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THE EYES OF TEXAS

In an eclectic array of projects from Paris to Montana, the Houston-based firm of Curtis & Windham specializes in capturing the essence of its clients.

by Eve M. Kahn

Patrons eager to bare something of their souls would do well to hire Curtis & Windham. "If the building in the end is that person or group we designed it for, if we can't walk in without thinking about them —" says Russell Windham, and William Curtis finishes the thought: "If it reflects how they live, who they are, with design integrity from the front door to the back, inside and out, top to bottom — then for us, it's a successful job."

Last year their mindful architecture won Classical America's Arthur Ross award. In presenting the prize Arthur Schlesinger remarked on how glad he was to know that culture is alive and well in Texas. But Curtis and Windham are quite amused by outsiders' perceptions of their native state; in their work, they've incorporated the regional and the international, the timeless and the upstart, with equal grace.

Curtis and Windham do sometimes wear boots to the office, and there is something quintessentially Houstonian about the firm's success at the tender age of 8, with tender-aged partners (Windham is 37, Curtis is 41). But they work in a modest former carpet warehouse, surrounded by churches and an empty lot's dense trees, seemingly far from the city's skyscrapers. The partners share a room, and 12 more architects crowd a loft upstairs. They often build in Houston, and yet are also designing for Rocky Mountain ranchland and Paris and New York apartment towers. They're versatile in styles as venerable as Palladian and as young as Arts and Crafts, for commissions as grand as mansions or as humble as a set of dishes or single forged flagpole.

On their bookshelves are monographs on previous experts at drawing on the past with both reverence and imagination: McKim, Mead & White; John Russell Pope; Houston eclecticist John Staub. "We read their works like the Bible, and decide what applies to today," Windham says. "We look not only at composition but also at plans, at details like how a window reads, to understand how those guys handled the technology of their time. Architecture is a living, breathing language."

Both partners speak it in a kind of shorthand, a Curtis & Windham code about precedents. Around the office, you're apt to hear a partner call out, "Think about how Lutyens did that split fireplace!"

Uncommon Paths

While Curtis and Windham behave as if they've always known each other, they met only just before they set up practice together, in 1992. They'd grown up about a nine-hours' drive apart: Curtis in a midsize east Texas



Russell Windham (left) and William Curtis. (All photos © 2000 Hester + Hardaway, unless otherwise noted.)

town, Windham in a rural Panhandle community. Curtis remembers first becoming intrigued by architecture at age 5, when a talented local modernist designed a shop for his florist father, its program complicated with retail and delivery zones. Windham says he

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Curtis & Windham architecture pays homage to context, even on as whimsical a building as this pool house. Its giant columns echo the giant columns on the adjoining main house, adding a touch of site-appropriate grandeur at a mere 16 feet tall.

"didn't know what an architect was until college," but always admired the proud craftsmanship he observed in rural buildings. At college, neither Curtis (at the University of Texas in Austin) nor Windham (Texas Tech) was forced into any stylistic mold. They knew, though, that their attitude toward history differed from their classmates'.

"All the modern architecture seems foreign to me," Windham remembers thinking. "Why does every modern building have to be a star, why can't they contribute to what's already wonderful about a place?" Moreover, both architects socialized far outside the insular architectural-student circles, "and that way, unbeknownst to me," Curtis says, "I learned skills that would help me in business, ones you don't get from being in the studio all the time sketching. We have to be comfortable with different kinds of clients, to lead a parallel existence with them, to momentarily assimilate." He cut his professional teeth at Hartman-Cox in Washington, D.C., on respectful additions to institutional campuses like those at Georgetown University and the Smithsonian Institution. Windham, for his part, followed an obsession with the Shingle Style to New England. He ended up at Orr & Taylor in New Haven, just as they were infusing suburban mixed-use complexes like Massachusetts' Mashpee Commons with an innovative and needed dose of classicism.

Within a few years, Texas' familiar comforts had tempted both partners back, as did the prospect of being their own bosses. "We got together and said, 'Let's just see if we can get some good work.' In some ways Houston's still a cowboy town, and you can establish yourself in a very brief period of time," Curtis says. "If you have an idea here, it can be done tomorrow." Likewise appealing was the lack of traditionalists to compete with. "No one was doing traditional architecture I thought was insightful or passionate," Windham says. While a few practices do dabble in the likes of developer Georgian, he adds, "they're all really wolves in sheep's clothing."

Soul Men

A college contact, sure enough, provided Curtis & Windham with its first commission: a Georgian townhouse with loggias cut deep in the front and back.



The addition's carpenters, wary of traditional building techniques, were convinced to simply use their keyhole saws to cut out Curtis & Windham's full-scale profiles of these curvy exposed rafter ends.



The architects built this addition for a former Victorian Society staffer with a collection of Arts and Crafts artifacts.

Clients ranging from academics to tycoons followed, all drawn by word of mouth. ("We made a decision not to seek publicity, to just be very sure-footed about what we're doing," Curtis says.) In each case, respect for context is crucial—even a Curtis & Windham pool house, for example, bears giant columns across its facade, thereby matching the main house's set and adding a touch of grandeur at a mere 16 feet tall. Likewise imbuing each project with soul is the firm's roster of devout craftspeople. Curtis & Windham subs have, for example, bent elliptical tempered glass over an entrance canopy, with support ribs that cast ever-changing shadows across the house's facade. For the same client, the office

converted a mechanical basement into a wine cellar, where a hand-forged rail in the staircase leads down past hand-blown hurricane lamps to a door with hand-forged hinges. Windham fondly recalls "watching the blacksmith heating steel to 2000 degrees and whacking away at it, or melting bronze at 3000 degrees and

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The contractor on Curtis & Windham's first project later commissioned an English cottage-style house from the firm, which looks so believably 1920s that visitors have asked the architects, "Which part of this did you add on to?"

having it retain the liquid shape in frozen form as it cools. All that's part of the beauty of what we do." (Soulful craftspeople now routinely call the office, Curtis says, eager to work to its perfectionist standard.)

Only on the occasional job site does the firm still have to train workers who are dubious about traditional construction techniques. In building an Arts and Crafts addition on a minute budget, for instance, they cut full-scale profiles of the curvy exposed rafter ends for the carpenters to simply follow with their keyhole saws. The owner displays part of her collection of Arts and Crafts artifacts in the space, including a rare signed photo of Lutyens: "She IS that building," Windham says. He only regrets, he adds with a laugh, that he couldn't convince her to trade the Lutyens picture for architectural services rendered.

For clients with more lavish plans, no wish seems beyond Curtis & Windham's com-



The architects kept the overall building height low by maxing each room's ceiling height; there's five inches between floors, and the thus-exposed steel beams are concealed behind wood imposters.



Curtis & Windham worked four existing chimneys into this Shingle Style lodge — a project done in collaboration with David Anthony Easton. (Photo: Peter Mauss/Esto)

mand these days. The partners have incorporated four massive old chimneys into a new Shingle Style lodge in New York, while giving the house a deceptively Colonial overall profile and room proportions. They maxed the ceiling heights so there's a mere 5 inches between floors, and concealed the thus-exposed steel beams with wood imposters. The owner wanted the illusion of age to be so powerful, the architects even de-electrified the 18th-century staircase chandelier. (The inhabitants now tend to its candles by lowering it via a pulley made of no less than whalebone.)

The firm has also been known to make drastic last-minute changes during fast-track construction, for instance by shrinking a living-room fireplace at a timbered Colorado ranch. The owner had found a major 19th-century American landscape, which had to hang over that very mantel. "We've had to learn to go with the flow a little bit, to embrace that kind of serendipity and make it work for us — although it's not our nature."

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A college contact provided one of Curtis & Windham's first projects: a Georgian townhouse.



In the townhouse's stairs, simple smooth balusters play off Piranesian perspectives.



Deep loggias cut into the townhouse's front and back.

Curtis says with a laugh.

The office is designing more and more furniture for its larger projects, such as the Colorado ranch. "In our buildings you can't really separate the interior and the architecture," says Curtis. "More clients are realizing, 'We've spent a year with you, why should we bring someone else into the mix now?' We could grow to 30

[staffers] in a heartbeat." One reason they don't, Windham explains, is that "it's hard to find people to hire who can understand the appropriateness we're after, who can feel it." The two partners keep sharing an office as the firm expands, partly to keep eavesdropping on each other's business conversations — so they're always up to date on every project, and the one who's on hand can always take calls for the one in the field.

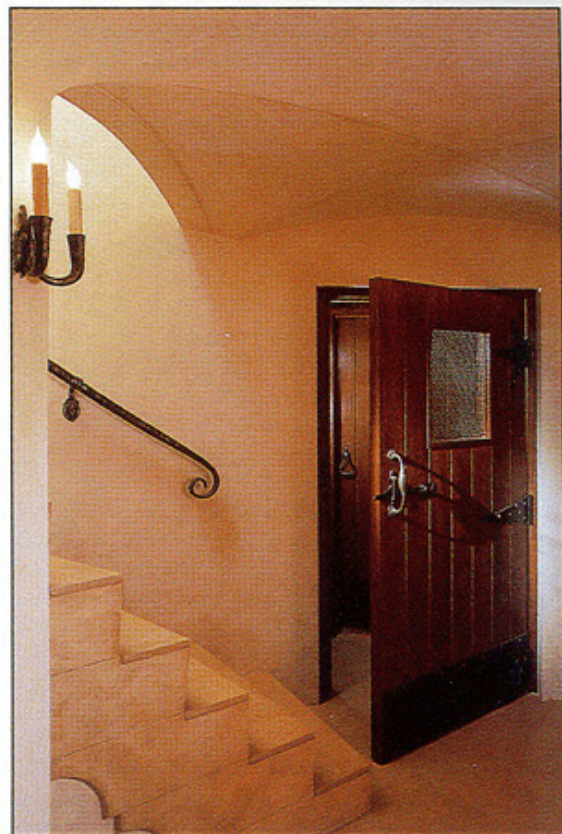
They're aiming for more non-residential assign-



Curtis & Windham's ever-expanding stylistic repertoire includes timbered rustic, like this Rocky Mountain ranch.



The ranch's owner bought a large and striking landscape painting that could only fit over the living-room mantel, so the architects had to shrink the fireplace at the last minute.



The firm's assignments can be as modest as an exquisitely crafted wine cellar. Hand-blown hurricane lamps illuminate its staircase with a hand-forged railing leading to a cellar door with hand-forged hinges.



Also for the wine-cellar client, the architects designed an entrance canopy with elliptical tempered glass bent over metal ribs that cast ever-changing shadows.

ments as well. (College connections should again prove helpful, for instance with institutions' boards of directors.) They are working on a headquarters for an association of the state's agriculture teachers in Austin, to be made from indigenous limestone that speaks of the state's small-town architecture and relates well to downtown Austin (unlike the neighboring university's Mediterranean red-clay-roof aesthetic). And talk about soul: The firm has already built a church, overlooking the main square in an East Texas town, nothing like the typical new church in Texas that Windham describes as "a bus barn with a steeple on top."

The firm's church, with its clapboard skin, plain pediments, clear panes, and Doric pilasters, looks as if rural Lutherans commissioned it — but it's actually for a Catholic congregation. Behind the nave it trails off into plain-pedimented wings for classrooms and offices, as if generations of congregants had kept adding on gently out back while maintaining the main sanctuary. "It was done on a very tight budget, although not as cheaply as a bus barn with a steeple on top," Windham says. "It's a very significant feature in that town. It contributes in a historic way. It's proof that traditional architecture is as alive and well and reasonable as it ever has been." ♦