

STYLISH LIVING IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

# HOME

CAROLINA

## + GARDEN

WINTER 2010

MINIMALIST IN  
MARS HILL

A CARTESIAN  
COTTAGE

PUSHING  
ECO-SMART  
BOUNDARIES

A NEW LOOK  
IN LEICESTER

A BLACK  
MOUNTAIN  
ARTIST'S ABODE

CANTILEVER  
TALES

there's something about  
**MODERN**

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# Off a Cliff, Gently



Ultra-smooth modern construction  
will distinguish “Aleph” home

by Melanie McGee Bianchi | photo by Laurie Johnson

Instead of simply tacking on eco elements as an afterthought — a rain-collecting cistern here, a photovoltaic array there — progressive architects are allowing environmental initiative to drive design. And so, in the most sophisticated cases, green building has become a kind of chicken-and-egg scenario. Viewing some of these dashing structures, it's tough to say which came first — the creed or the charisma.

It helps when the homeowners are themselves artisans, entering a project with an informed outlook and an eye for style. Elihu Siegman, architectural designer and general contractor (Siegman Associates, Inc.), has executed a cutting-edge dream house for a potter and woodworker. His long-time building partner Michael Silverman enthuses about the lack of rules that has allowed for front-line innovation.

"These particular clients encouraged us to go as far as possible with a modernist approach," says Silverman. "We have the latitude to adapt the clients' needs and desires with the site's parameters, creating architecture that is at once beautiful, useful and forward-thinking."

Extensively cantilevered in a southerly direction, the house grabs open air like the wings of one of Asheville's famous ornamental gargoyles, but without the awkward vertical freefall that characterizes trussed mountain homes of lesser integrity. The long, slender base of the house, anchored deep into the rocky soil, "lies directly along the natural topographical contours of the site," explains Siegman. "This reduces the degree to which we had to alter the land."

Or, in eco-parlance, the cantilever drastically minimized the structure's "footprint." For this project, then, the green element came first. Once the house was free of the ground, adds Siegman, "we were able to orient the main living spaces to take optimum advantage of solar exposures and the panoramic mountain views."

Already, what Silverman calls "the dynamic form" of the home is turning heads: "As soon as the structural steel for the cantilever was in place, passing cars and bicyclists started slowing down for a closer look." A trio of cached spaces anchored by a central axis, the building

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Michael Silverman and Elihu Siegman of Siegman Associates, Inc.

mimics the form of the Hebrew letter Aleph; Siegman and Silverman often use elements of Judaic architecture in their work.

They're also big on hiring local craftspeople. Mandala Design in Asheville gets credit for an exalted manipulation of concrete in the open-plan main room, resulting in a kitchen island and a hearth

that are dark, polished and intimate. Today's modernist architecture isn't about meaningless hard edges, much less huge yawning rooms. In the Aleph house, the kids' wing is a snug grid of built-in bunkbeds and cubbyholes that feels as private as a hopped freightcar. In one bathroom, a corner-wedged shower

has just a narrow prism for a window; however, that brief rectangle was placed with great intention, facing a stoic poplar. Only a minimum of the many lofty trees that grace the lot were cut down to make room for the house — another aesthetics-driven environmental benefit. Those that were felled were promptly re-used, locally

fitted into an expansive, matte white-oak floor. Indoors, one feels like a hawk aloft, melding with the vista and calmly aware of just how much of the exterior does not touch ground.

The owners, a family with three children, are returning to live in Asheville after a brief residency here in the early '90s. They purchased the secluded, high-elevation lot near downtown several years ago and merely enjoyed its majestic aspect before beginning to build. "The feeling we always had on that site was that you were perched on a ridge so steep you could just hang-glide right off of it," says the client, a hobbyist furniture maker whose wife works in ceramics. (On the house's light-filled

lower level, the couple will enjoy parallel studios bisected by a guest room; the floor there is another artistic incarnation of concrete, this time finished in high-rustic aggregate.)

He goes on to comment about the ostentatious "palaces" often built on such pretty sites, family homes of style but no substance, where so much, including family connectivity, is lost in translation. "A house," the client muses, "should be a tool, adaptable to the changing family, to environment and situation. The way we put this together, the kids' area can double as a guest suite. Wings can also be closed down over time."

That "we" business is one of the main

reasons the clients chose SAI to manifest their vision. As designers/builders, Siegman and Silverman can forego the hiring of an unaffiliated construction team, a situation that they say often leads to lapses in communication. The flow is thus more understandable and accessible for the homeowners.

"With our firm, the process continues into construction, allowing for refinements as the project develops," says Siegman. "Construction is elevated to a process no less creative and compelling than design." □

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