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We invite submissions of project and story ideas for upcoming issues of *Texas Architect*.

If you have ideas for "News" call us at (512) 478-7386, fax to (512) 478-0528, or e-mail ssharpe@texasarchitect.org.

cover image by Charles Davis Smith, AIA



WATERCOURSE

Cascading water
links sky to earth
and city to nature
in a classical villa
set beside a pond.

by EDWARD M. BAUM, FAIA



PROJECT House by a Pond, Dallas
CLIENT Withheld at client's request
ARCHITECT Max Levy Architect
PROJECT TEAM Max Levy, AIA; Marc McCollom
CONTRACTOR Don Romer
CONSULTANTS Bill Walker (structural); Mesa Design Group
 (landscape); Paul Draper & Associates (interior design)
PHOTOGRAPHER Charles Smith, AIA

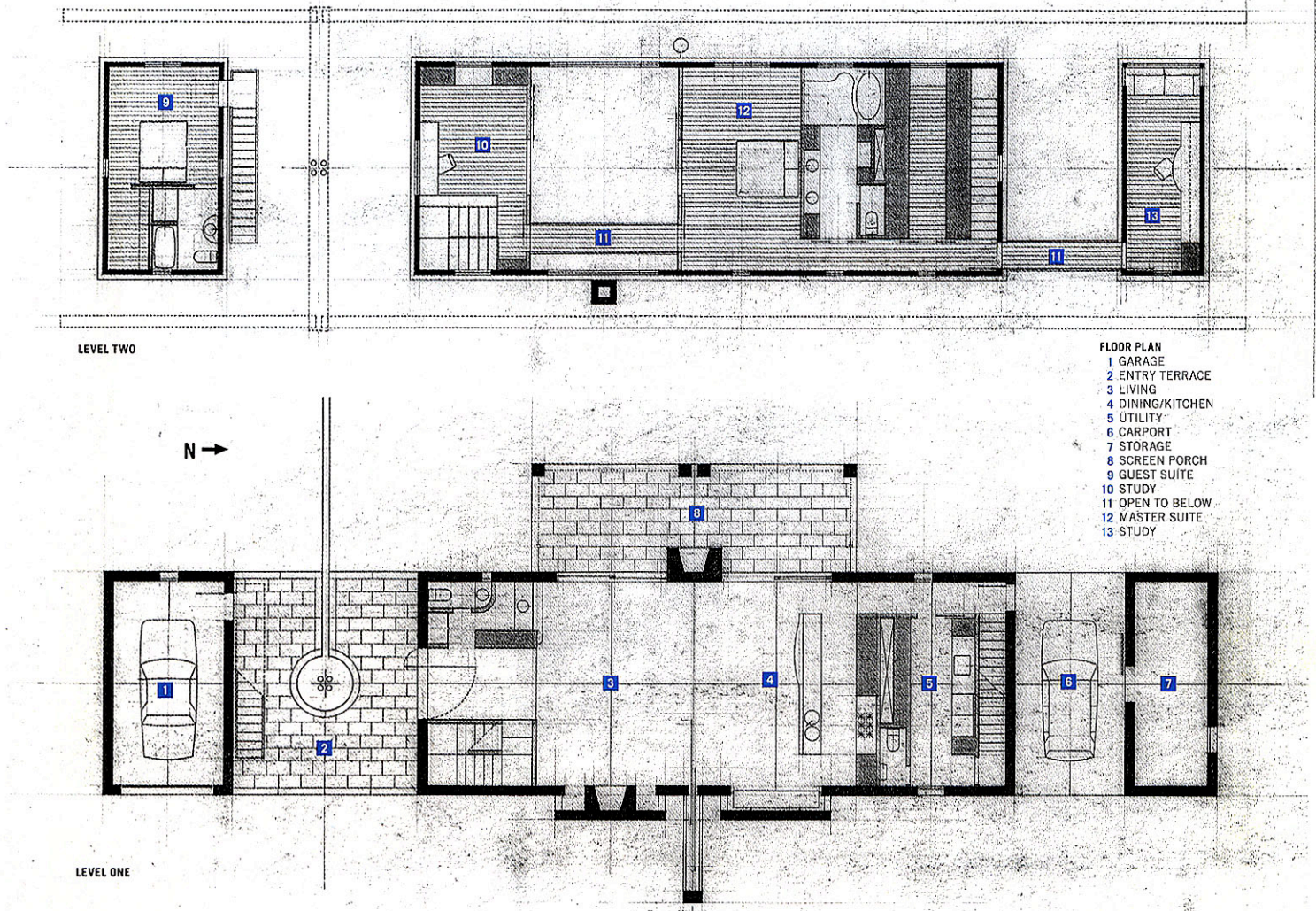
AS A CHILD, THE OWNER remembers living on this site, especially the pond. Years later when it became available she acquired the property and gave architect Max Levy, AIA, a simple program for a house—a master bedroom, two studies, a guest suite, a screened porch, and the stuff to tie them together. The result is a remarkable building, a long two-story volume one room deep sited between a quiet curving North Dallas street and a pond settled in a gentle bowl in the land. The house at first glance recalls a classical villa or country manor. Its long front (street) side faces the road directly, complete with a graveled semi-circular drive; the back (garden) side opens to almost Virgilian views of studied naturalness, trees, and mown grass sloping to the little lake in the middle ground.

But this house does not separate front from back, street from garden; it connects them. We quickly see the long volume is really three distinct volumes arranged in a row under a single gabled roof. Perhaps it's a main house and two out buildings; or a pair of very well-bred "dog-trot" vernacular houses of the American South; or a single house with two of the breezeways so popular (and effective) around mid-century; or maybe it's a row of tall rooms with two of them removed. Whatever its origins, the organization works beautifully. We are immediately drawn to one of the voids in the overall volume, revealing the landscape and pond beyond. A cluster of downspouts occupy the center of this space and are poised to spill water into a cistern-like pool with the overflow running down a precise concrete channel across the lawn and into the pond—nature's water cycle made visible. The elements gathering rain—half-round gutters, the array of downspouts, and the cistern—form a virtual fireplace and chimney in reverse, bringing the product of the sky to a concentrated point in the middle of a space which is itself a room in reverse. This space—linking the city to nature, sky to earth, open to closed—forms the entrance; the door is incidental.

Inside is another two-story volume, a more enclosed variant of the entry space, which is the living, dining, and kitchen area. One side of this room holds the hearth and oblique views to the street, while the opposite side gives directly to a long screened porch—a veranda really—which is an alternative living and dining area surrounded by the bucolic vista. Again, each space or room connects the two sides of the site by view and light. A garage and guest suite make up the separated volume at the entry end of the house, while a carport, storage, and study connected by an open bridge make up the other. The linear sequence of rooms and passages is different on the two levels, creating a remarkable combination of spatial settings and experiences within the clear logic of the planning system.

The materials and assembly continue the spirit of the house's organization in a very direct way: that is, a simple schema producing rich variations. The major surfacing materials—ground-face concrete block on the lower level, lightly stained Douglas fir tongue-and-groove siding on the upper, and treated galvanized ("Paint Grip") sheet steel for the roof and ceiling volume—are brought together within a narrow range of hue and value.





- FLOOR PLAN**
- 1 GARAGE
 - 2 ENTRY TERRACE
 - 3 LIVING
 - 4 DINING/KITCHEN
 - 5 UTILITY
 - 6 CARPORT
 - 7 STORAGE
 - 8 SCREEN PORCH
 - 9 GUEST SUITE
 - 10 STUDY
 - 11 OPEN TO BELOW
 - 12 MASTER SUITE
 - 13 STUDY

The materials read more by comparison of their subtle textural and tonal qualities than by strong contrast, much as the variety of spaces in the house is perceived within the linear order of rooms. Add to these materials the polished concrete floors and the zinc-coated rainwater system, and the whole presents a moving eloquence aspiring to a condition of grays, letting the owner's possessions and nature itself occupy the rest of the palette.

An architecture of subtle distinctions requires a strong design capability at all building scales and the intellectual consistency to drive ideas and then edit them. It also requires superb craft. In fact, the most remarkable virtue of this house is the poetic thoughtfulness at all levels, from the site to the materials to the joining of those materials. Each detail has been thought out and assembled consistent with the whole, but without the "totalized" architectural vision that precludes any but the designer's own formulation of the visual universe. We can all think of contemporary houses in which the odd piece of furniture or even a spotted

sink becomes an act of subversion. This house is resolved without being resolute.

This kind of architecture is very rare for three reasons. It is hard to do, demanding talent, sensibility, and a superior attention span from the architect. It needs an excellent builder devoted to getting things right. And it requires an owner who appreciates and wants an architecture of thoroughgoing quality. The last of the three may be the most elusive. As a friend once remarked, "Clients get professional services; patrons get architecture." Being a patron is not about money; it's about understanding, participation, and enthusiasm. Being a patron is not easy, especially today.

The realtor's notion of "curb appeal" dominates so much of our architectural culture—communicating desirability from outside and at a distance, without the effort of leaving one's car. Popular media and the profession's own press contribute their share to superficial expectations for architecture. What I'll call "blurb appeal" also relies on limited time and effort from the viewer/reader

and a certain distancing from the complexities of a building and its ideas. Gestural one-liners, historicist drag images, and buzzwords are faster and easier than communicating deeper considerations. How often do we visit a building first seen in the media and leave disappointed by the disconnect of overall ideas from the scales of occupancy and its own making?

Max Levy's House by a Pond goes against this grain. It is immensely welcome. ■

Edward M. Baum, FAIA, practices architecture in Dallas and teaches at UT-Arlington, where he was architecture dean from 1987 to 1999.

RESOURCES CONCRETE COLORING: L.M. Scofield; CONCRETE BLOCK SEALER: ProSoCo; MASONRY UNITS: Texas Building Products; LIMESTONE FLOORING: Custom Stone Supply; SLATE COUNTERTOPS: Burlington Stone; METAL STAIR RAILS: Julius Blum & Co.; WATERPROOFING AND DAMPPROOFING: American Colloid; WOOD DOORS AND FRAMES: QUANTUM; WOOD WINDOWS: Pella; TILE: Ann Sacks; PAINTS: ICI Dulux, Cabot Stains