CENTERBROOK

Reinventing American Architecture

Michael J. Crosbie

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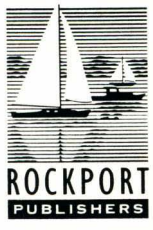

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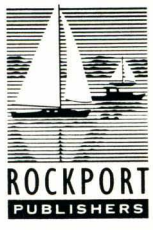

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Dedication

For Sharon, Sean, and Christopher

Foreword

In writing about Centerbrook Architects, I think first of its origins with Charles Moore, second of the many architectural victories wrought during the approaching two-decade-long span that it has served as the architect for the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, and third of the pleasures gained by my wife, Liz, and me in working with William Grover, the Centerbrook partner whose understated manners so belie his major talents as a designer.

In 1973 we were not looking for a clever architect to thoroughly renovate a totally rundown Airslie, the Laboratory Director's house, into which we were to move a year later. Built in 1806 for a gentleman farmer, it had been enlarged in the 1850s, and soon became a satellite house for a large estate. It already looked right in its colonial white and fitted well into the New England feeling of the shoreline on the long islet that Cold Spring Harbor makes along the North Shore of Long Island. That summer, like many before, scientists from the world of DNA-dominated research came together at Cold Spring Harbor to talk about experiments and picnic on the Airslie lawns. Ideas, not money, dominated a Cold Spring Harbor mood uncomplicated by fancy clothes or automobiles. We thus sought out a New York architect to preserve the past and to please not only our scientists but also the neighborhood community, which saw formal clothes as a necessity for Manhattan but out of place for weekends of sailing, tennis, golf, and gardening. His schematic design, however, was way off the mark for, unknown to us, he was used to working with clients who were not adverse to proclaiming their financial success through elegant Georgian features. Airslie so preserved would have given the wrong message—a misguided attempt to look backwards when the essence of science is future oriented.

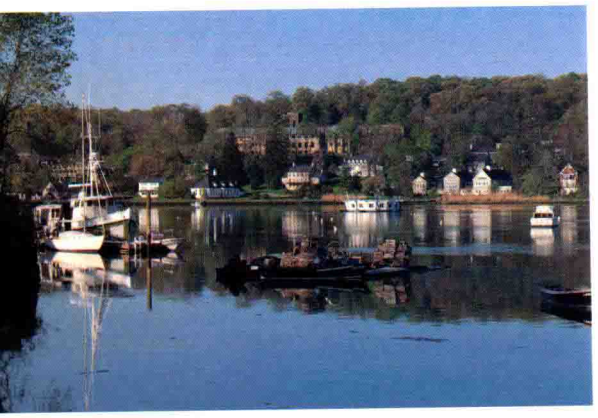
We thus did a quick about face and sought out an innovative as opposed to imitative architect. Luckily, I learned that Charles Moore was the architect for a low-income housing project being built nearby. His name would have meant nothing to me except for the fact that the previous summer Liz and I had driven north along the coast above San Francisco and by total accident spent a night at the Sea Ranch Lodge. The following morning we were given a tour with the hope that we might buy a plot of land and have a home designed by one of the Moore Turnbull Lyndon Whitaker partners. On the tour we saw the now celebrated condominium building as well as many other homes that equally well excited us.

We had no idea whether this already famous man would want to associate with a farmhouse renovation guaranteed not to offend our neighbors. But he was available and shortly thereafter he and Bill Grover paid us a visit. Then we were quickly charmed by the thought that Moore might make over Airslie in the style of Sir John Soane, somehow transforming a farmhouse into a manor house. Several weeks later, on a visit to Harvard, he produced a product on a napkin and soon with Bill Grover's assistance, a real set of plans were on hand to show to my trustees. Initially I feared that opening up the center hallway to the ceiling would be judged too radical, but a new center staircase held up by very Charles Moore stage-set columns was soon accepted. When we finally moved in a year later, I was initially embarrassed by the riches of the resultant architectural triumph, elegantly presented in a green, cream, and yellow pallet.

Even more innovative was Bill Grover's scheme in 1975 for renovating our 1893 Jones Lab for experiments on

nerve cells. The wainscoted shell of this almost Newport Casino building has a cathedral-like elegance revealed for the first time in its full glory by making the rooms for recording electrical impulses from nerve cells free standing units as opposed to encompassing the outer walls. Through this trick, each of the electrophysiological modules acquired separate concrete foundations, so giving to the scientists vibration free platforms on which to manipulate micropipettes into the tiny nerve cells. An ultra, almost French (Woody Allen?) high-tech feeling came from enclosing the inner rooms in aluminum sheathing. Following this major triumph in adaptive reuse, I was hooked on the consequences of good architecture.

Equal imagination went into the design of a sewage treatment plant which in our then impoverished condition had to be placed in an all too central location. Here Grover and his partner Bob Harper masked its rectangular concrete shell not only by placing much of it in a hill and topping it with a brick terrace, but by attaching a wood shingle Victorian gazebo on its waterfront side. By being so decorative a sewage plant, its function is seldom noticed, and the postcard that shows the gazebo may very well be the only one made of a modern sewage plant.



The Laboratory from across Cold Spring Harbor displays many Centerbrook creations. Photo: Timothy Hursley

Always we have wanted to maintain our continuity with the past so that visitors returning after several years' absence still feel that the essence of our existence remains the same. For example, when in 1982 we needed to place, on the site of a falling down barn, a new building for the holding of mice and rabbits, Centerbrook designed a more modern barn with solar panels. So an undistinguished barn of wood became replaced by a second wooden edifice of greater visual distinction. Equally important has been Centerbrook's ability to actually improve the looks of existing buildings as we increased their sizes through additions. Key to our initially accepting the striking modern addition to the 1950s concrete Demerec Lab was the bold decision in 1982 to clothe it in racing green metal sheathing, giving the feeling of a green hedge planted to hide the building behind it.

After a decade necessarily preoccupied by renovations and additions, we at last had the funds in 1983 to let Centerbrook design a 360-seat auditorium to be sited virtually at the entrance to the Laboratory, just beyond and catty-corner to our marvelous, Victorian, multi-colored Davenport House. Grace Auditorium was to be our first building that proclaimed for us a university-like role. Bill Grover and Jim Childress's answer was an almost Richardsonian brick affair that might have served as a train station had it been built in the 1880s. At the same time, its massive unsymmetrical dormers and almost elephantine central columns proclaim a romantic building of today. Interestingly, this was the first auditorium ever designed by Centerbrook and not surprisingly is as unsymmetrical on the inside as outside. Again they managed to profoundly change our appearance in ways that made us even more of what we have always been.

Front hall of the newly renovated Airslie House.
Photo: Norman McGrath

An even bigger opportunity for success or failure came with the Laboratory's decision to create essentially a second campus on the hillside above the main Lab. Here was the space needed for a major new complex containing a new laboratory for Neurobiology and a new residence hall needed to replace an un-inspired, motel-like one story wooden building from the 1950s. Initially we thought Adirondack style wooden buildings were needed to blend unnoticed into the forest scene above us, and Centerbrook gave us such a scheme. But the visual success of Grace Auditorium later on gave us the courage to ask whether we should not only act like a university but look like one. I remember telling Bill Grover that the mood of the new campus should be postmodern, collegiate Gothic encompassing a courtyard as well as a diminutive rendition of a Philip Johnson-like skyscraper bearing a large bell. Charles Moore emerged for two days of talking, but it was Grover and Childress who gave us the basic design plan—all in less than six weeks to met an early November 1987 deadline created by the visit of a potential donor. The courtyard sited bell tower was there, adjacent to the main laboratory, but most certainly not Gothic nor of any style gone before. With more bricks at the top than on the bottom, looking initially almost like a folly but in fact containing the smokestacks, Hazen Tower dominates our new Cathedral of Learning.

Already we have several more Centerbrook design projects within our sights and so stand apart from most academic institutions which never seem to want a return visit from their latest architect, no matter how highly esteemed. In part the reason is that Centerbrook's partners, in particular Bill Grover, act like true gentlemen and treat their clients with great respect. If we do not like some aspect of a plan, Bill is always willing to consider changes and actually will make them! At no time have they used their positions as experts to imply that we don't know what we want. Of course, if on our side we were architectural ignoramuses this approach could quickly have led to repeated disasters. But in Jack Richards, its director of the Building and Grounds Department, the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory possesses a high quality contractor who knows what an architectural plan actually specifies.

Equally important, first Liz and then I early on developed real interests in architecture—both of the past and present. Architectural magazines dominate our house as much as *Nature* and *Science*. And as the effective manager of a very large estate, I look forward to reading *Country Life* even more than I do the weekly *Economist*. Of course, if the latest received Centerbrook design was more of the same or indistinguishable from the common variety postmodern designs of suburbia, we would become bored and concentrate our thoughts on Centerbrook's minor errors in projects past. Hopefully, this will never occur with their always presenting solutions that we have never seen before. This will not be an easy task and their success can never be foreordained. In that sense, good architecture is much like science at its best—great fun, but sometimes scary.

James D. Watson
Cold Spring Harbor, New York

Introduction

Michael J. Crosbie

Essex, Connecticut, with a population of under 5,000, has managed to survive into the late 20th century with much of its early American character intact. Stately 18th and 19th century houses that line its Main Street, along with one of America's oldest inns, the Griswold, attract day-trippers from far and wide, who totter off tourist buses to soak up a bit of authentic, vanishing New England. All of this might make Essex an unlikely place to find one of the country's leading design firms, but the small-town locale bespeaks much of what Centerbrook Architects, and its work, is all about.

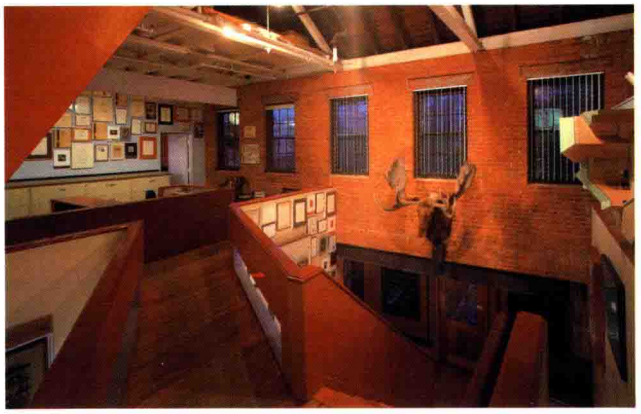
Centerbrook occupies a carefully tended, small congeries of rambling industrial buildings that are emblematic of the firm's architecture: a respect but not veneration of buildings that have come before and attention to architecture's habitation in the landscape. The firm actually started in New Haven, Connecticut, as a transplantation of Charles Moore's Berkeley, California, architectural partnership, Moore Lyndon Turnbull Whitaker. In 1965 Moore headed east from Berkeley to assume the chair of Yale University's department of architecture.

After several years of practice and one too many burglaries of Moore's house and studio on New Haven's Elm Street, his associate and former student, William Grover, discovered an abandoned auger bit factory, constructed in 1874, on the banks of the Falls River in the village of Centerbrook, part of the town of Essex, 35 miles east of New Haven. Fleeing the crime, traffic, and grime of the city, Moore's firm purchased the factory in 1970 and renovated it into studios. A Victorian cottage just west of the factory became Moore's home (it is now the site for office ping-pong tournaments). In 1975 Moore returned to California to head yet another school and start yet another firm, and Charles Moore Associates became Moore Grover Harper.

Centerbrook's staff, by the dam.

More than twenty years later, Centerbrook Architects (which changed its name from Moore Grover Harper in 1984) enjoys its privileged location, continuing to practice in the factory by the river. A major flood that in 1982 swept away a hodge-podge of shacks behind the factory presented an opportunity to expand the office with several new buildings that reflect the character of the old mill. A water turbine generator in the bowels of the factory was replaced and now supplies additional electric power. The landscape, which includes a waterfall just beyond the office, is manicured. At dawn, at sunset, or on a crisp autumn day, with golden light reflecting off the river, Centerbrook's home borders on the idyllic. It is a world in miniature that demonstrates, not unlike enclaves such as Taliesin and Cranbrook, the architectural values and attention to the creation of place shared by the people who work there.

While the exterior of Centerbrook's home for the most part "keeps the faith" of small-town New England—its modifications and refinements affirming the local context—the interior communicates the energy, creativity, and fun present in Centerbrook's architecture. Over the front door hangs a moose head, a gift to



TOP: Centerbrook's offices overlook the Falls River.
Photo: Timothy Hursley

ABOVE: Near the office entrance, architectural accolades and a stuffed moose.
Photo: Timothy Hursley

Charles Moore from a client, who claimed it to be the largest moose ever shot in Alaska by a woman prior to 1912. A waterfall of steps transports you to reception, an area studded with almost every conceivable architectural prize, from AIA National Honor Awards to recognition from the Pope himself for the design of a church.

Just beyond the reception area is the main drafting room, where, a century before, leather belts and flywheels propelled bit-making machinery. Today, there is just the low hum of CAD machines and plotters. The drafting room is one large space, its open roof trusses fitted out with zig-zags of fluorescent lights. The oak plank floors are worn and creaky, the exposed brick walls patched and patinated. Architectural models occupy nearly every horizontal surface that isn't being used for drawing—some are for presentation and others are for design study. There is a layer of bricolage throughout the office: mirrored column capitals from the Venice Biennale; sheet metal brackets salvaged from demolished buildings in New York City and Columbus, Ohio; a doll house made of weathered linoleum and asphalt shingles; a model ship; a sample board of neon lights; Bill Grover's trumpet. The environment is warm, relaxed, open, colorful, unpretentious, funky.

"The quality of this place that attracted me the first time I walked through the door was that it reminded me of my studio at architecture school," comments Mahdad Saniee, one of Centerbrook's dozen associates. "If it gets a little messy, no one cares." Unlike many firms whose offices attempt to awe with over-wrought design, Centerbrook communicates an architectural sensibility with calculated casualness. "Most architects think that they're going to impress clients with a fabulous bolt detail," says Mark Simon. "We show them a stuffed moose instead. They notice the colors, the comfort, and the strange things on the walls." Simon is one of five Centerbrook partners. The others are Bill Grover, Bob Harper, Jeff Riley, and Chad Floyd.

"Most clients love coming out here because it feels like they're on vacation," says Grover, and the locale does offer palpable advantages over the press and hustle of architect enclaves such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles where firms are pursuing work as significant as Centerbrook's. Many of the 50-person staff live nearby; some bicycle or walk to work. There's parking space at the front door, a good restaurant across the street, less crime, better schools—the tangible benefits of small-town life. And with fax machines, express delivery, computers,

airports, and reliable consultants close at hand, there are no drawbacks to practicing architecture in Essex. Except one—luring bright, new talent fresh from architecture school. In a town where the only traffic light shuts off at 9 PM, it's sometimes difficult to attract young interns seeking after-hours diversions. "If you're single, the social life can be terrible," Simon admits, "but many are willing to commute from New Haven."

Whether the choice of where to practice reflects what to practice, or the practice reflects its locale, the building traditions and values of the small New England town are bound up in Centerbrook's architectural creations. "This setting is what we're about," offers Floyd, "constantly refining, making it better, but not being too precious about it, fitting in with the old village. It becomes part of the framework that informs our view of architecture. It sensitizes us to New England and its traditions, but it also alerts us to the context and values that exist in the various places around the country where we design buildings. Compared to Europe, America's cities and communities have a relatively weak context. Successive generations which have not shared basic attitudes about design have left little continuity. In our design work we attempt to find places where we can seam together pieces of the environment that have been ripped. It may be only a memory of what was there, or ought to be there, or a wish. It's more than just paying attention to buildings immediately adjacent to your project. It's the community's history, its traditions, its memories." Riley describes a value shared in the work of all the partners as a search for genuineness: "The notion that architecture should be genuine, meaningful, honest, and lasting. It should have a sense of permanence." There is an emphasis on architecture's experiential qualities, a general disdain for dry formalism, and integration of buildings into the landscape. This last quality the partners attribute to their long and fruitful collaboration with landscape architect Lester Collins.

The main drafting room in the renovated 1870s factory building.
Photo: Timothy Hursley

In her insightful study of the profession, *Architecture: The Story of Practice*, Dana Cuff concludes that "the excellent architectural office...appears to have strong leadership, a loose organizational structure, a respect for creative genius, a clear set of values, informal, face-to-face communication, and a high standard of quality.... The architect whose name is on the door is actively involved throughout the project, acting as head designer and manager without substituting an impenetrable layer of management between the head and those who get the work done."

Cuff's description, multiplied by five, could be Centerbrook. The office is essentially five practices under one roof. Unlike traditional American architecture firms, there are no "design" partners, "business" partners, "marketing" partners, or

Roger Williams (left) and Mark Simon ponder a design.
Photo: Margaret Wazuka

"production" partners. Each partner is responsible for bringing in his own commissions, negotiating the contracts, designing the projects, meeting with clients and consultants, overseeing the construction documents, and administrating construction. The associates work directly with the partners in varying degrees of collaboration; their roles involve everything from sharing design decisions to attending to a project's minutiae.

Likewise, the architectural staff is not segregated into "design" departments and "production" departments. Everyone does a bit of everything. This organization is apparent in the physical setting of the office. Throughout the several buildings that Centerbrook occupies, partners, associates, and architectural staff all sit in the same drafting room and at the same sized desks. There are no partitions or private offices. Business cards bear no titles. Even the dress code is egalitarian: neck ties are the exception; flannel shirts, jeans, and loafers are common attire—although partners (save for Grover) do tend to dress up.

The casualness, however, should not be interpreted as inattentiveness. The high quality of the design work and its execution is due to a pervasive ethic of persistence to maintain the office standard. The partners' involvement in every aspect of a project—from the basic design concept to the selection of finish screws—grows from a desire for maximum control over (and responsibility for) the end product.

This extent of the partners' governance over the projects, uncommon in most firms of this size, is attributed by Chad Floyd to the nature of the staff. "We have a strong set of associates, very capable people, who manage the day-to-day details of a job so that the partners are free to design. In most other firms the partners are the ones who manage and the junior people are the designers. Although there's collaboration here on design and management, the talents of the staff allow the partners the freedom to shepherd the design all the way through to the building's completion."

The arrangement does have a disadvantage: With such personal attention, there's a limit to the number of projects one partner can handle. And that limit regulates the size of the firm, which has remained at about 50 people for the past few years. "We got up to about 60 people once, and it was not fun," Grover recalls. "If you're not having fun, it's usually the result of having too many things to do, and not doing them well enough."

The partners share a belief in the importance of relating architecture to its physical and social context. They describe this approach as "situationist" design: that every piece of architecture has a duty to respond to the specific demands of the client, the site, the people who will use the building, the community at large, and the budget. But it must also incorporate the intangible: a spirit of the time, a client's fantasy, a passage from a

The Miller House's agrarian forms.
Photo: Jeff Goldberg/Esto

book, the memory of a another place, poetry.

Being a good listener and flexible in the design's development are cornerstones in this approach. The logistics of listening well when dealing with a single individual, such as a house client, are relatively simple. In the design of public buildings or private institutions, however, Centerbrook often relies on a "design workshop" to gather as many ideas as possible. At the outset of the design of a university student center, for example, students, teachers, administrative staff, trustees, and maintenance staff will be brought together for a five or six-day session at the proposed project site. The participants walk the site with the architects, take photographs, discuss the design possibilities. Back in the workshop, large rolls of paper cover the floor, everyone is given color felt markers, Scotch tape, construction paper, and other graphic tools, and each is asked to draw his or her ideal student center, indicating what its spaces might be like, what adjacencies it might have to other campus buildings, and what kind of materials might be used. "The design workshop is like a town meeting," says principal Jim Childress, "where everyone is involved in the design process, but according to a clear decision-making framework that we establish." Leonard J. Wyeth, an associate, adds that the workshop "demystifies the art of architecture. When you involve the clients intimately, you strip away the mystique of design."

The most extensive use of the design workshop has been in Centerbrook's work in Dayton, Ohio; Springfield, Massachusetts; Watkins Glen, New York; and Roanoke, Virginia; where the process was used to develop urban design strategies. In those cities the intimate workshops were coupled with design sessions broadcast on local commercial and public prime time television, which allowed tens of thousands of viewers to have a say in the design of their communities.

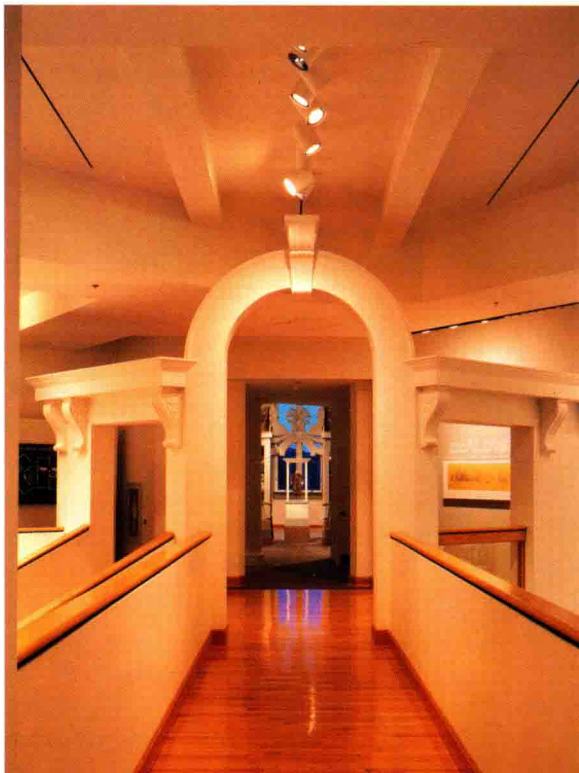
Flexibility is evident in the architect's willingness to change the design in response to client wishes—another quality inherited from Moore. "In reading *The Fountainhead*, Charles said that he always identified more with Peter Keating than with Howard Roark," muses Bill Grover. "Whenever a client was unhappy with something, Keating was ready to accommodate him. Roark would rather blow the building up than change it. Chuck's theory is that there are at least a million different answers to a design problem. The true genius is the one who can satisfy everybody and get a great building out of it, rather than the architect who comes up with one design and tells the client its the only answer to all his problems. Accommodation is a way of designing that has stuck with us."

Of course, accommodation must be tempered with the architect's knowledge about what will and won't work.

Giving clients everything they want, or changing the design at the drop of a hat, can be reckless and, on the part of the architect, irresponsible. "I've had instances where clients said, after the building was completed, that they wished I had tried harder to talk them out of something that they were set on," admits Grover. Jeff Riley believes that the designer has an obligation to defend an idea, "until you're convinced, beyond a doubt, that the client understands exactly what you've proposed. If you've fully explained the idea through models and drawings, and the client has a complete understanding of the design and still doesn't like it, then it's time to change it and move on."

Like members of a family, Centerbrook's partners share a bedrock of architectural value. But each has his own design personality and sensibilities. Grover is influenced by old factory buildings, industrial architecture, barns, hand tools, objects of utilitarian simplicity. "The gable-roof box, to me, is the essence of a building," he notes, albeit a New England building. "I like hardware stores, parts out of catalogs that already exist that you can combine in new ways—making something elegant out of something cheap. Ordinary things can be wonderful, and frugal. Architecture ought to be amusing too." Grover's design for the Miller House in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts seems to capture many of these qualities. Composed of simple, agrarian shapes and colors, the house dovetails with its rural location. The Baldwin House in Essex shares many of the Miller House's attributes in its large, simple shapes, use of materials, and open interior. Yet the two buildings are quite different—shaped by their clients and sites.

Williams College Museum of Art's historicist interior.
Photo: Steve Rosenthal



Harper possesses an academician's approach to design and a thorough understanding of structure and construction—a combination not found in many practitioners. In the Rudolph House in Williamstown, Massachusetts, Harper uses a classical arrangement of spaces straight from Palladio, adapting them to the lot's vigorous contours. In fact, the stasis of the classical plan is a deft foil for the sloped site, each pointing up the extreme of the other. The Williams College Museum of Art, also in Williamstown, marries an early 19th century building with an angled new addition that reiterates the geometry of the former to make the whole intelligible. "In plan, when you see this addition sitting at a strange angle to the original, you wonder what's it all about," says Harper of the design. "But experiencing the building as it sits on its sloping site, you understand where the angle came from." Harper's restrained exteriors often wrap spatial surprises inside.

Of the five partners, Simon is perhaps the best read architecturally, and the most cerebral. Books surround his desk, and he soaks up design ideas like a sponge, transforming them and combinding them with a twist. His floor plans can be quite similar in their elemental parti, but result in radically different buildings in response to client and place. A comparison of the Ross-Lacy House and the