

# atomic ranch

MIDCENTURY MARVELS

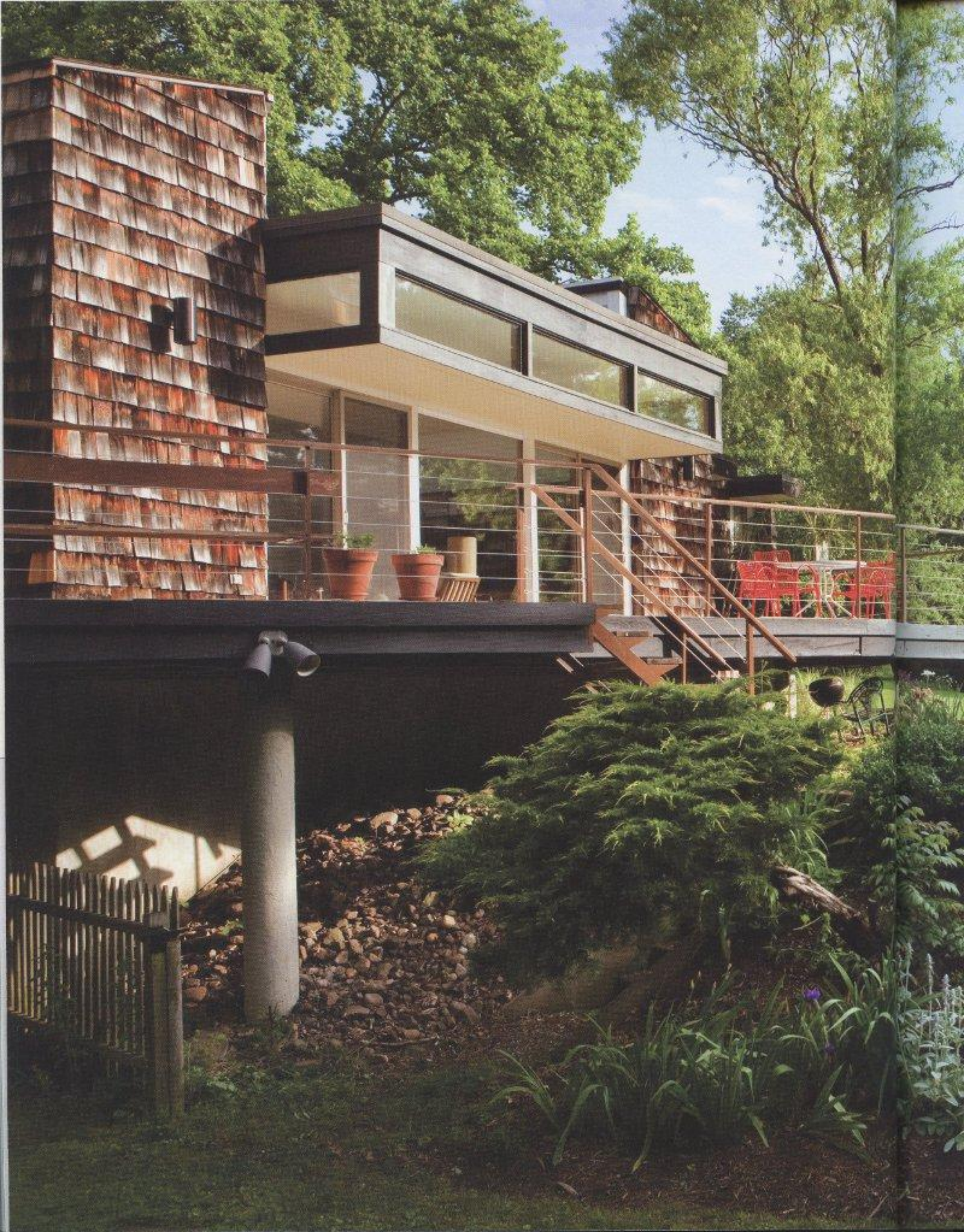


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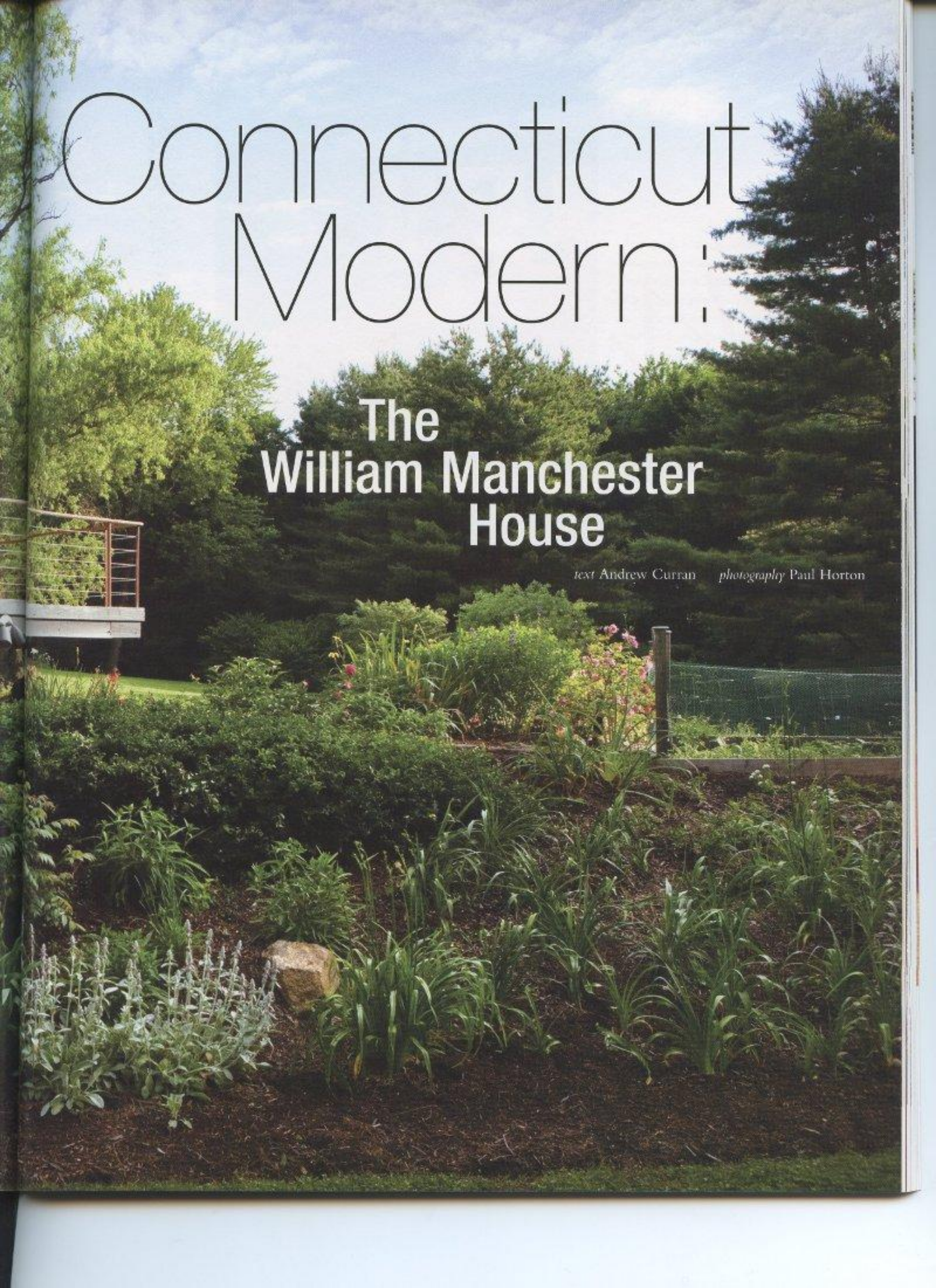
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# Connecticut Modern:

## The William Manchester House

*text* Andrew Curran    *photography* Paul Horton





Well before understanding just what midcentury modern really meant, my wife and I had long coveted the William Manchester house in Middletown, Conn. This sprawling example of '60s modernism came on the market four years ago while Jen and I were packing for a year's sabbatical in France. One week before leaving, we toured the house and were told that the property had been generously donated to the university where I teach. Like other interested parties, we were instructed to put our names in an envelope for a September lottery. We were settling into our new lives in France when we received word that our names had been drawn. Jen, God bless her, came back to the U.S. by herself and engineered the purchase and move while I stayed in Paris with our two kids.

### **Literary Provenance**

The Manchester house is well known in Middletown, as much for its style as for its story. While most people under 50 may not remember William Manchester, the author became a huge celebrity in the mid-'60s after being hired by the Kennedy family to write an account of JFK's presidency and assassination. Upon reading the finished manuscript, however, the Kennedys initially tried to stop publication, at one time by threatening to sue the author. Manchester finally resolved his well-publicized differences with both Robert and Jacqueline in 1967. That same year, his Pulitzer-prize winning *The Death of a President* appeared to great acclaim. With the exception of a small fee, Manchester donated all proceeds from the book's sales to the new Kennedy library. The check that he received from the serialization of the book in *Look* magazine, however, made Manchester financially independent. It also financed the construction of his dream house.

Manchester hired a good friend and fellow Wesleyan faculty member, John Martin, to design the house. Martin was both a professor and practicing architect in the area for a decade, designing a number of modernist houses for local doctors, lawyers and professors. He also was responsible for several modernist public buildings in the area, including a pharmacy, several banks, a college fraternity and even the Middletown police station.

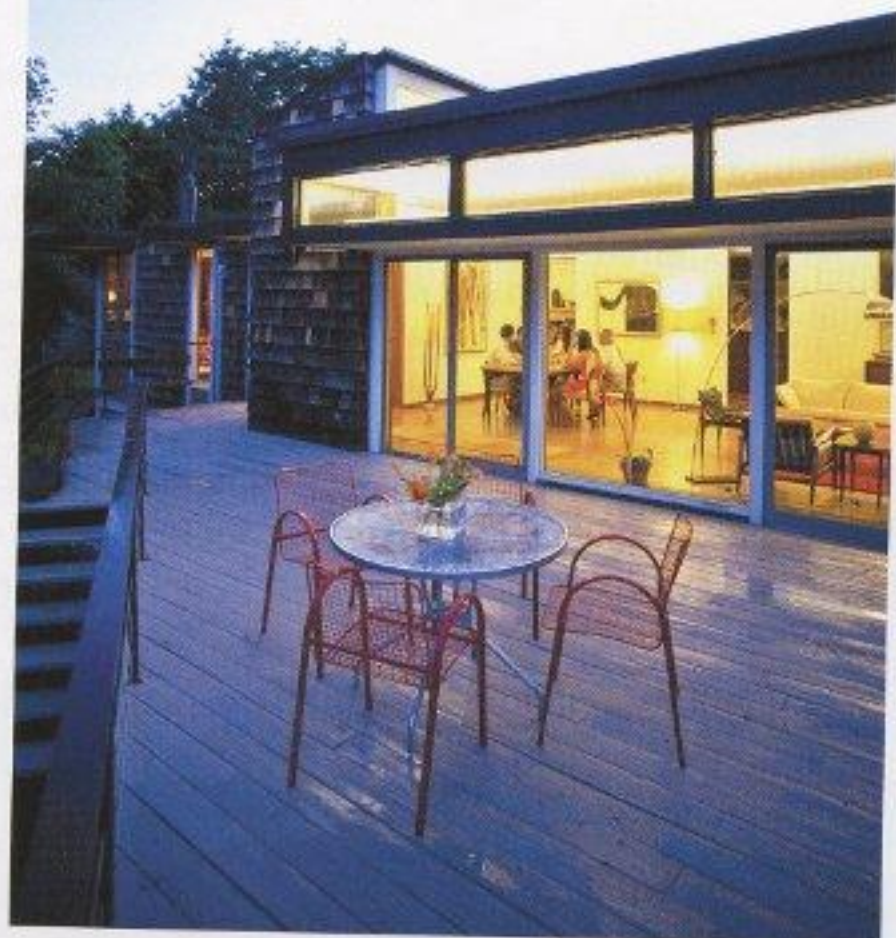
Manchester's house was apparently the first property for which Martin had carte blanche. The house itself, which is built on and into a hill, has more than 4,000 square feet of living space, including five bedrooms, a pottery studio and a big, open daylight basement that now serves as our martial arts studio. The most historically interesting room is the virtually windowless, cork-floored office that clearly reflected Manchester's siege mentality in 1967. Pursued by television crews and newspapers, he had become an unwilling celebrity: the bunker-like office space Martin designed was the perfect refuge.

### **Distinctive Elements**

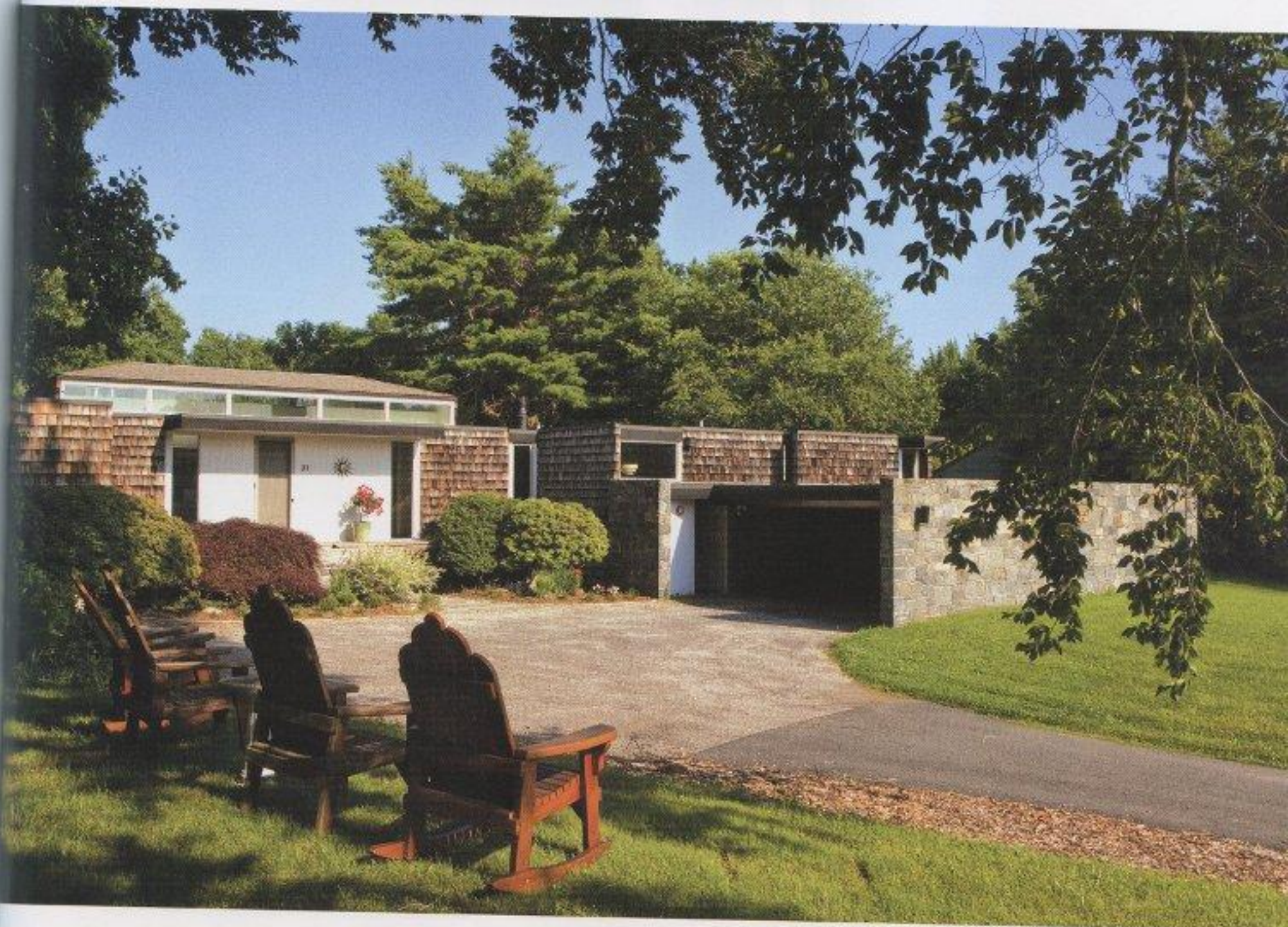
The signature feature of the house, however, is the living room's four-sided clerestory within a clerestory, which frames and hovers above the expansive floating ceiling. The light play in this room is nothing short of remarkable, particularly after a rain when the sun's rays bounce off the roof puddles and back onto the ceiling.

Martin incorporated other innovations into his design as well. Orienting the house's glass-dominated south side to take advantage of the sun, the architect called for a series of passive solar eaves that jut out of the back facade. From a distance, this makes the residence look more like Han Solo's Millennium Falcon spaceship than a house.





The exterior of the John Martin-designed home combines elements of Sea Ranch, indoor/outdoor living and a bunker-like garage facade. The Currans, seen dining (left) with friends, chose contemporary furniture for the expansive deck and Adirondack rockers overlooking the driveway and entry. Previous spread: the deck railing is kept as transparent as possible with steel cable stringers similar to those at the Oregon prefab home on page 53.

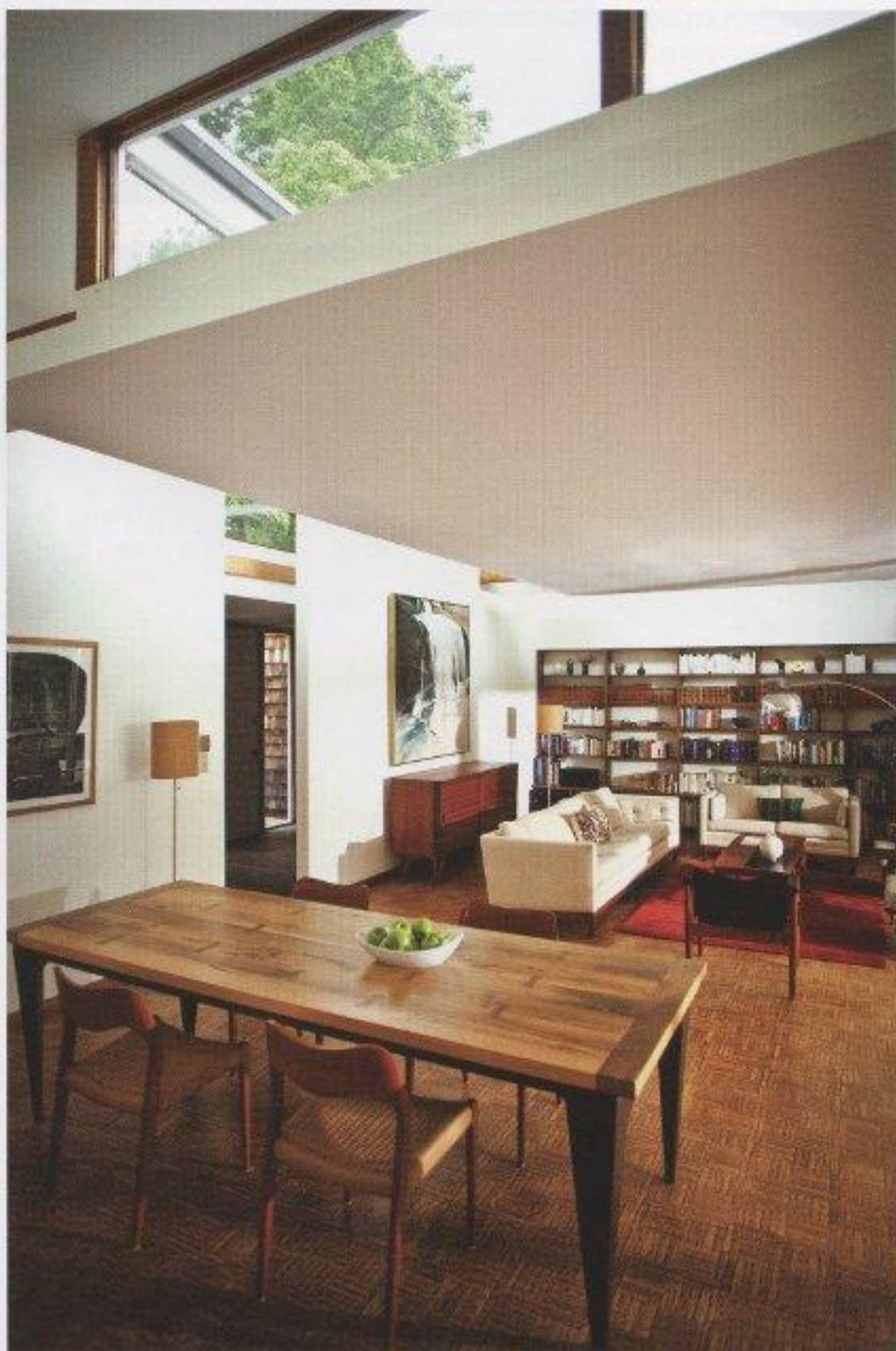




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is the living room's four sided  
**clerestory**  
within a clerestory

In the open plan living/dining room, we see Martin's unusual floating ceiling/clerestory treatment, with ceiling heights between nine and 14 feet. White walls are warmed by the original parquet flooring and built-in bookcases, as well as a custom sapele wood and steel credenza made by Andrew's brother, Bill Curran, a painting by Judy Ingemann hangs on the wall behind it.

Opposite: In the kitchen, original cabinets were refinished and a Hakatai tile backsplash and EOS solid surface counters installed. Maple flooring was put down here and in the rest of the 450-square-foot space, which includes a dining table and room for vintage armchairs in front of a modern wood-burning stove (see table of contents). New Design Within Reach pendant lamps hang over the snack bar, which replaced a built-in credenza and desk area; cork covers the upper portion of the wall by the door, which also holds one of several heat pumps that brought winter heating bills down to a mere \$400 a month.



Some of these midcentury advances had become liabilities by the time we bought the house in 2006, however. In addition to the fact that holes in some of the eaves had allowed a huge brown bat colony to set up shop, the radiant ceiling heat—which still worked well—consumed massive amounts of electricity: the first winter our heating bills were \$1,600, \$1,700 and \$1,750. Clearly, our initial task after taking possession of the house was to replace this system, which we did with efficient Mitsubishi heat pumps. At the same time we undertook this HVAC changeover, we also began an era-sensitive renovation of many of the home's spaces on our university salaries. Our idea was to restore the house to a more energy efficient version of its glorious 1968 self.

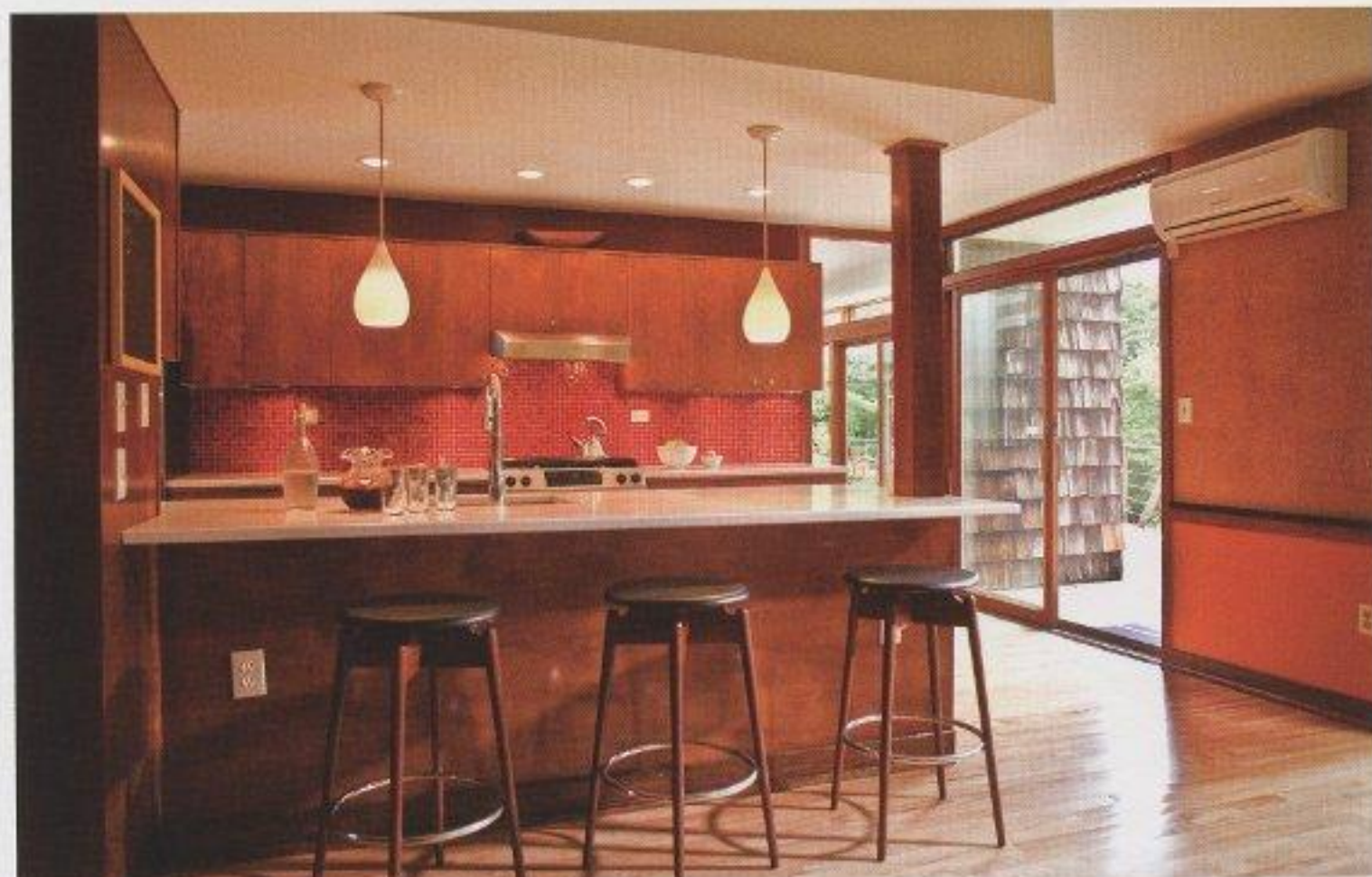
### Surface Treatment

The 450-square-foot eat-in kitchen area involved the most work. In addition to the fact that the nicely engineered wood cabinets had suffered during their 40 years of life, the yellowed drop ceiling in the kitchen area now read to the 2006 eye as an old sushi bar. Even sadder, the kitchen's psychedelic bowling-ball blue "Summer of Love" kitchen counters—which were legendary among the university faculty—were coming apart at the seams.

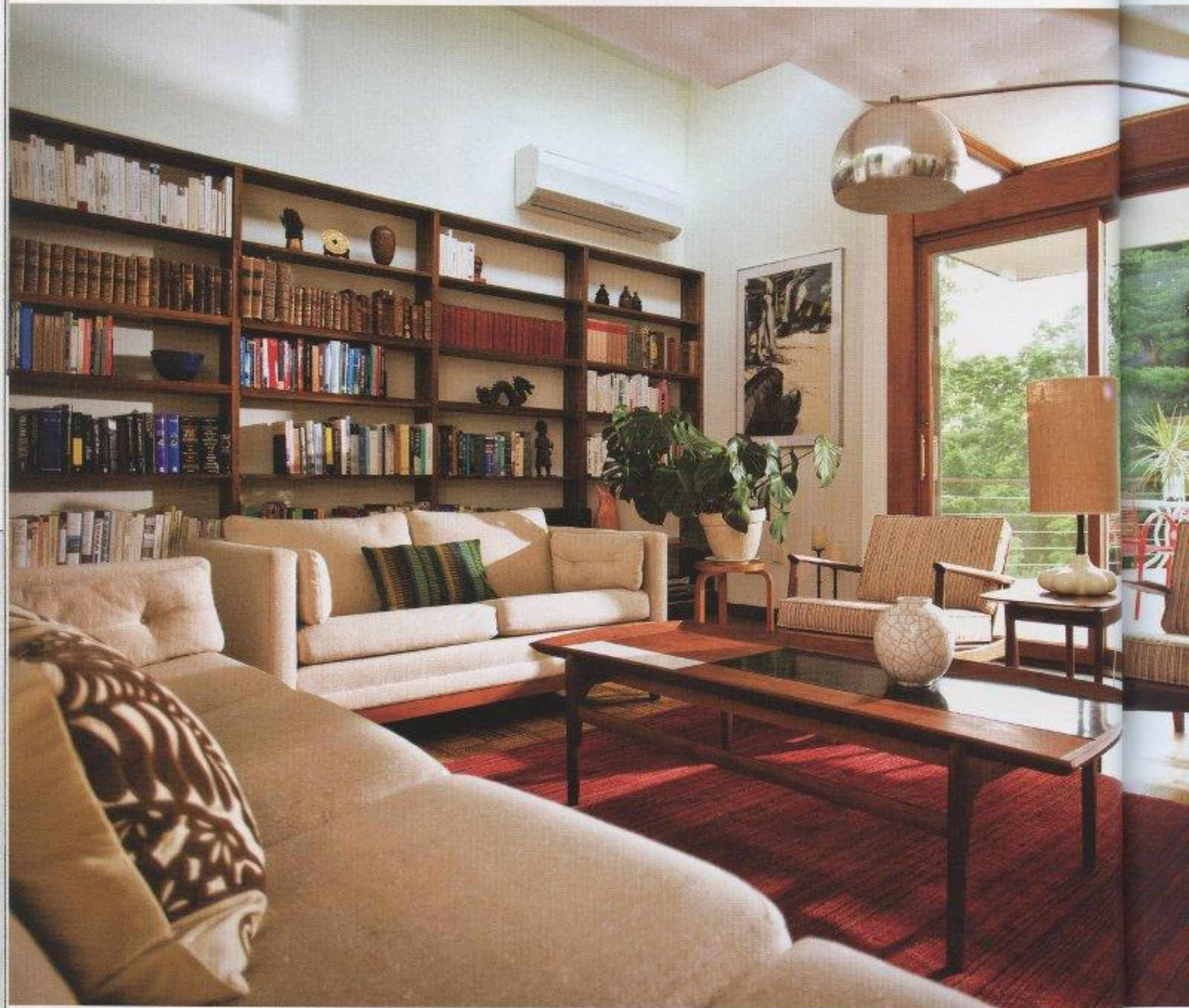
Transforming the kitchen involved a lot of our own labor: we scraped, sanded and refinished all the cabinets and replaced worn-out hardware. We also put in maple floors as well as new appliances and EOS solid surface counters. We replaced the original wood-burning stove in this area with a much more efficient Danish-made Scan. To furnish the kitchen area, we decided to combine midcentury furniture with contemporary pieces that are compatible with the clean lines and functionality of the era.



before



This page: The couch and loveseat belonged to the William Manchester family, while the Danish modern chairs and teak coffee table were found at estate sales; the arc floor lamp dates from Jen Curran's college dorm days. The bath was modernized with a new Toto sink, Grohe faucet and EOS counters. Opposite: Bill Curran Design made the recovered-oak table with tapered laser-cut steel legs; woven-seat vintage J.L. Moller chairs surround it, and a \$25 floor lamp and "Three Graces" by Francky Criquet are near the door to the kitchen.







Very much like the kitchen, whose roomy galley-style configuration corresponded perfectly to the way that we like to cook, Martin's design of the master bath was really logical. Even though the old tub, sink and tiles had seen better days, the layout was perfect; renovating was simply a matter of replacing the plumbing fixtures and adding radiant heated floors. The hardest part was actually removing the tub; once this was done, our handyman friend, Mike, put in a new Kohler shower base and doors, and Hakatai tiles.

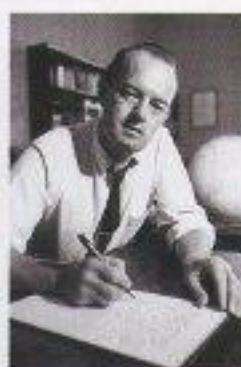
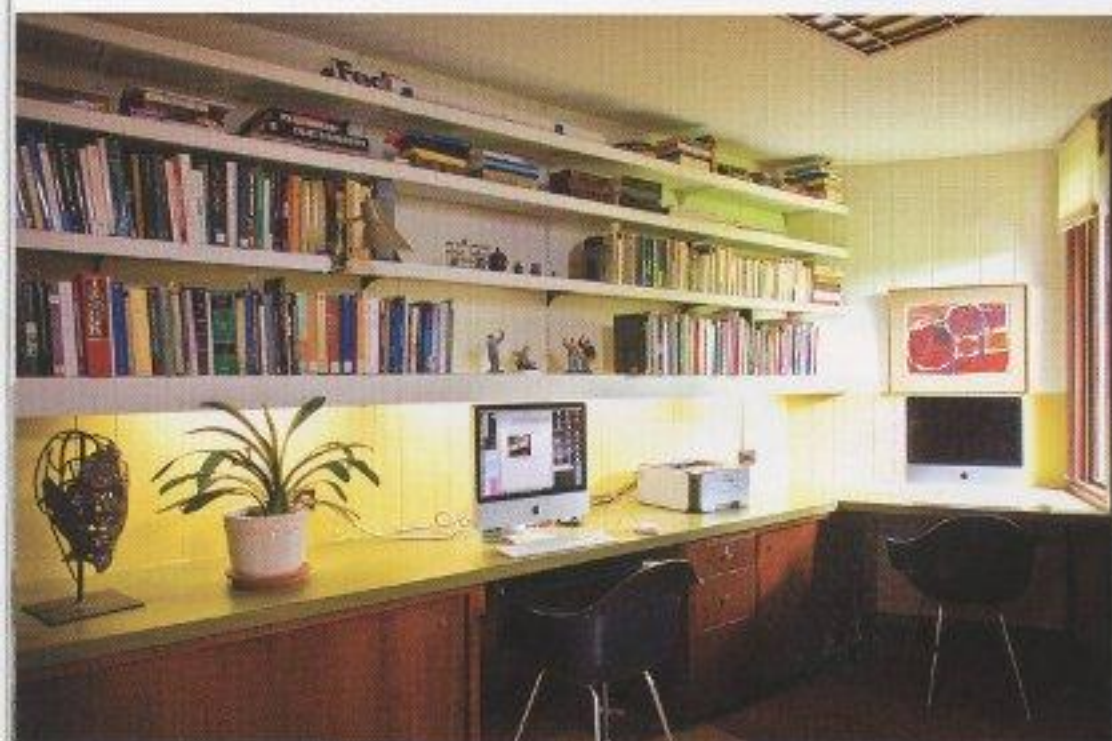
The living room posed a different sort of challenge. Once we had resealed the flagstone and refinished the parquet floors, we realized that the scale of this big room (30' x 22') simply dwarfed the furniture that came from our low-ceiling 1957 ranch. This was apparent to everyone who came into this space. In fact, when William Manchester's daughter came to visit the first year after we moved in, she commented that the living room looked naked without the four-seat Danish couch and loveseat that was bought for the house in 1968. In an incredible gesture of generosity, she offered these two couches to us the following week.

My brother, Bill, who is a designer and furniture maker in Philadelphia, has been similarly bighearted. In addition to giving us a 10' table made from reclaimed oak from an Amish barn for a housewarming present, he has also provided a hallway table, the coffee tables in the kitchen area and a sapele credenza for our living room.

Living in this house has been terrific for our entire family. In addition to the fact that our kids are now finding out about the famous people featured in Manchester's bestselling biographies (the Kennedys, Churchill, MacArthur), we feel extremely grateful to be the caretakers of an example of what we believe to be the most fascinating trend in 20th-century domestic architecture.

## the bunker-like office space

Martin designed was  
the perfect  
refuge



Courtesy Wesleyan University Special Collections (2)

William Manchester, seen in a publicity shot and at home in his office fortress. The office today is considerably tidier, and has traded the Winston Churchill photo and a manual typewriter for two Macs. Other than painting the paneling and bookshelves, the space looks much the same and suits the academic needs of the Currans. Opposite page: Three other Martin homes in the Middletown area.

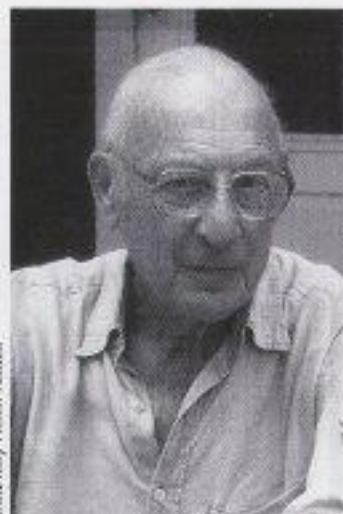


Resources page 87

## The Architect

Although born in New York, John Martin spent the first two decades of his life in Great Britain. Drafted by the U.S. Army and stationed in Germany after World War II, Martin was lured home by the GI Bill in the late 1940s. After studying architecture at Cornell, he settled in Middletown in 1957 where he began designing modernist homes and public buildings for more than 40 years.

While most of Martin's commercial buildings have been refaced or razed, a diverse group of his houses remains in this part of the Connecticut River Valley. The Martin homes pictured here testify to what was an evolving modernist aesthetic. During the late 1950s, he designed custom single-level ranch houses that were crafted to fit into specific natural environments. In the 1960s, Martin began drawing



Courtesy Helen Naylor

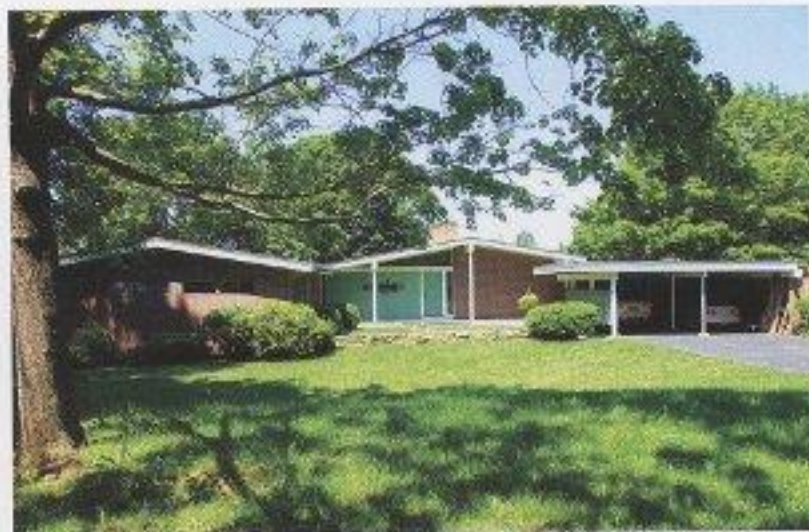
more challenging modernist structures that incorporated huge rooms, innovative light play, passive solar construction and unconventional exteriors that generally hid the sine quo non of American life—cars and garages—from the street view.

While the exteriors and the interior layouts of his houses are actually quite dissimilar, Martin owners immediately recognize a series of common themes once they step inside: flagstone hallways, redwood decking, cedar trim and huge windows oriented to look out on distinctive natural features. According to the architects that Martin trained, each residence can be explained by the way he dealt with his clients; he refused to talk about the building

Manchester hired a good friend and fellow faculty member, **John Martin**, to design the house

of a house until he completely understood the way in which its owners would live in it.

Although people often told Martin that his homes reminded them of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, the architect was reported to shrug off such comparisons. In a 1995 *New York Times* article about a house he had designed for a longtime friend who had become handicapped, Martin proclaimed himself to be an unrepentant modernist in an era that was embracing the postmodern. Whatever his aesthetic—he loved Le Corbusier and Maya Lin's Vietnam memorial—Martin interjected a needed dose of modernism into a region filled with colonial houses. Little wonder, then, that the owners of Martin houses have begun to seek each other out to talk about a man whom many of them did not know, but who seemed to anticipate their every need. ♦



Andy Curran (3)

Andy Curran is a professor at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn. His wife, Jen, who also works at the university, is an arts marketing specialist. Paul Horton, a commercial photographer based in Middletown, photographs people and still lifes in the studio and on location for a variety of clients. He has recently become interested in architectural photography and documentary filmmaking.