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## A House in the Trees: The TowerHouse

Marlon Blackwell

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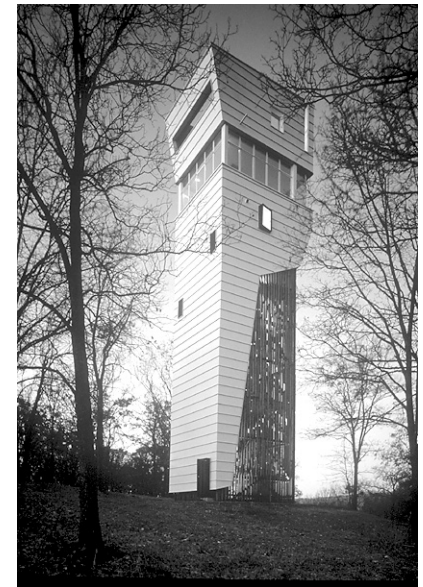
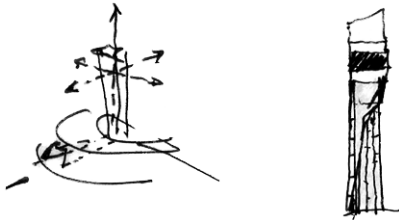
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## A House in the Trees The TowerHouse

Marlon Blackwell

*—Say it, no ideas but in things—  
nothing but the blank faces of the houses  
and cylindrical trees  
bent, forked by preconception and accident—  
split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained—  
secret—into the body of the light!*

—William Carlos Williams  
Paterson



### Place, Detail, and Process

I live, practice, teach, and build in Northwest Arkansas, in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains. It's a place considered to be in the middle of nowhere, yet ironically, close to everywhere. It is an environment of real natural beauty and, simultaneously, one of real constructed ugliness. Abandonment, exploitation, erasure, and nostalgia are all aspects of this place and are conditions as authentic as its natural beauty and local form. One thing I've realized is that the rural, suburban, and urban constructs I live in are no more real than the other. This land of disparate conditions is not just a setting for my work—it is part of the work. In these conditions I do not see

a negative, but instead, a source of deep possibilities in direct experience with the world. By choosing to live and work here—to call it home—I've been able to get beyond the surface of things, to turn over the rock and discover the complex and rich underbelly of my place—its visceral presences and expressive character—that so informs and sustains my efforts.

I am working from a conviction that architecture is larger than the subject of architecture. I try to look at the world with a wide-angle, microscopic lens to generate ideas and actions from concrete experiences of the everyday—between the ordinary and the extraordinary—between one's own

personal history and the history of our discipline. Observations of micro and macro conditions—biological, geological, and cultural—form the basis of inspiration and potential for making. This is an inductive, bottom-up process that allows us to amplify the small things that manifest the large things. We can then say, after the poet William Carlos Williams "...there are no ideas, but in things."

The program for a house is relatively simple, but the challenge is not. The motivating forces for space, for form, for experience should privilege qualities over quantities and spirit over function. Possibility, a deep sense of possibility, should transcend an imposition of the

limits of reality on the perceptions of users and the blindness caused by the perceptions of realities in the models that we usually find around us.

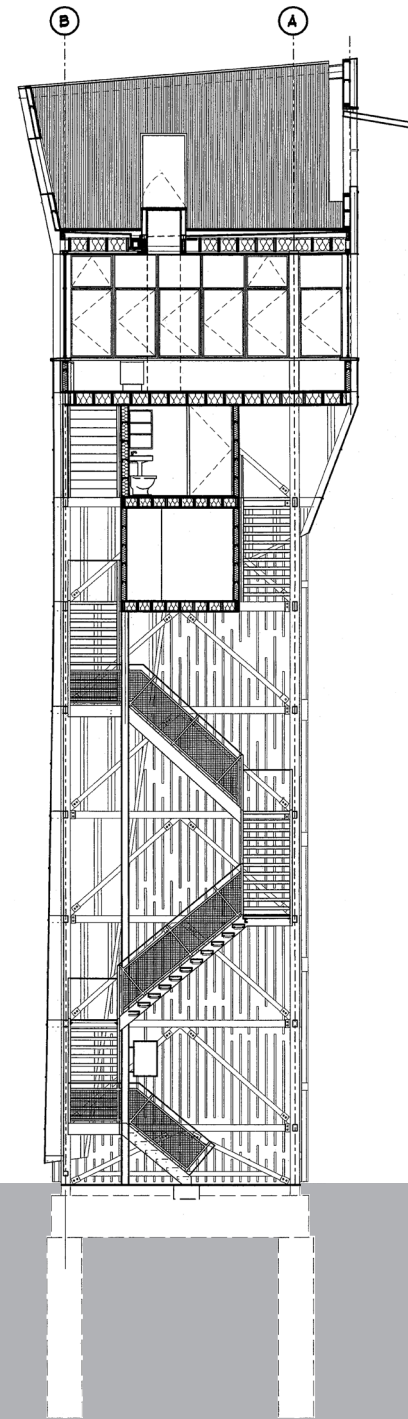
An ethic that values land resources is more likely to engender richly rewarding and sustaining environments than the banal, exploitative notions that constitute most land development. The design for the land should provide an appropriate setting for a house, and should address a similar set of issues and aspirations that it embodies. A carefully choreographed set of experiences articulated between the building and the land is critical to understanding the house as a work of architecture in the fullest sense.

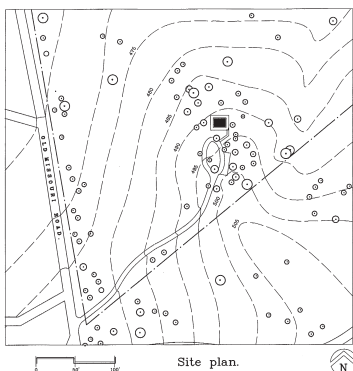
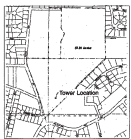
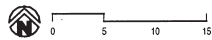
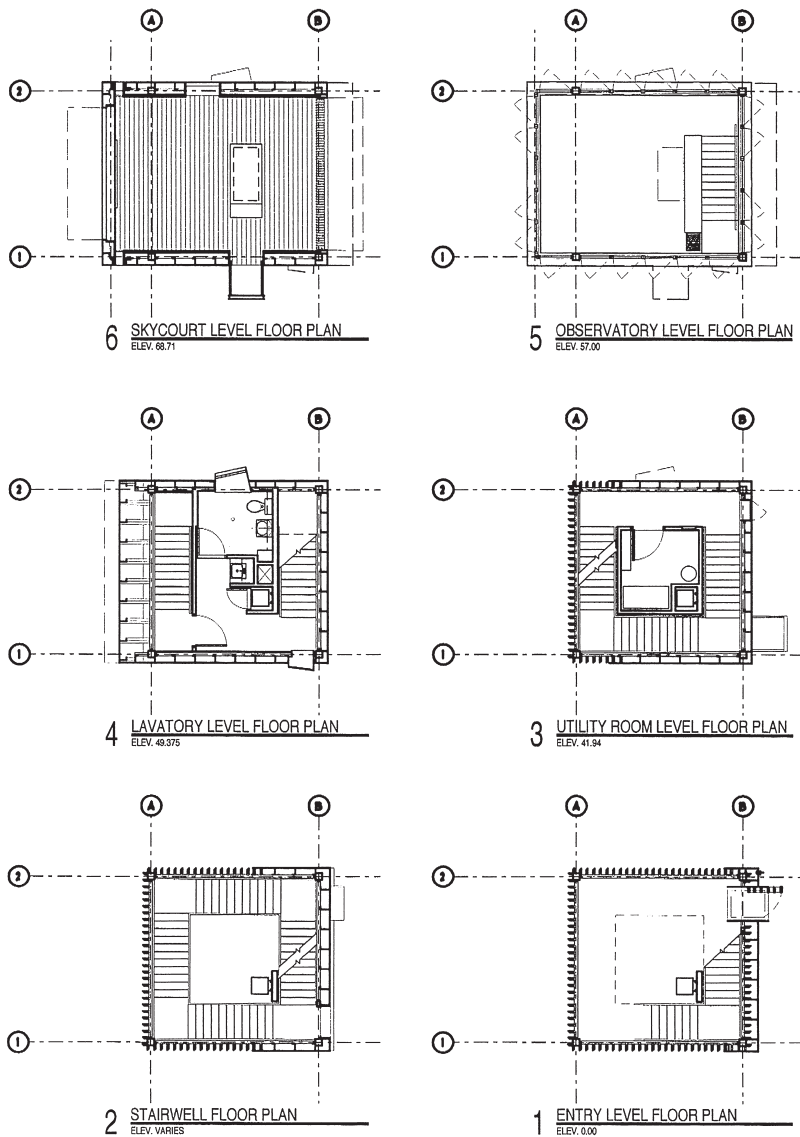


Here then, site and context can be understood in an inclusive way. The intent is to develop, through observation and abstraction, a structure that can simultaneously recall its lineage and comment on the present.

In each project I attempt to use a combination of tactical operations to insure some measure of interplay between detail, form, and place. These tactics center on the presence of material choices at the point of project conception, details considered as a spatial proposition, allowing local conditions to inform and generate systems of articulation, expressive details that generate expressive form, and the configuring of local crafted

assemblies with standardized products and assemblies to produce a hybrid tectonic. The ordering capabilities of details provide the perceptual structure of architectural form, in turn providing the conditions by which we experience and understand the emphatic presence of a work of architecture, and elevating conceptual notions and composition to their ultimate status as form. All of this is presented in the support of "local form" or place-specific architectural form and is set in opposition to the increasing and inexorable standardization, bland and ubiquitous, of most contemporary construction... and ideas.





## The TowerHouse

As a child the owner spent many memorable days and nights in a tree house built by his grandfather. In homage to these memories, a vertical structure was requested that would rise above the 50-foot high tree canopy and provide panoramic views of the surrounding Ozark mountain landscape and the opportunity for direct contact with the “elements.” The (82.33 foot) tower functions as a residential retreat with programmed levels including a utility room (elev. 41.94 feet), foyer/bathroom/kitchenette (elev. 49.37 feet), living/sleeping/observation room (elev. 57.00 feet), and a sky court (elev. 68.71 feet) for outdoor dining and observation.

The TowerHouse is sited on a wooded (hickory and oak), west-sloping hill in the southwest corner, the high point, of a 57-acre tract of land within the city limits of Fayetteville, Arkansas. While stubbornly rural in character the site is surrounded on all sides by suburban developments. The first response was to develop an inventory of patterns and textures naturally occurring in the immediate area of the site and to take into account forms within the built fabric of the land seen in the distance from the site.

A late-afternoon sun in November described the trunks of hickories

and oaks through the way in which dappled light fell across the vertically textured bark; its ridges and the shadowed spaces between the ridges produce the roundness of its form. This observation provided an analogy for the cladding of the steel tube tower structure with locally-milled, 2 by 6, disengaged, vertically-oriented white oak fins (50 feet high) around the open stairwell atrium. The lattice filters and reflects light while establishing a visible datum at the height of the tree canopy. Approached frontally, the lattice appears transparent and gives weight to the metal skin above. As you move around it, the space between the oak fins perceptually collapse providing a sense of weight and mass that “grounds” the tower structure. This organic condition is contrasted with the “white” cladding of horizontal standing-seam steel panels that enclose the east elevation and the upper program elements. This material tactic seeks to develop a complimentary relationship with the predominantly white metal-clad industrial and agricultural structures that pierce the tree canopy in the landscape beyond. Here the structure takes its place within an existing “other” order seldom seen, or understood, from the ground. The metal skin is supported by vertical purlins attached to the structure that allow for an overlap where metal and wood



meet, and further enhances the sense of cladding as skin or husk.

Oriented on the cardinal points, the TowerHouse provides for an intensified presence of solar and lunar movements, and seasonal change. View and the act of viewing, horizontally and vertically, structure the experiential content of the tower.

The ground surface of the natural landscape transitions to local creek and river stones at the tower base; an acoustical transition is made once one steps into the stairwell court surfaced with pecan shells from southern Arkansas. An open-air vertical sequence rotates up industrial perforated metal stairs through the tree canopy—intertwined with filtered light and shadow. The higher one climbs, light and view are reduced and then regained upon entry at a foyer level outfitted with a small kitchen and tiled bathroom (with arguably, the best view from a toilet in the state). A single flight of stairs provides for arrival into the light-filled observation/living room above. Here continuous steel frame windows provide 360-degree views of the surrounding landscape with a formal gesture to the western foothills and the plains of Oklahoma. The expansive horizon is emphasized through a room height where the

distance from floor to the eye and from eye to the ceiling is essentially equal. A fold-down stair leads one up to the sky court above; an open roof exterior room—a constructed nest—with a vertical orientation to the sky and controlled views to the horizon through framed openings. One is invited to feel the breeze, star gaze, anticipate the passing of clouds above, or sleep out under the night sky.

All wood floors, decks, and wall assemblies are of locally milled white oak. All mechanical, plumbing, and electrical lines are channeled through one vertical chase wall that also serves as structure for a small dumbwaiter. A table folds out from the west wall of the sky court for outdoor dining. Only one tree was removed for construction.

The TowerHouse strives for a multiplicity of readings within direct experience. The desire here is to maintain individual identity and tectonic presence while bringing into play forces that are active within a given cultural condition...in effect, to emplace material tangibility into the everyday. This necessarily challenges us to return to the significance of the everyday, to enrich it and revalidate it through the totality of the things we build.

Photographs:  
Timothy Hursley and Richard Johnson

