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A MODERN STATE OF MIND

Rand Elliott creates the residence as museum for a pair of dedicated art collectors

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Every now and then amidst the clamor of the competing architectural theories of the late 20th century, a building appears with integrity enough to remind us all of the power of that early 20th-century ideology, Modernism, as originally created by Mies van der Rohe, Philip Johnson, and their ilk. The house shown on these pages, designed by the Oklahoma firm of Elliott+Associates Architects and recent winner of the national AIA award for residential interiors, is one such project.

Located on a promontory overlooking a small lake in the New England woods, in addition to being a residence, the 8,700-square-foot building serves as a gallery for the owners' collection of modern European and American art, and African masks, fetishes, and statuary. While the building is powerfully linked to its rocky, forested site by glass and steel curtain walls throughout, the classic modernism of the primarily black and white interior has been developed directly in response to the art; it "shows that art and architecture can be blended in a modern setting. The concept was to infuse the house with the spirit of the art," says principal Rand Elliott.

The building shell and siting were developed by architect Ted Graves with Elliott's office responsible for the final space plan and the interior architecture, with its subtle, rich palette of materials, its sophisticated illumination program, and, most importantly, its complex interplay of volumes and planes. Elliott describes the results of this interplay as "planar tension," and it is created through a number of architectural

Top: Facing east, the classic Modern house is 8,700-square-foot in size, and almost entirely clad in clear insulated glass with a steel glazing system. From this point of view, the living room is the forward volume at left, with the dining and family rooms to the right. Left: The family room is dominated by the pigmented plaster wall, rear, with its five inset blocks by artist Max Ernst. The hearth is a 12-foot-long slab of polished black granite.







Looking from the dining room back towards the entry. The dominant element in this image is the painting by Helen Frankenthaler, flanked by an assortment of African statuary. Note the hidden tracklight systems in the ceiling. In the left foreground, the slab that forms the fireplace in the living room, out of view to the left, cantilevers into the dining room. The use of such penetrations of adjacent rooms is characteristic of the design, and helps to unify the interiors.

strategies: interior walls are left “unattached” to the exterior skin; separating walls float unconnected to the ceiling or vertical slabs; 3/4-inch reveals are utilized where surfaces would normally be expected to meet; and planes pierce spatial boundaries, tying adjacent spaces together. Further definition and articulation of planes is achieved through contrasting materials, including polished granite, flamed granite, honed granite, sand-blasted marble, cleft-faced slate, stainless steel, and pigmented plaster.

The owners’ art collection includes works by Calder, Miró, Motherwell, Giacometti, Ernst, Noguchi, and Picasso, among others. Pointing out a Miró in the kitchen, Elliott says, “The whole space is conceived of as both home and museum. The primary goal is to create surroundings that complement and enhance the display of modern art and African sculpture;” and

so kitchen, bedrooms, bathrooms, and bar area are detailed, lit, and finished with the same care as the living and dining rooms and the studies. The palette is primarily black, gray, and white, with colors and textures selected as the appropriate backdrop for the art in each of the spaces. For example, the African sculptures, grouped by tribal affiliations, are placed on black granite slabs that visually absorb their bases, while the darker silhouettes of the statues stand out against pure white backgrounds. By contrast, white African masks are placed in front of polished black granite slabs, creating a foil—and a reflective surface to show off the backsides of the masks. In addition to the vertical wall planes, which serve as backdrops for the art, the architect also created the tables, slabs, plinths, and other horizontal surfaces the art rests on. For example, in the living room, with its expanses of glass, Elliott designed a 21-



Left: A view from the living room back through the entry. Over the piano, a Calder mobile. On the left, a white African mask is set against polished black granite, creating contrast and reflecting the backside of the mask; on the right, a dark statue is set against a white wall. Below: By lighting the exterior landscape, the designers avoided the black mirror effect that extensive glass walls might create at night. Knowing that precise illumination lets the artworks glow as if lit from within, the designers spent three days aligning lights and art. The owners supplied their own furniture, including the dining table and chairs, and the architects supplemented it with custom-designed pieces like the buffet at right, which serves as an art display area.





foot-long modular sandblasted acrylic table which serves as a "canvas" for several groupings of African statues. His custom pieces work well with the owners' collection of classic Modern furniture pieces, which are perfectly suited for these elegantly spare, linear rooms.

A critical component in successful art display is illumination. The lighting plan for this project recognizes the importance of warm, flattering light for the residential aspect of its use, but the primary emphasis is on lighting the artworks. There is no deployment of lighting fixtures as sculptures, often a major element in contemporary interiors. Instead, given the richness of the art, Elliott has hidden all the fixtures—in the ceiling primarily, but also atop floating wall planes (enhancing their unattached qualities.) As he notes, "The fixture doesn't matter, the light does. And when the source of illumination is hidden, art objects appear to glow, as if lit from within." The lighting is primarily low-voltage,

Left: A view into the bar area from the living room illustrates the power of what architect Rand Elliott calls the "near-touch" effect, with its mysterious light glowing from beyond. The bar is actually a rolling wall which swings open; the top is finished with 21 coats of hand-rubbed black lacquer. The painting at left is by Miró. Behind the bar, a painting by Clave. Right: A view from the master bedroom through the fireplace into the study. The horizontal slab, which serves as a base for the fireplace, is honed black granite, the color of ashes; the vertical frame of the fireplace is flame-finished black granite. Ten-foot-high ceilings are consistent throughout the house, as are light fixtures buried in the ceiling.

utilized for its clarity and whiteness, with some standard incandescent sources installed in function-oriented areas. The architects spent days positioning the lights which focus on specific works, and their care shows: The shadows are minimized except where intended as part of the effect, there is little or no glare on the objects, and the light itself, on the white walls, is free of color.

When the owner saw the conceptual model of the interior, he said, "It feels like a Motherwell painting." Adds Elliott: "With those words I knew I had connected with my client on a conceptual level. It was to be a house where Modernism is a state of mind." Modernism in its heyday was more than a state of mind: It was meant to save the world. Today, the Modernist philosophy in architecture carries no such heavy freight. It has become, however, a timeless, now classic, way of making architecture, and when executed with cohesion as in this house, it is intensely, quietly powerful.



Left: The floor plan of the house shows the entry at center. Clockwise from far left: Kitchen, family room, dining room, living room, study I, study II, master bedroom, and master bathroom. Below: A view from the study back through the fireplace towards the master bedroom. In the foreground, left, a sculpture by Gonzalo Fonseca, and right, chairs by de Sede. The tall cabinets at right are pewter-clad pullout bookcases.

Seating: Knoll; Upholstery: Douglas, Maharam; Carpet: Pinar St. Technologies; Flooring: Vermont Slate, Stiles Polystone, Cressville Ceramics, Genesis tiles; Lighting: Alcoa, Lightolier, CSL, Halo; Scones: steel walls, ceiling: Stout Metal Services; Marble & granite walls: Pietra Brothers; Paint: Sherwin Williams; Custom acrylic table: E Squared Limited; Custom plastics; Custom exterior doors, windows/glass: Stamford Iron & Steel; Interior doors: S.C. Birch; Hardware: Baldwin, Son; Kitchen fixtures/appliances: Kohler, Franke; Bathroom fixtures/hardware: Kohler, Kohler, HWT.







Left: One of two studies, this space is an essay in a finish material requested by the owner and contrasting with the rest of the house—walnut. At left, a white marble art display plinth brings a unifying element from elsewhere in the house into the room. At rear, the architect designed this vertical shelving/storage system, transforming storage containers into art objects which can be adjusted vertically.

Above: The master bathroom features this glass-enclosed shower, with its immediate visual links to the woods outside. The floor is black slate, the countertops flamed granite, cut out to form a seat inside the shower stall. The shower floor is sloped to the perimeter, where the water runs over the edge to drain. The exhaust system is built into the stainless-steel ceiling.

Below: With the flagstone floor continuing into the room and a Miró on the wall by the window at right, the kitchen, too, is designed as museum/gallery type space. The architect describes the stainless-steel exhaust hood, left, as similar to a Donald Judd work. At right, an indoor barbecue cooker is housed in pigmented plaster with a granite shelf.

