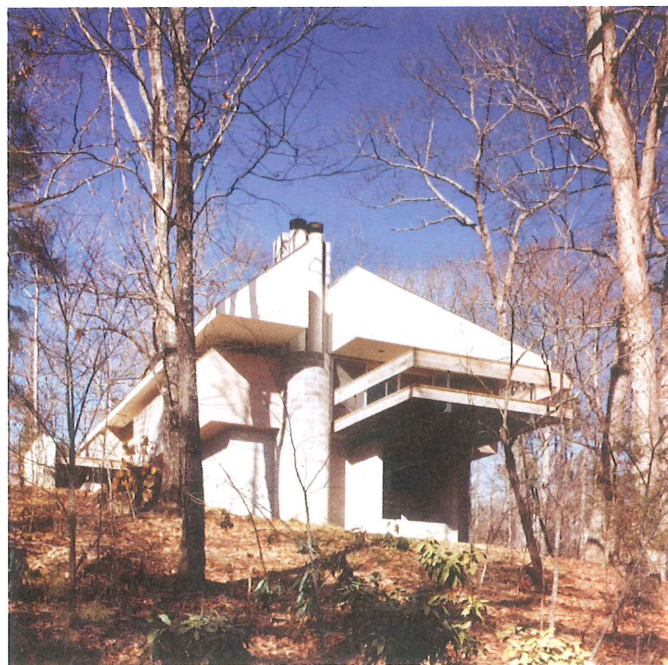
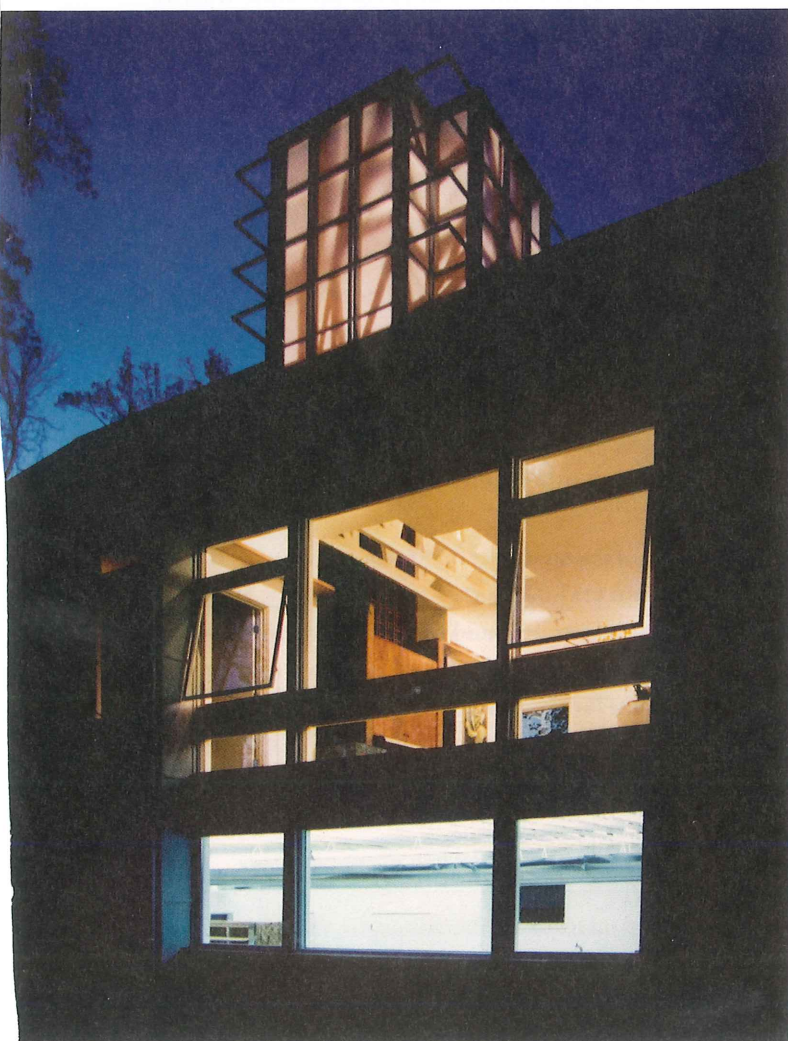
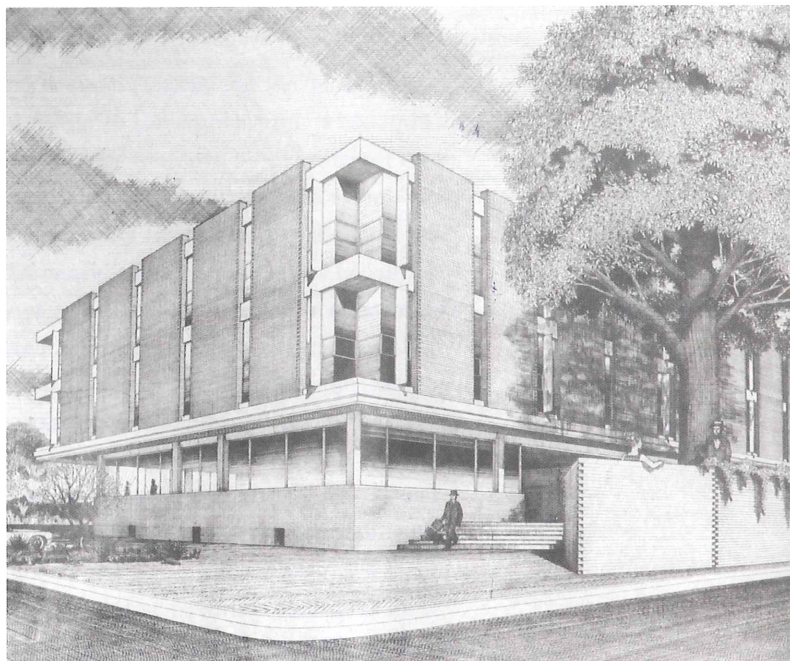
He's been in the business for a while. Born and raised in the Queen City, William Murray Whisnant graduated from Charlotte Central High in 1950 and began his studies at North Carolina State University's School of Design shortly thereafter. He worked with three firms in Charlotte after his 1956 graduation, before partnering with Charles Wheatley in January 1960. He wouldn't found his own firm, Murray Whisnant Architects, until 18 years later.

Separating himself from the established industry wasn't tough, as he was already well-known in Charlotte. His divergence was provoked by a difference in creative philosophy. Murray's inspired schooling at NCSU (of which he only says good things) and his early experiences in the architecture industry were at odds with one another. He found that Americans, and our architects as a result, were mostly interested in a particular sort of design. "When I look at today's world of American architecture," he muses, "it's clear that the secret to success is embracing what I call 'reminiscent' design." Murray believes that, in the States, we're always fondly looking back, restrained by our remembrance of things past. "If you want to be successful in Charlotte architecturally, build a house that looks like what you find on a jigsaw puzzle box." European and picturesque, these homes are beautiful, sure, but they're a bit out of place in the present environmental climate. "With a planet consuming its resources at an alarming rate," Murray believes architecture should have a moral basis. "In today's world, we're fortunate: We can design buildings that produce all the energy they consume *without* them looking like an addition to the International Space Station."

As fun as pretending can be, most of us Carolinians are not Europeans. Murray Whisnant's brand of artistic expression — he hopes — has always been one of honesty. American architecture should be honest with itself, should emphasize *itself*, rather than the successes of models far away and long ago.



★ **PREVIOUS SPREAD:** Murray Whisnant's Calabrese Home design. Murray in his studio. **THIS PAGE:** The courtyard and pool at Murray Whisnant Home II. An architectural drawing of Providence Medical Center. The front elevation of Murray Whisnant Home I. The "mast" of Murray's current home.



**"You retire from a job.
I never had a job."**

-Murray Whisnant

“Things like the Boeing 787 liner and Wright Brothers’ airplane in 1903...they’re both beautiful and they remain beautiful in the same way, as pure answers to the problems they were meant to solve.”

Murray’s instinct has always been to progress the art by identifying and meeting the needs of a form, as opposed to imitating what other artists have done with that form. “The school of architecture was about learning to be problem solvers, not stylists,” Murray stresses. The best (and craziest) architects derive a particular joy in seeking out these problems. The original Whisnant home at Sharon Hills Road sits on a hill that rises over 50 feet in elevation from one end of the site to the other. Reinforced steel beams had to be incorporated into this structure, which would become as dramatic as a mountain home but with all the geometric, Bauhaus flourishes. The house’s design fits into the wooded incline as if it was always meant to be there, hugging the sloped earth like a boxy, white-and-red outcropping of rock. Perched precariously on a strange site but also large enough for a family, this home is emblematic of Whisnant’s strategy: His niche is “appropriate” design — appropriate for the site, the budget, and the clients’ wishes.

For Murray Whisnant, trend is a trap, and at 84, he’s speaking from experience. “I know that if you’re incredibly stylish,” he says, smiling like a schoolboy, “take a photo of yourself and wait thirty years for a good laugh.”

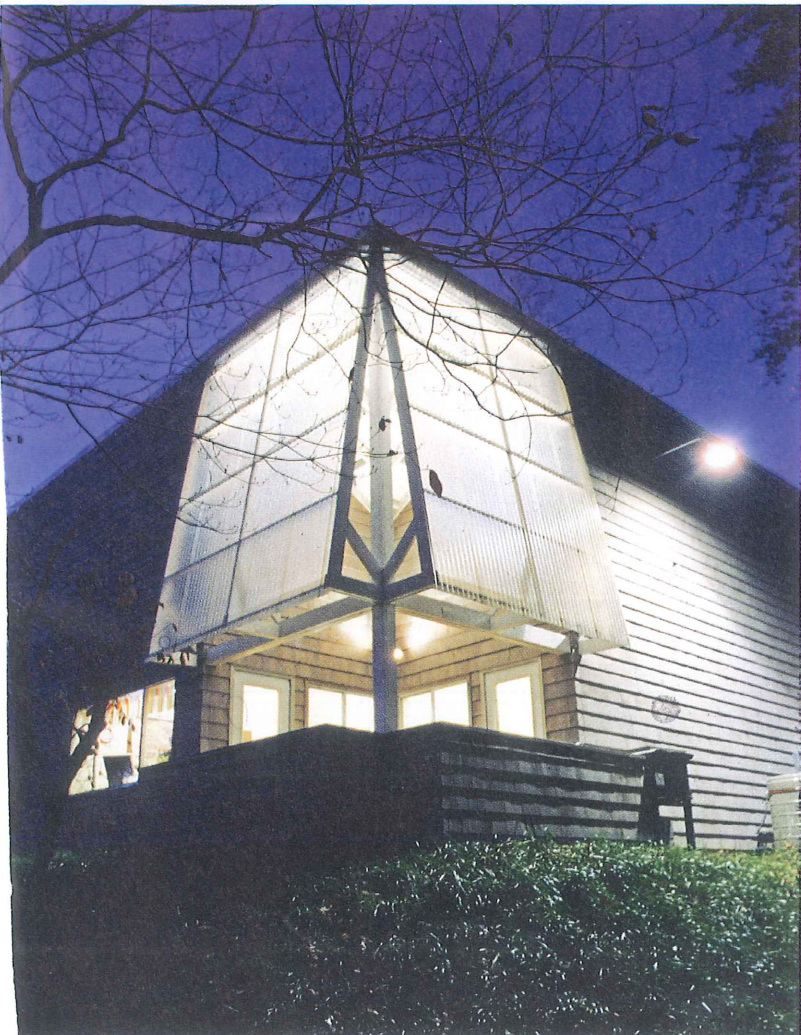
If an architect wants to be timeless, he avoids style. “No one designing a Boeing 787 liner is thinking about style, you know? Things like the Boeing 787 liner and Wright Brothers’ airplane in 1903 — those were never about style. They’re both beautiful and they remain beautiful in the same way, as pure answers to the problems they were meant to solve. Like anything truly beautiful, they demand that we view them intellectually.”

Murray’s designs are themselves unalterably cerebral, each of them one-of-a-kind, but he’s never seen his career in that light. In Murray’s mind, his designs exist outside the realm of what’s been overdone not because of some labored attempt at reaching that place, but rather because he simply creates in a way that makes sense. “If, in the end, there’s something that makes a design distinctively mine, well,” he shrugs, “that’s great.”

He’s a humble man. On occasion, it seems, Murray’s utilitarian approach to describing even his own work sells himself short. Good architecture solves a problem, and Murray’s biggest problem may be his modesty. Luckily his breathtaking works carefully address these humble tendencies, speaking proudly for themselves. Murray Whisnant’s design *is* distinctively his — all of it. His work is without classification, and thus can only be described as Whisnant-esque. He laughs at the notion of his own style though, reasserting his Appropriate Design philosophy: “I guess, if you set out to solve a problem, style may follow.”

Indeed, some semblance of style has followed, but it’s an autonomous one rather than manufactured, making Murray one of the most visionary American architects still working today. He’s helped shape modern American architecture for over half a century, and he’s not going to stop doing so any time soon. “You retire from a job,” Murray, who’s currently working on two new architectural projects, explains. Ever the pragmatic modernist but never lacking some old-fashioned wit, Murray grins. “I never had a job.”

★ **FOR A BIT MORE INFO:** Visit Murray Whisnant’s studio on East Boulevard in Charlotte, NC or you can see his modern furniture design at the Bechtler’s The House That Modernism Built.



★ **THIS PAGE:** Designs by Murray Whisnant include the Carmel Presbyterian Church and Pentecostal Church. Murray Whisnant sits in front of his leaf paintings at his East Blvd studio.