

INTRODUCTION

BY AARON BETSKY

Tightening Up the Vernacular: Brian Mac's Field House

It is rare when one moment sums up a building. In the Field House, a single-family residence in coastal Rhode Island designed by Brian Mac of the Vermont design/build firm Birdseye, it occurs where the second story of the house extends to hang over the entrance door, even as a wall courses at a right angle under that same cantilever. The gable end that is thus suspended is an abstraction of a child's drawing of a house, with no windows or other scale-giving elements. Covered with black-stained eastern white cedar, it hovers over the wall of the same material and color with just a few inches to spare. The wall marks off the house's territory, standing guard against the arrival area with an expanse cut through by several openings. One of those, barely wider than the door it faces, lets you enter under the overhang. If you pause at that exact moment, the full weight of the house presses down on you as you leave the larger terrain of the woods and meadow from which you have come and face the living room beckoning inside. The place and space of home, belonging, and the constructed relation to the natural world all float around you as wall and mass, gable and void, held in balance.

Mac is a master at manipulating such masses to obtain effects like this with the most minimal of means. Working with a small team of designers as part of a Vermont-based firm mainly dedicated to construction, site preparation, and other aspects of building, he has concentrated on designing single-family houses that stand in the landscape with resolve. Almost all of them take what we think of as the elements standard and necessary to the homes of America's northeastern region and take them back to basics: they

are objects held together by wood siding, topped with gables, and placed as objects by themselves in a rural or suburban landscape. The houses are both recognizable and abstract, opening up traditions in appearance and building methods to more modern modes. The volumes are usually singular both on the inside and outside, with rooms as clearly defined and as open as possible. Details are reduced and tightened up to reveals and carefully considered transition moments, with masses hovering and sliding by each other with minimal clearance. Living spaces are unitary and open to the outside, while bedrooms are organized along single-loaded corridors.

The sources for this refinement of basic building types are local first and foremost. Mac describes "material-rich Vermont" as an inspiration, and notes that there "no barn is like any other. Though they all have the same basic function, each responds to its site and its conditions in its own way." The same, he notes, is true of traditional houses. Coming to this vernacular of geometric objects adapted to use and landscape and added to over time as an outsider—he grew up in Wayne, Michigan, and attended architecture school in Detroit—he has adopted them with the fervor of the convert. Brought up by a father who was an aircraft mechanic, a mother who was a nurse, and a grandfather who was a draftsman for Alcoa, he also brings a high regard for the craft of making things to his commissions.

What saves Mac's approach from being purely focused on such technical and formal aspects of architecture are his wider interests. After working in historic preservation for several years upon graduation, he dropped out of the profession for several years to

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Trained as an architect and in the humanities at Yale University, Mr. Betsky has served as the Director of the Cincinnati Art Museum (2006-2014) and the Netherlands Architecture Institute (2001-2006), as well as Curator of Architecture and Design at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1995-2001).

In 2008, he also directed the 11th Venice International Biennale of Architecture. His latest books are *Fifty Lessons from Frank Lloyd Wright* (2021), *Making It Modern* (2019) and *Architecture Matters* (2019). His *Anarchitecture: The Monster Leviathan* will be published by The MIT Press in 2022.

help troubled youth on a farm in Ohio, before reentering the field with renewed dedication and wider perspective. In Vermont, his social environment includes a strong connection to the folk-rock scene in Vermont, which has led to projects (including album covers) for members of the band Phish and Leo Kottke. Ask him what inspires his work, he evades (though does not deny) sources that might seem obvious, given his design elements, such as Alvar Aalto, Scandinavian modernism in general, or previous attempts to abstract American domestic vernacular in the work of architects such as Charles Moore. Though he claims an infinity with Frank Lloyd Wright because of his upbringing in the Midwest, the influence he cites most often is that of the artist Donald Judd, who housed his seemingly simple boxes, assembled with fanatical precision into even more calibrated series, in a set of barely renovated former army buildings in the already abstract desert landscape of Marfa, Texas.

Out of such a background, Mac has built up a practice in which he has honed his methods through iteration and exploration. "I work quickly now," he says, "because of the years of experience I have. You develop an intuition of how things work and how they come together, how to compose on a site, by doing it over and over again." He also cites his collaboration with the craftspeople and builders who are part of the firm: "You build up a certain amount of empathy, for the people, for the way of doing things, and for the materials." It is a controlled environment in which he can experiment with creating ever tauter and more inventive compositions.

That approach has also limited the scope of Mac's portfolio. He refuses to work for developers, preferring the bond with client-us-

ers, and has no interest in designing commercial buildings—although he would gladly pursue a cultural project "if there was a clear client I could work with." He has also until recently stayed in Vermont, with forays across Lake Champlain into New York and other adjacent sites. A house in Sagaponack, on Long Island, the Lath House and the Field House are Mac's first work outside of the territory where Birdseye's crew can build the designs and where the context is different. These recent projects also exhibit a step beyond the still complex compositions of previous work, presaged by designs such as the Woodshed and "Hygge," both in





Vermont. The volumes have become singular, the cladding tighter, and the buildings stand with a greater deal of separation from the surrounding landscape.

The commission to design what became the Field House presented Mac and his collaborators with conditions that, like those in Sagaponack, differed markedly from those he had faced in most of his other work. The client grew up in a nearby town, but his work has taken him to the Midwest. He was looking for a home base near his family and childhood friends where he could spend four months a year. Ironically for an area that is mainly known as a summer resort (the beaches are less than a mile away from the site), his stays usually take place during the winter, so the house needed to be buttoned-up and designed for coziness during that colder period. As he married during the process of design and construction, his wife also became an increasingly important part of the vision for what the house should become. Trained as an artist with a strong interest in minimalist craft, her views resonated with those of Mac and his team. Finally, the couple's first child was born during construction of the house, and they anticipated future additions to the family.

The site the client chose is in a subdivision of large lots in the second- and third-growth forest that makes up much of the Eastern seaboard's inner area. The client opted for the plot nearest the main road on a recently cleared flat area bordered by a wetland

to the north and a rock ledge leading up to the rest of the development to the east. Having grown up in an urban setting, he did not mind the open and somewhat noisy site, though now that he is there, he plans to plant the meadow with enough trees to buffer the road's presence.

Mac placed the house, which consists of a living area on the ground floor and three bedrooms above, parallel to the ridge and road towards the back of the site. This both creates a distance to the road and shelters the house against the ridge in a manner reminiscent to the way he has observed most farm structures being sited in Vermont. The living area and bedrooms look out towards the open area, allowing afternoon sun to fill them with light during the winter months.

In the original design sketches, which show the forthrightness with which the architect assembles the masses and lines of his design, Mac had envisioned the house being more of the courtyard typology, with a smaller living volume and a garage structure enclosing an outdoor area buffered from the outside world. During the design process, he reduced that composition to a single, large volume for the house, a garage, and the freestanding wall that acts as a screen to the approach and helps define what is still a semi-enclosed courtyard to the rear.

The decision to bring that wall close to the house, and to even almost engage it with that structure, remained a constant in most of the design sketches. Creating the moment where that meeting clarifies the relationship between the presence of the home as an object and enclosed space in relation to its site and to visitors arriving there was a question, however, of extensive fine-tuning that took place in both physical and three-dimensional models. Bringing the pieces close enough to create tension, but leaving them sufficiently free to be clear elements in their own right took a great deal design fine-tuning.

The overhang that makes that moment happen, and which is mirrored by an implied cantilever over the screened porch at the house's opposite end, also serves to lighten the structure's overall mass. Mac further balanced weight and lightness by designing a string course or reveal between the two floors. This element also helps to accommodate the lintels of the sliding doors. The vertical siding serves to emphasize the building's height, while the offset pattern of the over-scaled windows then lightens them. Snow catchers, though more useful in the heavier snows of Vermont, provide a cornice-like element that breaks up the expanse of the roof's slope, while an off-center chimney stands in counterpoint to the overall horizontal mass. Finally, Mac floated the whole house on a concrete pad that extends as a wood-covered deck in front of the house and conceals a full basement under the occupiable volume. Such large and small details come together to make the Field House stand against, or in a human-made relationship to its landscape, rather than being either off or on the land. This is a separate home away from home inserted with balance in a landscape that has evolved and is evolving over time. Though Mac



speaks about the relationship between his buildings and nature. he does so in a more abstract sense, seeing his designs as asserting themselves with care and precision as artifacts clearly crafted by humans.

Although the Field House's color, which right now is a matte black for the vertical surfaces that stands in contrast to the untreated horizontal stretches of wood, will mellow into a softer gray, the overall effect is to make the Field House into a markedly singular house, as much symbol as reality of home, coziness, belonging, and occupation, as it is the actual part-time location for these qualities.

Step inside the house under that symbolic end gable and you find yourself in a white oak and off-white plaster cocoon. After passing through a tight, low vestibule that also serves as a mudroom, you emerge into a single volume intended for living, eating, and gathering. This room takes up almost all of the ground floor, with only a small office or workspace and the screened porch tucked in at the far end, behind the staircase to the upper floor. The space is held between expanses of windows to either side, which open it up to both the larger view of the open area in front and the semi-enclosed, gravel courtyard to the west, and a fireplace at the far side of the room that beckons as a place of gathering during the winter months. A concrete countertop separates the kitchen area, dominated by cabinets and enclosed appliances the designers

treated as an opportunity to combine rectangular volumes space, from the dining area. The wood floor and ceiling, together with the cabinets, door frames, and also wood-paneled entrance area give the space a sense of being inside a domesticated version of the Field House's barn-like exterior.

Walk up the wood staircase to the rear, and you enter into a slightly different atmosphere. Here the plaster of the ceiling and walls begins to dominate, taking you out of the woods, so to speak, and into places of retreat. A long corridor runs almost the whole length of the house (utility spaces are tucked behind the stair and above the porch and work area) and lead you past a series of simple bedrooms towards the master suite. Only there does some of the wood reappear in the bathroom to surround the tub. Each of the rooms, including the main bedroom, is modest in size and (currently) devoid of any art or covering over the plaster walls. The scale of the windows and their emphatic framing brings the outside doors into the space, increasing the sense that you are floating over the landscape around you.

In all of the rooms, Mac and his collaborators were able to achieve a level of craftsmanship they managed both by using the catalog of details they have built up over years of experience on such structures and through the close relationship they developed with the local contractor who here had to substitute for Birdseye's in-house team. The manner in which planes slide by each other with min-



small distances between them, the patterning of the boards that have separate rhythms for different surfaces, and the compositions of cabinets and windows, are all controlled to lighten the spaces and make every vista one that balances scale, distance, and the outside views. Although most of the hardware, including the windows, are standard, Mac's designers both selected and adapted them to enhance certain specialized details that further the design's sense of specificity.

Field House is neither an overt exception—not in Birdseye's portfolio nor in the area in which it sits—nor an odd building. It is in its ability to develop tried-and-true methods of siting, building, composition, and detailing in a manner that is specific and sometimes even slightly eerie in its effect that its greatest strengths lie. It is what Mac describes as "quiet architecture," allowing the building to be a "little island" in its setting that can provide a refuge for the client. That stillness is contained in a structure that is expressive and even gestural in the manner with which the long, black gable sails over the landscape and the living spaces, with their simple arrangement, two main materials, and large expanses of view, so that the owners can inhabit this environment with an equal amount of bravura.

There is a long tradition in the United States of revisiting and updating a limited repertory of domestic building forms. Many of the first inhabitations built by Europeans on the Eastern seaboard

were based on pattern books that pared down the themselves neo-Palladian forms of large country houses. The saltboxes and gabled buildings that developed from those simple manipulations of available material—mainly wood and stone—were then revisited in the decades after the Centennial as a way to reground the States in a local tradition of living and occupying the land. Continually perfected by builders, developers, and homeowners, mass produced across the country, and refined by architects for more discerning clients, these neo-colonial forms in turn helped to adapt European modernism to American tastes after the Second World War. Again revived in the Postmodern era as a way to make a more place- and human-based form of modern design, they are now being adopted and adapted by New England architects such as Brian Mac to accommodate the more global tastes and ways of making that mark much of the upper end housing market. With the latest version also comes a new scale, a tautness, and a slight strangeness that makes these designs stand apart, both physically and visually, and the Field House is an excellent example of that stance.

It is Brian Mac's achievement in the Field House and other recent projects to continue this work not only with great skill and craft, but also in a manner that makes the tensions and ambitions of occupying the land with such modern structures overt. In his hands, this kind of vernacular American modernism becomes a thing of beauty.