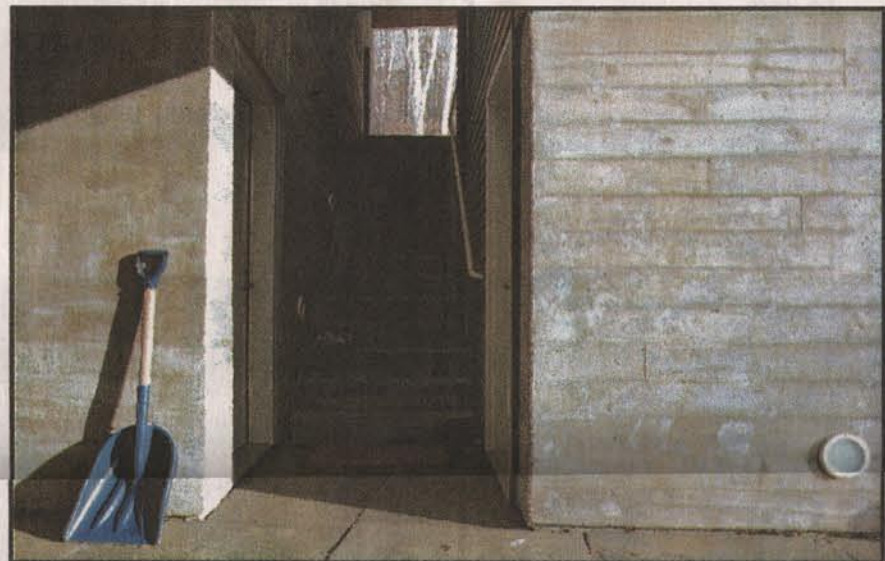


CLOSE-UP



Above, this outdoor staircase, made of concrete, leads to the two separate studios that sit atop the garage and storage spaces. At right is a Scandinavian masonry heater, a design found throughout the house. Below, a view of the entryway with its Oslo windows, built in Canada.



Above, a screened-in porch is connected to the house by a small bridge, and to the grounds by a ladder. At left is a view of the living room with a bit of the dining room seen at left. The floor-to-ceiling windows in the Mayors' house seem like "a moving glass wall," according to architect Carol Wilson.

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An Artist, a Surgeon and Their Leap-of-Faith House in the Woods

By DONALD KREIS
For the Valley News

ELIZABETH AND Michael Mayor are the perfect architectural clients. She is an accomplished artist; her prints are sold through McGowan Fine Art in Concord. He is an accomplished orthopedic surgeon at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, specializing in both the development and the implantation of artificial joints.

Artistic beauty and smart engineering are the key ingredients in great architecture. So it makes perfect sense that the Mayors' new house, in a wooded part of Hanover, is the most distinguished work of contemporary architectural design to grace the Upper Valley in recent memory.

Designed by the Falmouth, Maine, architect Carol Wilson, Mayor House shatters the illusion that architecture has to be tra-

ditional in order to commune effectively with the landscape of northern New England. Using simple forms, a variety of familiar materials and an uncomplicated plan organized along perpendicular axes, Mayor House confidently and gracefully cascades down a hillside to the Mayors' pond, just as water would. The effect is not unlike what Frank Lloyd Wright sought to achieve with Fallingwater in Pennsylvania, but Mayor House is more serene, and unlikely to need shoring up by engineers from an ensuing generation, as Wright's masterwork has.

Since taking up residence last summer, the Mayors have had the experience of inviting friends to visit them and sensing their polite disapproval of what seemed so raw to these guests, so radically different from the Mayors' former digs, which were typical of the homes on the streets near downtown. "It was like a jail cell to them,"

Elizabeth confides.

Actually, it's the opposite of jail. For example, the Mayors' bedroom is positively liberating. Their bed looks out on nature through floor-to-ceiling windows, a view that is intimate and comforting rather than threatening because the bedroom faces the forested hillside.

"It would be hard to describe to someone who hasn't experienced it," says Wilson of the pleasures of living in such a dwelling. "That," the architect asserts, "is the real leap of faith."

Indeed, Elizabeth's affinity for art and Michael's for structure do not fully account for how they made the leap, how they were able to accept that Wilson's design, which looked on paper like nothing familiar, would yield a home of distinction and delight.

An additional catalyst was necessary, in
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Mayor House

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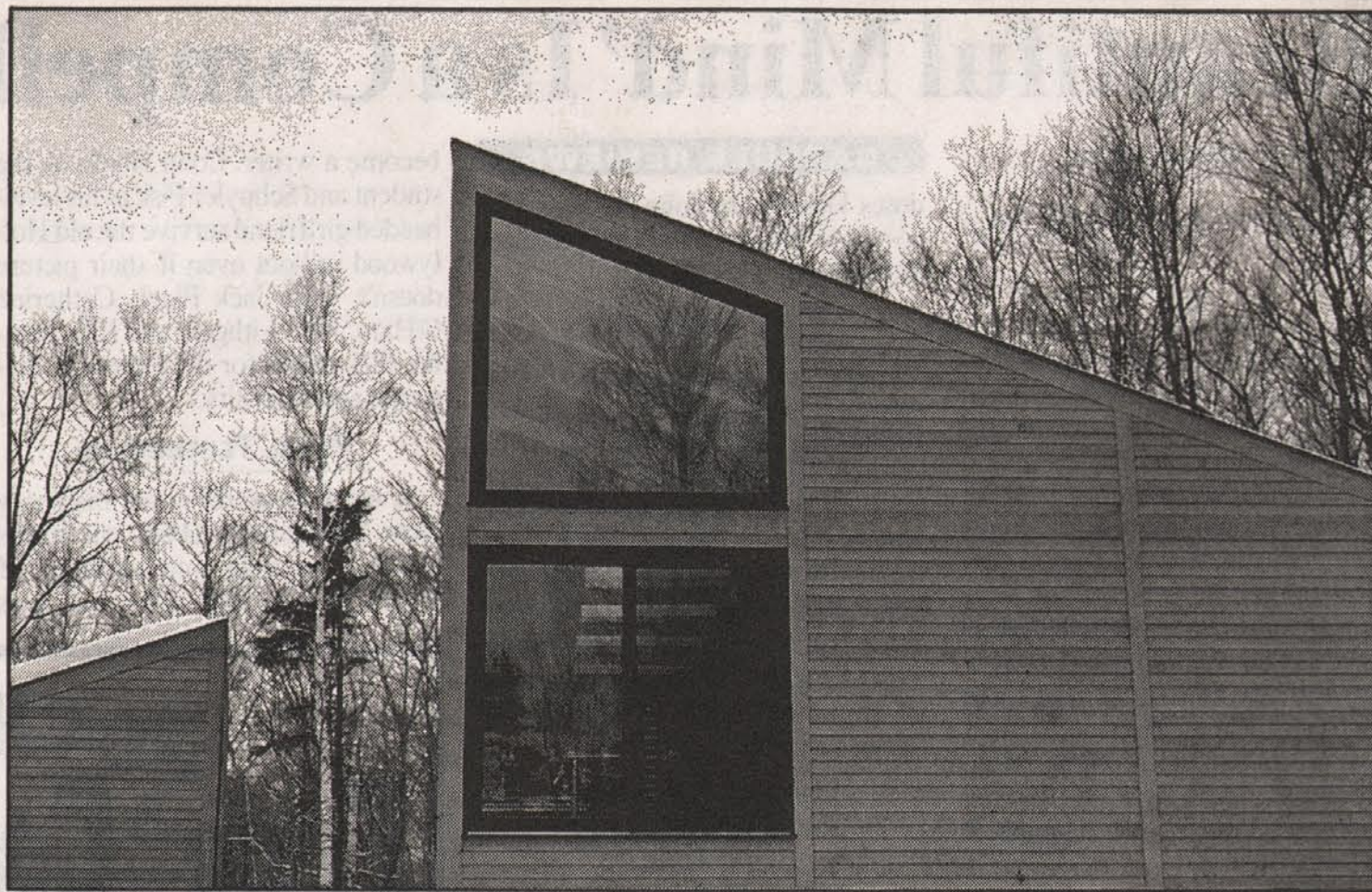
the form of the Mayors' adult daughter, Sloane Mayor Chambers.

Given their talents, it is hardly surprising that the Mayors produced an offspring who grew up to be an architect. Moreover, at the time that Mayor House was on the drawing boards of Wilson's studio, Sloane was working for Wilson in Maine. The Mayors had long owned their Ocom Ridge property, and had harbored a dream that it might prove a vehicle for their daughter's artistry.

"We wanted Sloane to express herself," Elizabeth recalls. Looking across her open kitchen, with its boundless counter space and flowing sense of connection to the adjacent dining area and, outside, a forest of birches, she smiles at Wilson and remembers hearing Sloane talk about her employer. "She said you were fantastic. We wanted to trust her implicitly. . . . I had no basis to totally trust you in the beginning, except that Sloane told me so."

This is a variation on a familiar architectural theme. The first commission of many a great designer involved a house for the architect's parents. Robert Venturi, for example, is more renowned for the home he created for his mother at the beginning of his long career than the one he has more recently designed for Dartmouth College's library. It says something about the generous spirit of Sloane Mayor Chambers that she did not seek to keep this important family commission for herself, opting instead to serve as a bridge between her professional and her familial mentors.

Mayor House has something else in common with Dartmouth's new Berry Library. Venturi and his partner, Denise Scott Brown, organized the library along a lengthy "Main Street" that will, when renovations to the adjacent Baker Library are completed and Gerry Hall is torn down, proceed from the Dartmouth Green and back outdoors to the school's developing North Campus section. Similarly, there is a ribbon-like pathway that proceeds through the Mayor House, starting with the concrete stairway that separates Elizabeth's studio from Michael's workshop near the top of the hillside, proceeds through the dining-living area and adjacent terrace, and then pro-



On the right is Elizabeth Mayor's studio, which sits above the garage. The triangle shape at left is the roof top of the main section of the house.

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ceeds down to the pond along a walkway that seems to hover over a field of ferns and literally floating on the surface of the pond itself, where the pathway terminates in a dock. What feels like social engineering at Dartmouth reads as poetry at the Mayors'.

Along this ribbon, remarkable things happen.

Placing the owners' individual work spaces at the top of the complex, overlooking the living areas and the pond, in a separate module atop garage and storage spaces, acknowledges the primacy of the owners' individual identities and, in particular, provides Elizabeth with views that cannot fail to inspire her as she draws and prints.

The outdoor staircase that separates these two spaces is as cool and elegant as the narrowest commercial passageway in one of the ancient cities of the Mediterranean, creatively protected from the elements by a covering of translucent plastic Kalwall, a sliver of which sneaks into the roofs of the workplaces themselves, artfully adding daylight.

One level down the hillside, the terrace and the adjacent living-dining area commune in a manner that speaks to Wilson's interest in defying the climate by linking the indoor and outdoor realms of her buildings. The

bluestone that paves the terrace continues uninterrupted from patio to hearth. Separating the outside from the inside here are floor-to-ceiling Oslo Windows, stained in a mahogany color that Wilson specially selected for the Mayors and simply decorated with curtains fabricated from synthetic sail-cloth. Wilson

explains that she is striving to be "thinking about windows differently" from the traditional New England conception of just "a punctured hole in the wall." The Mayors' windows, she explains, are more like "a moving glass wall."

From the hillside-facing side of the living-dining complex, the master bedroom and two guest rooms are organized along a line perpendicular to the communal spaces.

Built-in closets along the passageway recall Shaker design values, ample bookshelves provide a colorful contrast and a desk space for each owner is cleverly carved into the passageway. Standing at the intersection of the two axes — the book-lined hallway connecting the living rooms and the more fluid pathway connecting the living areas to the studio spaces — one has, through doors and windows an airy glimpse of sunlight and nature in all four directions, a vista of which Wilson is particularly proud.

Mayor House has something in common with Dartmouth's new Berry Library.

On the pond side of the living module is the house's paean to playfulness — a separate, screened-in porch on tall steel pilotis, linked to the rest of the building by a walkway, and obviously evoking either a treehouse or, perhaps, the most luxurious of exotic birdcages. The porch and the workshop-garage module are aligned with one another, several degrees off parallel with the living module, which adds a further and pleasant sense of complexity to what is otherwise a very straightforward and cartesian plan. A sly touch is the pavilion's invisibility from the living area, making it something of a hidden pleasure.

One of Wilson's friends and mentors is the great (but largely unknown in the United States) Australian architect Glenn Murcutt, whose credo involves striving for buildings that resonate with their site and with nature generally while still embracing the sparse and elegantly simple design theory espoused most famously by the late Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Mies's fabled Farnsworth House in Illinois is nothing but glass and steel; in the same spirit, the structure of the Mayor House is always prominent in a way that makes it central to the project's allure. The tubular steel holding up the roof of all three modules is ubiquitous, resembling the surrounding birches at the porch and reaching inside and outside in the living areas, reinforcing the connection between these two realms.

In other elevations, Wilson expresses the building's structures through bands in the clapboard siding. It is universally true, but little known among users of buildings, that when one can tell while inside what is holding up the roof above, occupants feel a sense of comfort and pleasure in their surroundings.

Other important influences for Wilson are the architects Edward

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Mayor House

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Larrabee Barnes and Peter Forbes. The former's Haystack Mountain School, in Deer Isle, Maine, was when opened in 1961 a great leap forward in New England architecture, proving that the modern idiom is especially suited to rustic settings. The latter's award-winning coastal Maine homes have proven that the combination of steel framing, glass, stone and concrete can exude warmth as well as wood can.

What all of these influences have in common, and what they clearly have taught Wilson, is an obsessive interest in materials and their properties — the certainty that the feel and finish of a building, the very texture of its surfaces experienced at close range, is as crucial to the building's success as the forms and concepts the architect has chosen.

For example, Wilson can eagerly deliver a lengthy disquisition on the concrete used extensively at the Mayor House.

"We used board-form cast-in-place concrete," she notes, even though this is an old-fashioned technique and "it's not really done anymore" in an era of pre-cast concrete structures.

"What's interesting," the architect continues, "is that the form work was pine," which, she notes, contains sugar that reacts with the cement and accounts for the greenish color in the resulting concrete, "so you really have a memory" of the wood when the formwork is removed.

She also insists that New Hampshire concrete looks distinctly different from its Maine counterpart because of the differences in a key ingredient — sand — in the two states.

Mayor House is actually Wilson's second project in the Upper Valley. Her "Country Living" House in Lyme, commissioned in the mid-1990s by the magazine of the same name, is a dynamic effort at reconciling traditional and modern. Mayor House is bolder and ultimately more successful, an achievement Wilson credits in great part to the owners and their architect daughter.

"They were so influential," Wilson reports. "I've had clients who've said 'Call us when the building's done.' That doesn't interest me." Rather, she says, working actively with a surgeon whose fascination with materials and mechanics gives him the perspective of an inventor, a visual artist whose work Wilson describes as "sublime" and "tactile," and a daughter "who basically held her parents' hands and said, 'Take a risk,'" allowed for a collaborative process that created "a new kind of beauty."

Every new building should strive to do that, though few do. The fact that it happens sometimes, in a real-world realm of a profession so full of practical considerations that art can seem impossible, is the very essence of why architecture matters.