



The Fusion of Vision and Environment:

The Architect's Thoughts and Personal Tour

BY BARRON SCHIMBERG

A successful project blends creative vision and a commitment to efficiently use environmental elements. These factors came together harmoniously in an original custom home in Sarasota, Florida. The site is located at the end of a cul-de-sac, surrounded by a canal and opening up into Sarasota Bay. The clients had a vision of the style of home they wanted as well as a commitment to the essence of the design we created. Working together, we achieved a contemporary residence designed under Florida Green Building standards. The clients' home effectively incorporates the site's natural advantages — chiefly its proximity to the water — as well as highly efficient mechanical systems and environmental materials to create a unique home.

INITIAL INSPIRATION

Soon after we began working together, my clients showed me a photograph of a house they saw in a magazine, which helped to generate the initial design. The house pictured was much larger than the one we were designing, but I was inspired to incorporate what I saw as a series of pavilions, interconnected with hip roofs, canopies and flat roofs. I was also drawn to the use of natural materials, both in selection and color. This image had a modern Polynesian feel, and as the owners are originally from California, the words "California Contemporary" came to mind frequently. All of these concepts allowed the design to evolve in a way that emphasized the true beauty of the site on the canal opening up to Sarasota Bay.



The original house (demolished) faced due west, and it failed to take full advantage of the great view that was available more northwest towards the bay. I located the new house on the site so that all main rooms made maximum use of the wonderful views to the northwest. By incorporating the clients' desired architectural style with the location of the lot and the pavilion concept, I was able to create rooms that were all interconnected but under one roof, oriented towards the bay. By slightly extending all exterior walls beyond the connecting perpendicular wall, the eye is directed towards the water, which is the main focus of the property. We painted these walls appropriately one color while painting the perpendicular walls a different color, which also emphasizes the orientation toward the bay beyond.



It was important to everyone involved to avoid building a mega-house, which is too often the result when the FEMA elevation requires the finished first floor to be 6'-0" higher than existing grade. By keeping the majority of the house as a single floor and only popping up a second story over the garage — the lowest allowed space — we kept the scale of the house appropriate for the neighborhood. We also painted the base of the house a color that blends into the landscape and allows the building to “float.” The front porte-cochere canopy, though 40'-0" long, helps to bring the scale of the building lower by drawing the eye to a 9'-0" level rather than being confronted with the mega wall and stairs typical of Florida “McMansions.”

ENVIRONMENTAL MODERNISM

As my background and education are based on modernism and commercial design, my designs reflect those basic elements: clean lines, open spaces, natural light, lack of superfluous ornamentation, proper scaling of materials and respect for the site and context of the building. By incorporating wood trellises, copper roofs and earthy paint and stain colors, I was able to offset the rigidity of the modern floor plan. I incorporated organic shapes as accents throughout the house to soften the angular lines and verticality of the building, as well as help to tell a story and create an experience.



THE EXPERIENCE OF WATER

To fully incorporate the lot's chief advantage, we deliberately evoked the experience of water, which is organically infused throughout the site. From the moment you set foot on the property, the landscaping, designed in collaboration with Grant's Gardens, brings to mind the tranquil feeling of water and foreshadows the bay just around the corner on the other side of the house. Certain plants, grasses and boulders provide context for the location of the site. This starts the process and prepares one for the experience of the entire building.

Walking up the front steps, you see to the left a water sculpture designed by Eric Higgs, a highly respected sculptor known for his work with basalt and bronze. When I was introduced to him and the features of the stone he used, I immediately felt it was perfect for this house. From the beginning of the design process, I envisioned carefully placing his water sculpture in this residence. The clients agreed and made the commitment to incorporate his work into the design. Placing the sculpture on the front porch evokes the experience of water as you journey through the house, hinting at what lies beyond. As you walk past the sculpture and the sound of running water cascading over the basalt stone into the basin, you get a peek to the right of the stair through two 12'-0" high windows on both ends of a hallway to a teasing view of the canal. Though subtle, this creates an immediate connection to the bay before you even enter the building.



THE EVOLUTION OF BASALT

Just as the design invokes an evolution of experiences, the use of the basalt stone evolves into an ongoing experience as you journey through the house. Basalt stone resulted from massive volcanic flows occurring



between 12 and 60 million years ago and constitutes most of the earth's oceanic crust. As the molten lava cooled, it typically formed into multi-sided columns. Fissures between the columns allowed sediment deposits creating an outer layer of various brown and gold tones. When polished, an exposed interior transforms from a rough dark grey into tones of smooth glossy black that dramatically contrast with the stone's exterior. Sculptor Eric Higgs emphasizes these variations of color and texture in his work highlighting the natural beauty of basalt.

The house's mailbox, also sculpted by Eric Higgs, is set in a basalt column, its original form, and anchors the entire project from front to back. Leading from the mailbox is a basalt walkway set in a landscaped bed of flowing grasses to emulate the feeling of water and movement. Then, the water sculpture, located outside at the entry way, is a sculpted rock, broken down slightly from its original form. Entering the house, you are welcomed by an entrance wall finished on both sides with basalt cut into 4" strips, varying in lengths and randomly stacked, but placed horizontally, emphasizing the direction of that magnificent view of the bay. Finally, the same basalt strips, cut on a larger scale, are placed on the back wall of a disappearing edge pool, tying the material from beginning to end and allowing the organic nature of the stone to become one with the water and the house itself.



FROM ROOM TO ROOM

At the entrance to the residence, the sculptural basalt wall helps to soften the angular lines of the spaces with a very organic material, undulating with every piece, in shape and color, and varying from a dark gray to golds and reds. As you walk past the wall, the space opens up to a grand yet informal great room. The room was designed specifically to minimize interior walls and allow as much natural light and continuous cross breezes into the house as possible throughout the year.

In the ceiling are dropped soffits, "clouds," set at different heights above the floor. These "clouds" help define the spaces below them: living room, dining room, family room and kitchen. The "clouds" are up-lit to give the sense of a floating form in a field of a beautiful reclaimed cypress wood ceiling. In addition, the 'clouds' continue to evoke feelings of movement and organic flow. Based on discussions I had in the beginning of the design process with the interior designer, Robert Claussen, fabrics, furniture and specialty lighting fixtures were chosen specifically to bring curves or free forms into the interior, thus complementing the architecture and allowing the space to have subtle organic shapes.



The kitchen, open to the great room, surrounds an island that was designed to step at 3 different heights with three different materials. The countertops not only relate to the ceiling, but also create undulation and an organic quality. The ceiling "cloud" over this island is illuminated with star lights, giving the feel of a starry night when lit. Off of the kitchen to the south is another porch overlooking the south canal, which provides an area for grilling and sun bathing and allows the owners to have a different experience of their house and site. On this porch, there is a continuous trellis, bringing similar materials and details from other parts of the house to the back side. Some materials used throughout are mahogany, cherry, cypress, limestone and bronze. All are soft in color and feel.



One of the most dramatic features of the house is the staircase. Centrally locating the stair against the entry basalt wall allows it to be treated as a piece of art within the space, rather than just a functioning mass unconnected to the overall design. To unify the beauty of the basalt wall (cut into horizontal strips) and the organic bronze railing, the relationship of these two elements were deliberately kept close to one another. This contributes to the goal of treating the stairs as a piece of art and not simply a massive grand stair or a non-descript forgotten access to the upper floor. The wood treads are cantilevered off of the wall as rectangular boxes, leaving them to literally float in the space.

The bronze railing, designed in collaboration with Eric Higgs, is attached to the treads very delicately in minimal locations to keep it light and airy. The result is a totally organic composition of bronze to offset the angularity of the space, as well as the horizontal lines and natural movement of the basalt backdrop. As you ascend the stairs, the space is illuminated with a clerestory of glass above that not only has operable windows to allow for passive heating and cooling, but also acts as a beacon to boaters when lit at night. This evocation of a light house is appropriate for the location and nature of the site. The vertical shaft of both light and sculptural architecture is a highlight of the house.



The second floor is made up of 2 guest bedrooms with separate baths, a playroom and large windows for natural light. Even the showers have a window to allow for natural light in a normally dark space.

The garage is meant to be used as a room, not just a garage, with a large 8'-0" x 8'-0" window allowing a view of the canal and outside. The floors are stained concrete. This gives the floors a color and helps create warmth and comfort in a room that doesn't typically have pleasant associations.

There's a mudroom for the dogs off of the garage space, which then leads up a set of small stairs to the first floor with the laundry room on the right, close to the kitchen. A window above in the laundry room allows for more natural light. This room also functions as a safe room for hurricanes if necessary, as it is surrounded by masonry and impact glass, has a refrigerator hooked into the generator and a sink.

Returning to the great room, the 45 feet of 8'-0" high double doors and 16 feet of 8'-0" high double doors on the opposite wall, when open, will eliminate the need for air conditioning for at least 6 months of the year. Above all doors are operable transom windows, again allowing for cross ventilation and heat exchange, even if the doors are not open.

The nine sets of double doors open onto a porch, covered by a floating canopy that overlooks a 50 foot long disappearing edge pool. The same limestone flooring used on the interior is installed on the porch deck to provide a continuous floor and never-ending feel for the space. The interior of the pool is finished with a darker color, evoking the true color of the canal. When one overlooks the pool, the canal becomes one with the house and the pool truly disappears, again connecting the house with the water beyond.



Leaving the great room, you walk past a wonderfully finished powder room and then into a hallway with the full-height windows on either side, allowing the previously mentioned view of the canal, and now from the inside, you catch a glimpse of the water sculpture on the porch. As you walk down the hallway, on the wall above are 16" square openings permitting northern light to penetrate into the space, yet high enough to allow for art work on a long corridor wall.



To the left of the hall is the study separated from the hallway by an 8'-0" long x 10'-0" high bookcase, which accommodates the owners' passion for reading. It is an open bookcase, which provides a direct connection between the two spaces and continuous air flow. The study also has magnificent views of the canal and bay.

Across from the study is the master bedroom. The orientation of this room is similar to the great room and the study, allowing the owners to enjoy and appreciate the site and the bay in front of them. There is a "cloud" above in the ceiling, bringing in similar details from other parts of the house and a porch, allowing them to enjoy a space outside if desired, increasing the level of experiences from every room throughout. The exterior railing, one of my favorite details, runs continuously around the entire porch. Its stainless steel cables keep the view from being unobstructed, and its fin-like stainless steel posts are designed to allow the cables to be placed slightly on an angle outward. This allows one to comfortably stand without the bottom rail obstructing one's feet. This slight angle also breaks up the straight and angular lines of the architecture.



Finally, we reach the master bathroom, which was designed to create juxtaposition between the very straight rectangular shape of the space and the organic quality of the spaces within, where relaxation and comfort are desired. The entire north wall of the bathroom is a beautiful recycled glass tile that acts as a backdrop to what is within the room. A steam shower with its own sitting area is enclosed within a curved glass wall. In the steam shower is a horizontal window, allowing another peek of the bay and connection to the water. The radiused glass wall intersects with the elliptical tub deck, which serves also as a seat within the steam shower, connecting the two features. The tub deck then brushes up against the cabinetry with a slightly curved countertop front, terminating in a curved 'L' shaped vanity. The flow of materials and walls create a serene, spa-like oasis.

RESULT: A TRUE ORIGINAL

The amazing result of a lot of listening and thoughtful design was a highly efficient house with zero wasted space and no unusable areas. Every detail was considered, from the 1/4" revealed door jambs, to the 1/4" reveals in the interior doors and millwork, to the square cover plates on all hardware. All elements work harmoniously, from the exterior railings, to the front stair design, stepping to emphasize the view beyond, to the use of water throughout. It was an absolute joy working with the clients, who were committed to the essence of the design and allowed the creative juices to flow. As a team, we were all able to create a truly original home.

ARCHITECT: Barron Schimberg

CONTRACTOR: Tandem Construction

INTERIOR DESIGN: Robert Claussen

LANDSCAPE DESIGN: Grant's Gardens

PHOTOGRAPHY: Greg Wilson Group