

on the boards

Hilltop Haven

Architects make a steep homesite work

By Marcianne Miller

Portrait by Matt Rose



Sometime next year, on a hilltop in Fairview, there will appear a modern wood frame house. During the day it will seem to hover over its surroundings — on one side it overlooks a deep ravine, on another is a grassy meadow. In the distance is Mount Pisgah. At night the house will glimmer like the constellation of a falcon ready to take flight. The house is envisioned

and will be built by Siegman Associates, Inc. from Asheville, a unique design/construction team composed of Elihu Siegman and Michael Silverman. Both are architects and Elihu is a contractor as well. The men have known one another since their days at The University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Architecture, from which they graduated

in 1991. They've worked together, off and on for almost 20 years. Though the pair look like lost-long cousins and often finish one another's sentences, "We're not two peas in a pod," Michael laughs. "But when we disagree we do so in a productive way."

"We push each other, evaluate each other's ideas. Most of our projects are collaborative endeavors both in design and

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Michael Silverman and Elihu Siegman of Siegman Associates, a Design Build team.

construction,” Elihu says.

Working in harmony is not just a good habit for this team; it’s their basic business philosophy, known as Design Build. Design Build means the architect takes full responsibility for the project from inception to the first clearing of the land to the final nailing of the address numbers. They say this eliminates miscommunication and cost overruns that can happen in the traditional way projects are run — when the architect

finishes a design and hands it off to the contractor.

The site in Fairview is unique in that it presents challenges to both design and construction. It’s on a steep site, always a challenge. “With little flat space, your parameters have to be pretty tight,” says Michael. “We drew inspiration from the rock layering on the site itself. We design right on the topographic survey.”

“The challenge of building in the

mountains,” Michael continues, “is to have views and thus a lot of glass, but also make room for objects and the outdoors. It’s a balancing act that we discuss with the client to determine what is most important for them.”

“It really is a kind of poetic process,” Elihu says. “Building is down and dirty and all these raw things, but what guides us is really the poetry of the place.

“For example,” Elihu continues,



“this client has a very broad interest in modern design — furniture specifically, and so we are often looking at new pieces that would have to be custom or built-in to the house. Taking furniture into consideration is an ongoing part of the process with this project. We always recycle wood from the sites into the projects we build. For this house, we might make flooring, even furniture.”

The clients wanted to have primarily one-level living, but that wasn't a simple design solution with this site. “We presented several schemes to the client,” says Michael, “including the one they accepted — a tri-level design that maximizes the site's placement. In the end it's a collaborative process.

“It's our job to interpret the client's program, their list of desires,” says Elihu. “Maybe they want the study to be

this big and near this part of the house, but maybe in the plan, it's elevated to the other story and works better there. We try to give the clients back more than what is the sum of the parts of the project — all that and then more. The ‘moreness’ is the architecture.”

There are different zones on the property: the team gives each zone a new and unique design goal. For example, where the hill starts going up a steep incline into the house, it creates a courtyard that becomes an outdoor extension of the kitchen, so the kitchen can flow outward. “The hot tub is where it's located not just because it's connected to the bathroom,” Michael says, “but because that's where the site is like a grotto. It's a place you'd naturally want to sit.”

The site turned out to have plenty of surprises. “We discovered a very nice

place to perch across from the ravine — off to the side,” says Elihu. “So other than just face the meadow we approached the house moving along the line of the hill to bring you to this perch over the ravine — It's a very important part of the design.”

“The house has a curve,” Michael points out, “not only angling you out of the ravine but also the mountain — it ties in what's close by and distant and pulls them together.”

“Ultimately we have the same goal as the client,” adds Elihu, “to have a project that is full of wonder for them and everybody else who sees it. The house is uniquely theirs — they could not think of this house being anything other than what it will become.” ■

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