

Driving off Route 1 just west of the Guilford town center, you ease up a meandering street amid "normal" suburban homes mostly built between 1970 and 2000 — an established residential neighborhood in a lovely New England town. Then without warning, you spot an architectural quirk here, an unexpected shape there amid the mature trees and plantings and ragged rock outcroppings.

During the heyday of expressive "Modern" residential architecture that spiraled out of Charles Moore's tenure as dean of Yale's School of Architecture, dozens of architects created highly sculptural houses in nearly every town around Mother Yale, but perhaps the epicenter of that genre's built expression exists in the Sam Hill section of Guilford. Its name defines the topography — hilly — but the terrain defined the architecture. The craggy rock-filled landscape and the winding roads that it demands do not accommodate center-hall Colonial well — or many other stock plans, either. By definition generic houses are designed for generic sites — featureless and flat — the antithesis of Sam Hill.

Among area architects, when one thinks of sculpted buildings that focus on shape, structure and material and eschew the trappings of a namable "style," one architect's name always gets a grin: Wilfred (Wil) Armster. He is not only an architect trained in the experimental art-filled world of mid-century Yale, he owns with his children Wood, Steel and Glas (note the Euro single S) — a Madison company that sells salvaged wood from all over the country and also specializes in plantation-grown (i.e., renewable/sustainable) cypress — and has done so decades before "green" became fashionable. As an architect Wil designs memorable structures that are active participants in our bucolic and/or historic New England communities — as well as all over the rest of the country.

When in 1983 Marshall and Leslie Long were looking for the home where they could raise a family, they were clueless about Wil Armster. But the best calling card for an architect is his or her work, and the home the Longs discovered on Sam Hill clearly grabbed them. "It was so



Living Art

Where there's a 'Wil' there's a way to reinvent a one-of-a-kind Shoreline home

By DUO DICKINSON

PHOTOGRAPH: Anthony DeCarlo

The addition's living box is surrounded on all sides by air. The outsized glass walls and skylight allow direct connection with the site horizontally, and with the upper floors of the home's shape vertically through the skylight. The tightly spaced cedar timbers at top are typical of the 1980s extension.



The original home's dining and family room are a flowing space with chiseled-in skylight fitting comfortably over the sofa. The connection to the added space is to the right, up a few steps, and the home's central masonry 'core' is visible at far right.

PHOTOGRAPH: Anthony DeCarlo

unique compared to anything else we had seen," recalls Leslie Long. But the building they acquired had a history.

Designed in the mid-1970s for a couple, the original house took three years to complete. Armster essentially oversaw construction, but the owners ultimately decided to move farther out into less populated country — Maine — and sold the house to a New York couple who used it as a second home in the early 1980s.

When the Longs took possession, the home was a singularity — a cube, with a launching deck to one side and 45-degree angled walls within — a classically distilled, abstracted form reposing in the active stone/tree/hill-fraught landscape.

The Longs hailed from Montana, had new infant, and Marshall had a job teaching mechanical engineering at Yale. They knew the cube had to evolve. If you love a creation, but it needs to adapt, the best start is to contact the creator. They contacted Armster and thus began a multi-phase, multi-year evolution.

First, Marshall Long needed an office. Rather than subvert the existing form Armster slipped a tight office under the floating deck, and found a classic slot window opportunity under the deck's built-in bench.

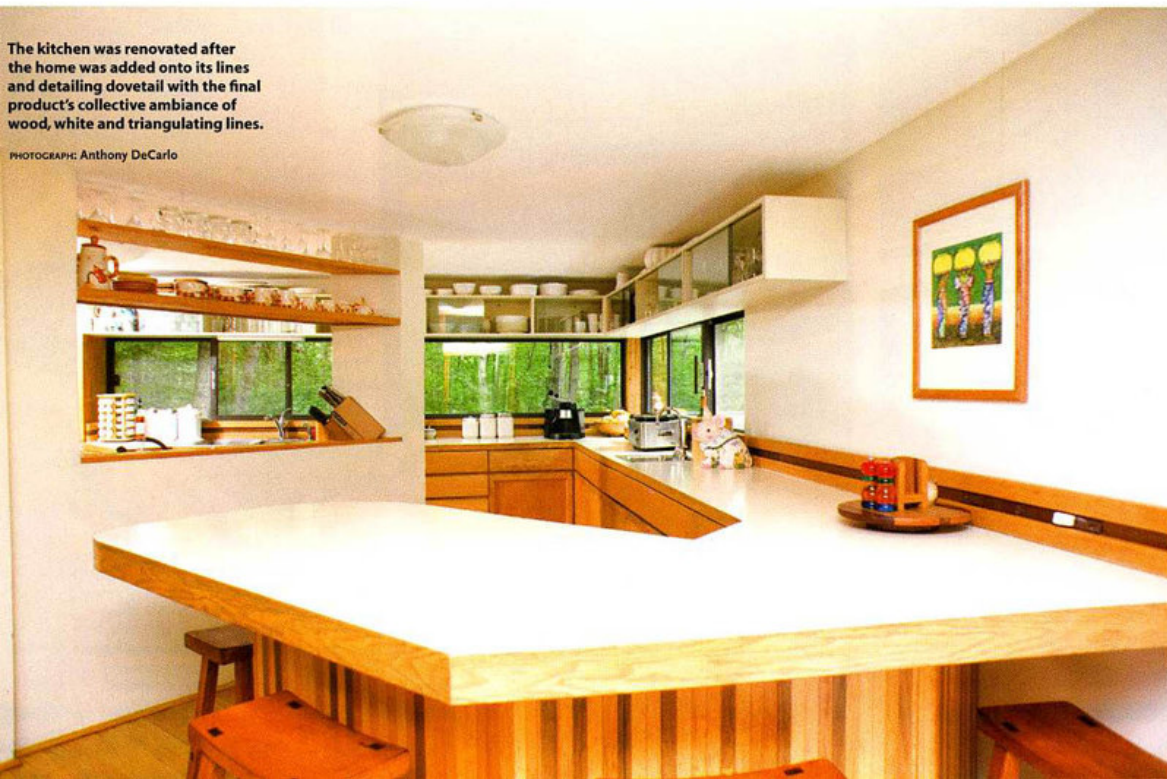
Then, as more children arrived, a new approach for expansion had to be devised. Armster knew that unless the expansion complemented the original cube, the vision of his design would be lost.


When it comes to houses of any design that are undersized for rapidly growing families, the need is usually for three types of added space: informal living space, bedrooms and bathrooms. Armster saw that these new individual spaces (plus in this particular case a celestial-view tower space for Marshall Long's love of stargazing) meant he could completely invert the design concept of his original cube with the new spaces he added to it.

His cube was a perfect example of outside-in design and that meant the exterior of the original house was a pristine container that was filled with floors, stairs and had cuts sliced into it for windows and doors — often using a 45 degree angled geometry. But for the new added space Armster saw that an inside-out design, where each of the spaces for each function — living, bedroom/bath and view tower — could have its own individual box, separated by air supported by expressed beams and columns — the opposite of a single box filled with unseen structure, floors and

The kitchen was renovated after the home was added onto its lines and detailing dovetail with the final product's collective ambiance of wood, white and triangulating lines.

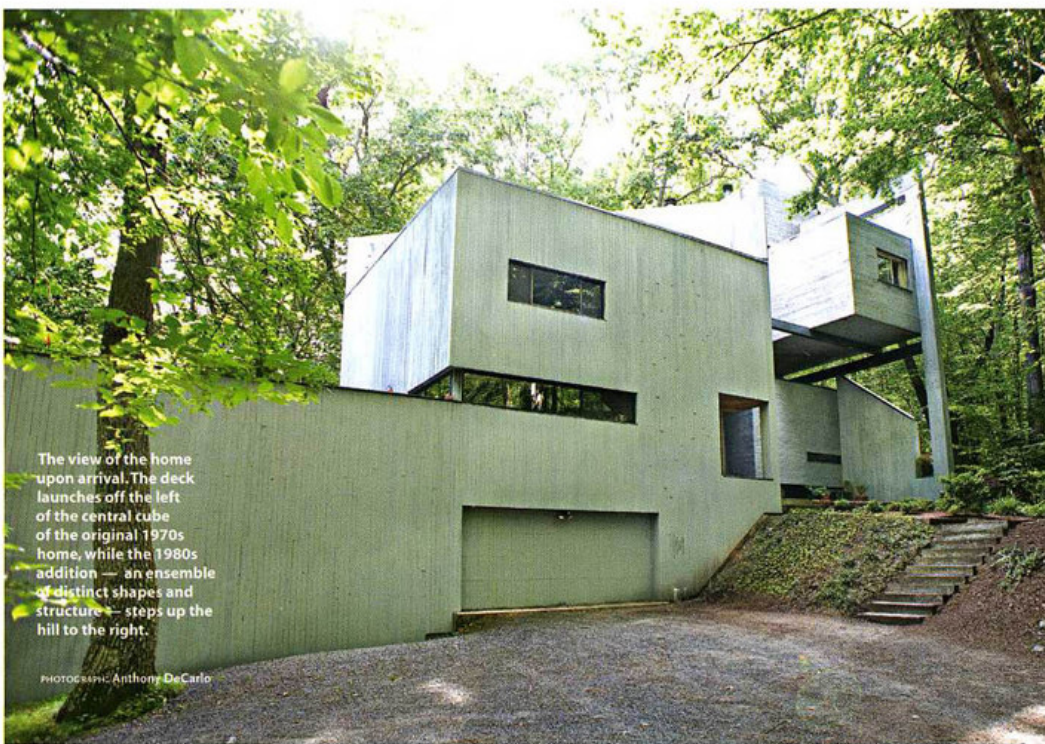
PHOTOGRAPH: Anthony DeCarlo



A photograph showing four people standing on the stone steps of a house. From left to right: an older man in a white shirt and brown trousers, a woman in a pink top and white pants, a younger woman in a black top and white skirt, and a man in a white shirt and dark trousers. They are all smiling at the camera. The house behind them has light-colored horizontal siding and a window with a dark frame.

Still friends after all these years: (L-r) architect Will Armster and his wife Sarah Armster with Leslie and Marshall Long.

PHOTOGRAPH: Anthony DeCarlo

A photograph of a modern, multi-level house with a light green or grey facade. The house features a prominent deck that extends from the left side. The building is surrounded by lush green trees and foliage. A set of stone steps leads up the hillside towards the house.

The view of the home upon arrival. The deck launches off the left of the central cube of the original 1970s home, while the 1980s addition — an ensemble of distinct shapes and structure — steps up the hill to the right.

PHOTOGRAPH: Anthony DeCarlo

walls that are revealed only once you enter.

The dynamic between these two approaches is delightful and suited the love affair the Longs had with the original home. "It's like living in a work of art," says Leslie Long with a wide grin. The house may be a work of art, but Armster is not a sculptor — he is an architect in the venerable European tradition of the "master builders" who designed and built the great cathedrals and public buildings of the Renaissance through the Industrial Revolution. Every structural concept is freshly interpreted and infused with a muscular assurance that speaks of Armster's many decades of designing and building.

It has been quite fashionable these last couple of decades for architects to call themselves "Modern." But the vapor-thin cyber rendering world of computer-aided design has facilitated aesthetic expression without the deep background of technical and environmental knowledge and construction skill that make interesting ideas into viable buildings. Armster's confidence is revealed in his design method.

Armster views drawing as the first step in the design process. Once construction starts, desirable changes reveal themselves and the design is modified — not on a flat-screen monitor, but in real time and in real space. Windows were designed for seated children to view returning parents, or adults sitting to see out — not forgiving blank panes of plate glass, but carefully sized and located apertures. Skylights bring in light, but also look back on the other parts of the house. Gaps between the new and existing have full glass infill to put the joint into full view. All these pyrotechnics also meant quite a few floor levels — ten at last count.

If Armster wanted the cheap thrills of an architectural

one-liner, his buildings would tend to disintegrate when the reality of weather, gravity and rot became inexorable. But a master builder builds structures to last, and this home — parts of it 30 years old — looks fresh and vigorous. Some floors are solid slabs of ganged two-by-sixes spanning over a dozen feet, allowing the gaps between the boxes. Cedar was used as structure — novel given its structural lightness, but dramatic in its tight spacing and aromatic impact. Wood is used as steel — large, strong, expressed pieces — allowing for cantilevers and large skylights and windows.

The house floats over rolling terrain, with decks coming off bedrooms and a family deck culminating in a angled pool overlooking the hillside.

As time went on and the Long brood grew to three, a child needed a separate bedroom and Marshall's viewing tower became a fourth bedroom. The kitchen was redone and any number of thoughtful accommodations were easily tolerated by this crafty construction. As kids became more autonomous Leslie Long became a science teacher, for the last decade at the Foote School. With the youngest child now safely in college, this nest is empty — but beckoning the returning flock.

The Longs loved this home enough to stage the birth of their third child in their bedroom. "Light is everywhere — the home feeds the soul," observes Marshall Long. All homes nurture memories and comfort, but the stock designs that blanket our suburbs do not challenge the way we think about space, light and shape.

Living in a home like the Longs' creates a crisp edge to the memories and experiences any family has. An "out there" house brought the Longs home — a gift of design, and faith in the designer. ❖