

CHAPEL HILL

MAGAZINE

AN INSIDE LOOK AT
STRIKING MODERNIST HOMES


DOOR PRIZE
The Balakrishnan home
off Hwy. 54 W. is an
award-winning, innovative
take on the timeless style.

16TH ANNUAL HOME & GARDEN ISSUE

THOROUGHLY MODERN

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Ellie Balakrishnan
and her mom,
Lisa Balakrishnan,
enjoy the views
from their home
just west of
Carrboro.



QUIET MODERNISM

For 75 years, Chapel Hill architects have practiced restraint in public and private spaces

By J. Michael Welton
Photography by John Michael Simpson

The legacy of modern architecture in Chapel Hill is not about grand gestures or tall buildings.

Instead, it's mostly quiet residences and small public structures carefully inserted into the landscape by gifted designers over the past 75 years.

"Modernism was the aesthetic that grew after World War II, and a lot of [the architects] were veterans of the Air Force and Army," says Chapel Hill architect



Zach, Arvin, Lisa and Ellie Balakrishnan spend quality time together in the expansive living/dining/kitchen area of their Chapel Hill home.



PHOTO BY MARK HERBOTH PHOTOGRAPHY

Phil Szostak. “They came here when there was a whole new world and a new way of perceiving housing – and professors led the thinking.”

Some of those professors taught at **UNC** and others at N.C. State’s School of Design. Their tenets were simple: respond to the site, listen to the clients’ needs and work with a spare material palette. Natural light and landscape drove design as well.

When Phil arrived in Chapel Hill in 1977, the key players from that postwar generation were still finessing modernism’s clean lines and open floor plans. **Jim Webb** and his brother, **John Webb**, established themselves in the 1950s, designing homes in **Highland Woods**, many of them spotlessly renovated today.

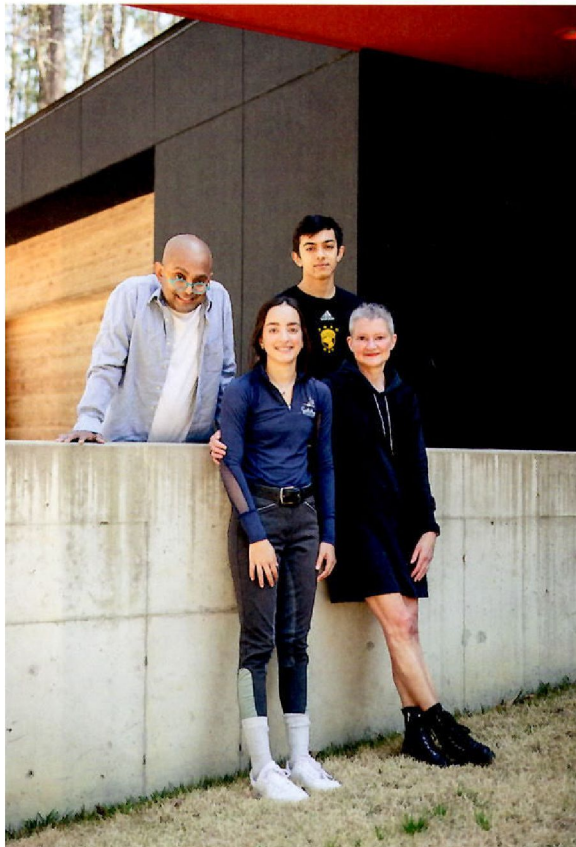
Jim arrived in 1947 to teach a regional planning course at UNC – an endeavor he pursued for 30 years. The MIT graduate also set up an influential firm called **City Planning and Architecture Associates**. He recruited UNC grad **Don Stewart**, who later designed homes and public buildings such as **Carmichael Auditorium**, the old **Chapel Hill Library** (with Raleigh’s Brian Shawcroft) and the still revered Atlantis Lodge in Pine Knoll Shores, North Carolina.

There was **Arthur Cogswell**, who arrived at CPAA in 1959 from the School of Design. He set up his own firm in 1962 and was joined by



PHOTO BY MARK HERBOTH PHOTOGRAPHY

Mojo (left), Hank (right, with Arvindh), and the family's other dog, Bruno, enjoy all the windows that ThoughtCraft Architects installed in the house.





Lisa and Arvinth set the table for a family meal.

Werner Hausler in 1967. The pair rapidly earned an enviable reputation. “They were the class act in the late ’60s and early ’70s,” Phil says.

A prolific residential architect, Arthur also designed the modern fire station at the intersection of **Elliott and Franklin** streets. By 2010, Phil and Arthur found themselves in competition for the coveted Kamphoefner Prize, named for the founder of the School of Design. Phil, younger by decades, won. “It was like: ‘Damn! How did that happen?’” he recalls.

Shortly after Phil received a congratulatory call from Arthur, the elder architect died from injuries sustained in a fall. Phil responded almost immediately. “I persuaded the committee to give him the Kamphoefner Prize posthumously in 2012,” Phil says. “He should have gotten it 20 years before.”

Joe Nassif was a 1964 School of Design grad who worked for Arthur until he established his own firm in





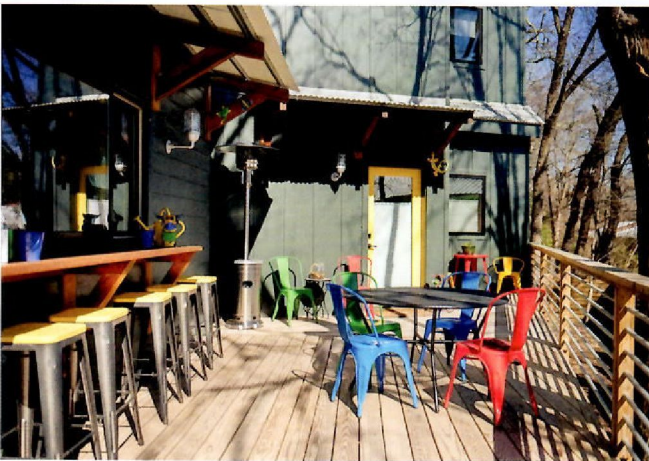
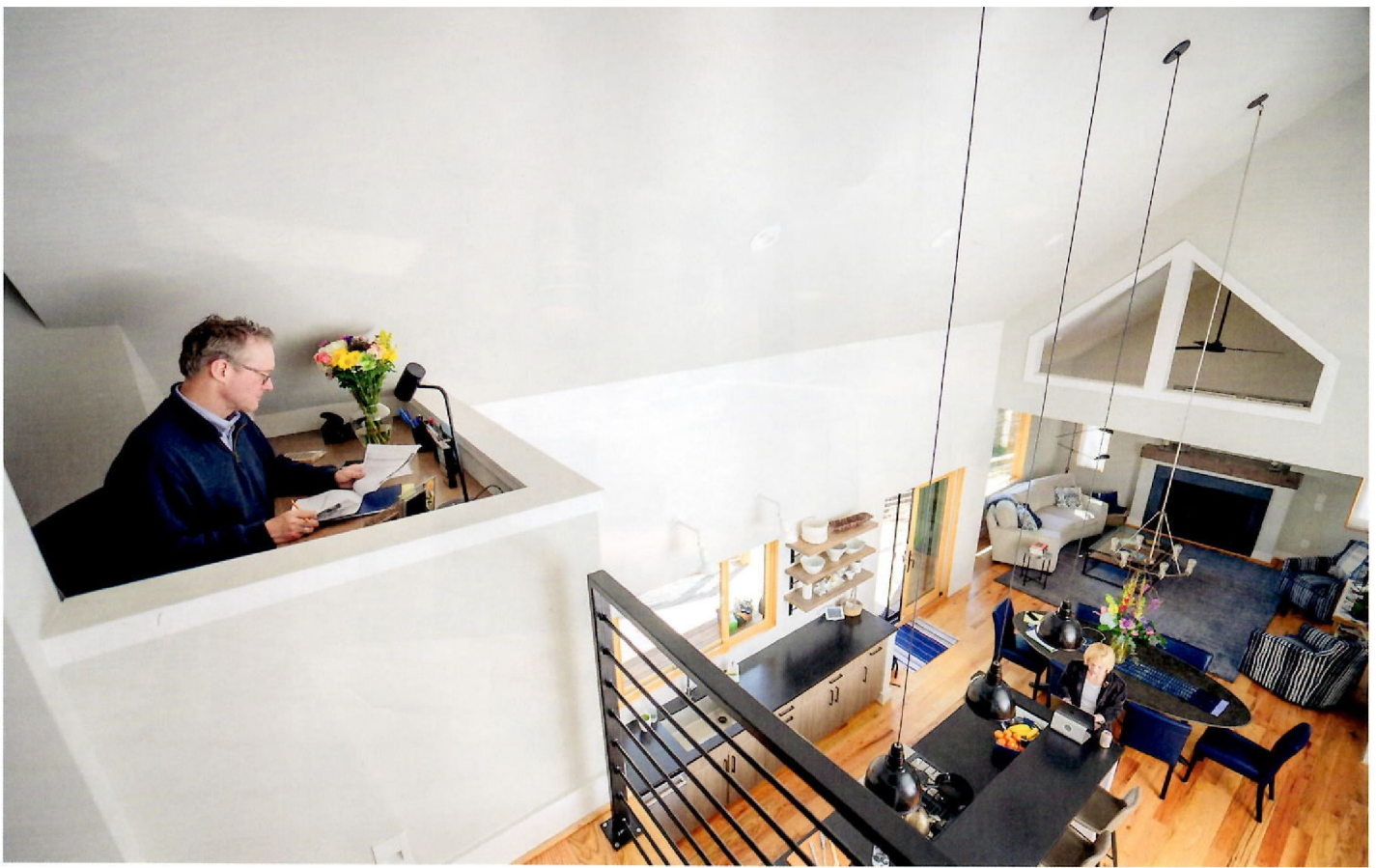
The Carrboro home of Dr. Laurel Leslie and Dr. Allen Gifford is filled with items from local businesses, including a flower arrangement from Victoria Park Florist.



1971, then served as Chapel Hill's mayor from 1979 to 1985. He's known for his sanctuary design at **Binkley Baptist Church**, which started out as a fellowship hall designed by Raleigh architect Carter Williams. Phil later designed additions to its chapel and administrative building and completed a renovation to the fellowship hall. "If a couple of more architects like Arthur had worked on it, it would have been everybody in Chapel Hill," he quips.

One of the more notable Raleigh architects contributing to Chapel Hill's residential work was George Matsumoto, whose cedar-clad home on **Ledge Lane** has now risen to iconic stature. A compact 2,656 square feet, it was designed in 1954 for **Milton Julian**, father to clothier **Alexander Julian**.

Phil set up his office here in 1979, designing six homes in Chapel Hill and many more elsewhere – along with



The couple's home has plenty of indoor and outdoor space for doing work and entertaining.

DPAC in 2008. "My practice has been on **Franklin Street** for 40 years," he says. "I left between 1990 and 2000 but came back to the same office – I call it home."

Other designers continue to call Chapel Hill home as well. Among them: **Jennifer Hoffman** of the Carrboro design/build studio that bears her name and **Jason Hart**, founder of Chapel Hill's **ThoughtCraft Architects**. Both are interpreting modernism in their own, 21st-century ways.

On a wedge-shaped lot on **Pleasant Drive** near downtown Carrboro, Jennifer designed a spec house that takes advantage of nearly every inch of its one-eighth-acre site. Wide at the back and narrow at the front, the three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath home spans 2,063 square feet in two stories. The only space it doesn't cover is a parking spot out front.

It's a V-shaped home with a vaulted space at the back for the living room and kitchen. "You walk in, take a deep breath and it feels expansive," the architectural designer says. "You go upstairs to two bedrooms and a bath and a desk that overlooks the first floor. Downstairs is the master suite plus a half-bath."

Jennifer worked with the language of the nearby small, utilitarian homes of the **Carrboro Mill Village**. Outside it's clad in fiber-cement panels, with some corrugated metal siding, a metal roof, and board-and-batten. "Sometimes modern homes clash with those around them – but this fits right in," says homeowner **Dr. Laurel Leslie**, a pediatrician who bought the house with her husband, **Dr. Allen Gifford**, who's also a doctor.

Inside are hardwood floors and shiplap on the two biggest walls of the open living space. "It calls for simplicity and clean lines and colors," Leslie



says. “It’s not a cottage feel, but an open, barnlike or churchlike feel – and we try to keep it that way.”

The couple graduated from **UNC School of Medicine** in 1989 and still maintain a home in Boston, commuting back and forth until they eventually retire to Carrboro. But the pull of their new home runs deep. “We’re very lucky,” she says. “Sometimes I just don’t want to go back to Boston.”

About eight minutes away from downtown Carrboro, Chapel Hill architect Jason Hart has reinterpreted the Carolina dogtrot – a rural typology with a breezeway

Laurel and Allen may still have a house in Boston but they plan to live in their Carrboro home when they retire.