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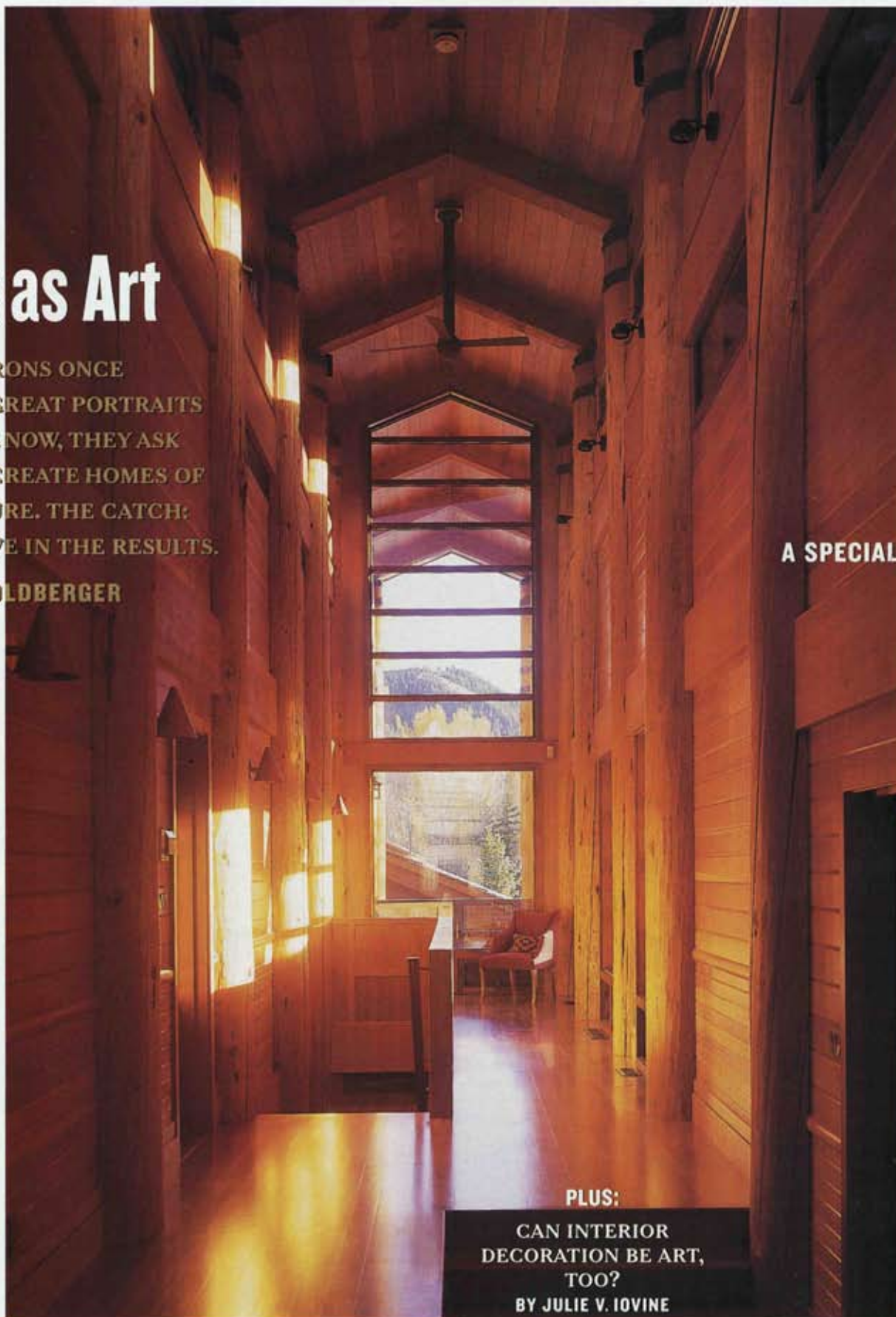
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Houses as Art

RICH PATRONS ONCE COMMISSIONED GREAT PORTRAITS OR CONCERTOS. NOW, THEY ASK ARCHITECTS TO CREATE HOMES OF LASTING STATURE. THE CATCH: THEY HAVE TO LIVE IN THE RESULTS.

BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

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HOUSES AS ART

The Masterpieces They Call Home

Great houses, not paintings or operas, are what wealthy patrons commission today. For better or worse, they have to live with — and in — the results.

BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

WHEN I FIRST SAW the model in the architect's office, long before construction began, it struck me as a case of overbearing architectural hubris. The arrogance of it all — those huge logs, fastened together with steel, serving as columns to support this vast gable confronting the snow-capped peaks. Who needed such monumentality? Weren't the mountains monumental enough? What kind of people would build such a house?

Then I went west to see it. The house, by Cesar Pelli, architect of notable skyscrapers like the World Financial Center in New York but of few private dwellings, turned out to be — well, surely no modest cottage in the woods (it's 10,000 square feet on 90

Upscale Cesar Pelli, better known for designing towering office complexes, used logs to soar into the Western sky.



Cesar Pelli
FOR AN ANONYMOUS PATRON

acres) but much more than the rich person's extravagance I had feared.

It had an aura, a presence, that only true works of architecture possess: it managed, in a way that seemed almost mystical, to be at once powerful and endearing. The house is long and tall, organized around a central spine of columns

Paul Goldberger, chief cultural correspondent for The New York Times, won a Pulitzer Prize for his architectural criticism.

made of huge logs. The spine functions as a kind of interior street, running down the middle of the structure and reaching up to support a pitched roof. The rooms of the house are placed on both sides of this central spine, which also contains the stair and balconies overlooking the double-height living room. The rest of the exterior is formed by more log columns, with panels of wood and glass set in between them.

The design merges worlds that by



all normal measure have nothing to do with each other: the sleekness of modernism married to the embracing warmth of a log cabin. And for all the hugeness and luxury (the house cost several million dollars), in the end it celebrates the land far more than it defies it. This house possesses human warmth but also the essential quality of all art, which is the ability to make us see the world in a slightly different way. I thought of Frank Lloyd Wright; I thought of Wright's Arkansas fol-

lower, E. Fay Jones; but I thought most of all of Cesar Pelli and how he had designed something that is not like any building I had seen before.

The experience of visiting this house gave me pause. It reminded me of the first rule of architecture criticism — that nothing ever matters except the real building. More, the visit underscored the extent to which — for all that has happened in architecture, for all that has happened in the economy, for all that

has happened in the evolution of cities — the design of the single-family, private house remains an architectural touchstone. Houses are still what many architects want most to build, even though they take more time, cause more stress and earn lower fees than most commercial projects. They are utterly irrelevant socially. Yet they are architecture's laboratory. The creation of a serious, ambitious house — a house that will serve not merely as a sign of wealth but also as a sign

Mountain High

Pelli's house, which had seemed so arrogant and monumental as an architectural model, took on an entirely different aura in its natural setting, celebrating the land rather than overpowering it.

of cultivation — has an allure to certain clients like no other way of spending money.

Houses may be the last form of private artistic patronage. Few of the rich commission paintings or sculpture any longer, or support the writing and performance of music, and when these things do occur in our time, they tend to be public events, not private ones. But at the end of the 20th century, a house can be what a piece of chamber music was in the 18th century: a work of art commissioned for the owner and his friends alone. When a person of means orders a house from a serious architect, it is pure patronage, not philanthropy. It does no good for anyone except the owner and the architect.

In an age when most of the arts have become relentlessly democratic, the commissioning of an architectural ambitious house is a statement of private connoisseurship. No one will see it unless the owner wants them to; in some instances, no one will even know that it exists, since far from seeing their act of patronage as a means to fame, a great many of the builders of patronage houses avoid publicity like the plague. The owners of the Pelli house in the mountains hesitated for a year before allowing pictures of it to be published here, and when they finally said yes, they insisted that their names not be used, even though they are as proud of the house as if they had designed it themselves.

Important houses, no matter how private, do have a way of coming to light, first in design magazines and then in the architectural history books, where they influence other architects and shape the developing taste of architectural students. Architectural fashions shift slowly. But patronage houses can change them profoundly: there is no question that the architecture of our time would be different if, say, Robert Venturi had never designed his 1962 house for his mother or Charles Gwathmey had not designed his 1966 house for his parents, both celebrated masterworks of patronage in our age. (See "Be They Never So Humble," page 60).

Of course, the Gwathmey and Venturi houses were built for patrons



Visitor Center
The guest house echoes the design motifs of the main building.

All Natural
The interior of the house, right, contains no painted surfaces; everything is finished wood, glass, stone or metal.

who, like the architects themselves, had more zeal (in their case, parental zeal) than money. Most of today's patrons are different: they are rich and also anxious about how their houses will play in the outside world, particularly in the supposedly pared-down 90's. A patronage house may be important enough to find its way into architectural history, but it is an outrageous thing to spend your money on — millions of dollars and countless hours struggling with an architect to get a roof over your head and, moreover, a roof that doesn't look like anyone else's, so that it will likely be all the harder to sell someday. (Try selling a Frank Gehry house. Gehry tried to sell his own celebrated house in Santa Monica, Calif., a remake of a Dutch colonial house that looks as if

Surely that is why Frank Gehry, the soft-spoken California architect whose work is now in such demand, has had so little luck in persuading his most extravagant house client, a Cleveland insurance company owner named Peter Lewis, to cut back on the house he is designing for him — a house that is now estimated to cost some \$30 million. (Architects generally negotiate their fees as a percentage of a project's construction cost, and there is quite a range: from a low of 10 percent to a high of 25 percent. Usually, the more complex the project, the higher the percentage, with 15 to 20 percent the most common.)

"I'm a do-gooder Jewish liberal to the core, and it's hard for me to think I'm solving any problems doing a rich guy's house," Gehry says. "I said to him, 'Why don't you just build a little \$5 million house and give the rest to charity?' Do you know what he said to me? He said: 'Look, I'm going to give lots to charity — this is only a small part of my wealth — and can't I have this one indulgence in my life? It may be a folly, but I would like to be identified with this kind of effort.'"



Rural Sprawl
Glass and wood panels are set into a frame defined by log columns, with low-pitched roofs extending beyond the main structure.



Artistic License
An early sketch by the architect hints at what's to come.

it had been partly deconstructed, and after two years and no nibbles he gave up and stayed there.)

And yet. Virtually all of the patrons I spoke to seem driven by the determination to embark on a creative act. It is not only because they see what passes for elegance and grandeur in the standard upscale American house — those garish, 20,000-square-foot imitation Taras — as vulgar and boring. They see their patronage as a kind of mad adventure. All of them, from the clients who have had a lifelong interest in architecture to the clients who came into it barely having heard of Frank Lloyd Wright, seem to embark on the process in search of some connection to the making of art.

ONCE — AS RECENTLY AS 30 or 40 years ago — it cost a hefty but not an insane amount of money to commission an architect to design a house, and often the most important houses, the ones that pushed ahead the art of architecture, were modest ones, houses designed for people who had more artistic daring than cash. Some of Frank Lloyd Wright's most important clients were schoolteachers and journalists and academics who came to him with bags of cash representing their life savings and they got wonderful, if small, houses, just like Charles Gwathmey's parents.

But if Gwathmey's parents, an artist and a photographer, came now to Amagansett, L.I., where their house was completed in 1966, they would probably be laughed out of town by the first real-estate agent who heard their budget (\$35,000, the equivalent of \$165,000 today). It costs so much to build even the smallest custom-designed house that there aren't very many small custom-designed houses being built, period. Hiring an architect to

