



Anderson and Iris Todd House, Anderson Todd (above), architect, 1995.

# At Home With Anderson Todd

Frank Welch

Anderson Todd, professor emeritus of architecture at Rice University, has begun his academic retirement with a bang by building a sparkling new house for himself and his wife, Iris, at Bolsover and Hazard. It is the second house he has designed for himself, and in both formal style and execution it perfectly reflects the talent and philosophy of this architect and educator. That means a structure that adheres closely to the precepts identified with Mies van der Rohe.

While a student at Princeton, Andy Todd met Mies, who would serve as his

architectural and philosophical mentor. Todd recalls his first personal encounter with the newly emigrated architect: "Mies came to Princeton when I was a freshman. No one would help him hang the exhibit of his precise drawings of bricks, so I did. Little did I know what the future with this man held for me." Todd, in turn, served his teacher in 1956 by helping see to it that Mies received the commission to design Cullinan Hall and later the Brown Pavilion for Houston's Museum of Fine Arts.

If Mies was Todd's architectural

lodestar, Jean Labatut was his inspiration as an educator. Born in France and educated at Paris's Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Labatut joined the Princeton faculty in 1928 and remained there until his retirement in 1967. The Princeton teacher inspired his students in the manner of the humanist-liberal tradition with analysis, knowledge, and sympathy for all periods of architecture. "He was the greatest teacher and meant everything to me, he was my *patrone*," Todd recalls. On his first visit to Labatut's office, in 1939, Todd saw a photograph of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion. The professor explained, "It is one of the ways architecture will be built in the future." The two great influences on Todd's architectural and academic career merged in this one moment of revelation, Labatut wide-ranging and inclusionist, Mies strict, rigorous, and methodical.

There was a third important figure: Todd's maternal grandfather, John Hampton Barnes, in whose Philadelphia house Todd first heard architecture discussed. A successful Philadelphia lawyer, Barnes hired his best friend, Wilson Eyre — a prominent Philadelphia architect — to design the family house on Waterloo Road. Later, as chairman of his bank board's building committee, Barnes was instrumental in approving the choice of George Howe and William Lescaze as architects for the country's first modern skyscraper, the Philadelphia Savings Fund Building in Philadelphia. Todd's paternal grandfather and his father's brother were both architects in North Carolina.

"I have never," Todd declares, "said to a student: 'Do it like Mies would do it.' Never. Never!" Some longtime Todd observers understand that he actually feels this in his heart, but in truth Todd's passionate beliefs lead directly to Mies. Former student John Casbarian thinks Todd really believes that he teaches without bias: "His love and respect for Mies van der Rohe is so embedded in him he doesn't recognize it. It's like being so close to something, one can't see it. Early in his career Andy found the philosophy that suited him, and he totally absorbed it into his being." Todd asserts emphatically, "I try to inspire [students] with certain basic principles: how to organize space in a rational manner, how to conceive a structure with logic and directness, and how to assemble its parts with common sense and grace!" If God is in the details, for Todd it is a wise, analytical God of *Sachlichkeit* — directness, objectivity, and realness.



Todd House, Bolsover Street elevation.

Paul Hester &amp; Lisa Heston © 1996



Todd House, front court

Paul Hester &amp; Lisa Heston © 1996

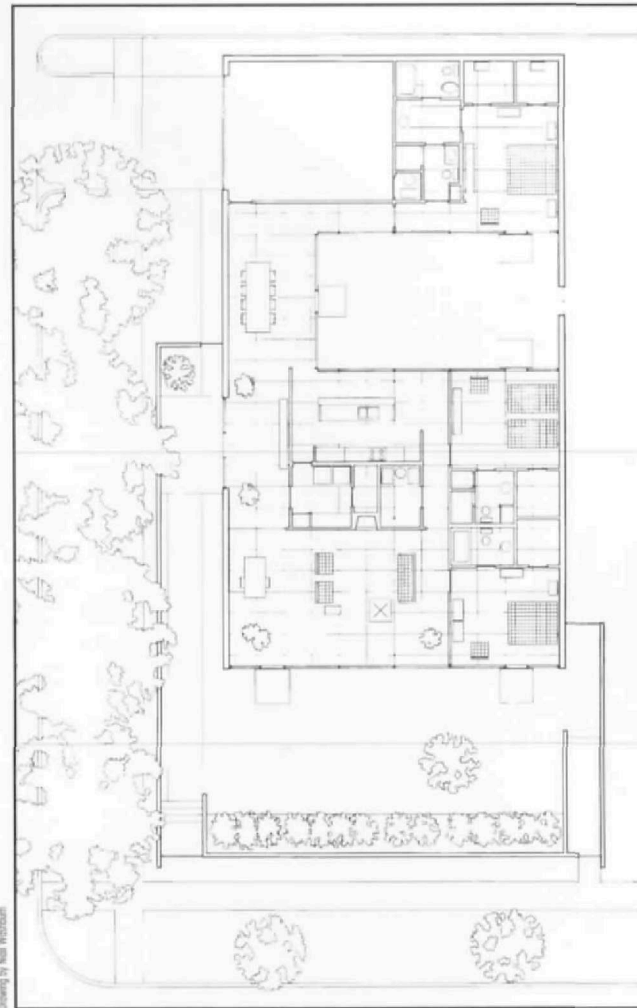
Todd's new house at 1932 Bolsover is located on property that had been used as a site for house design projects in Todd's Rice studios for more than 20 years. "The lot is not quite long enough north-south for the sort of modular organization I was asking the students for, but nobody caught the discrepancy in all those years except one fellow." In spite of the site's dimensional intransigence, his new house strictly adheres to Todd's familiar principles of modularity and respect for the clarity of planning, the roles of materials and their exact assemblies. In concept it is a junior version of the house Todd designed for his family at 9 Shadowlawn Circle in 1959, but as Houston architect William Stern says, "more youthful, less Miesian, more like the 1950s California Case Study houses." Todd himself describes his new house as "quirky, quaint, and cozy."

The older Shadowlawn house is larger than the Bolsover house, richer in tone and execution, and more somber in mien. It is likewise a courtyard house but with high walled courts on its east and west sides bracketing a rectangular, block plan. After a visit many years ago, Philip Johnson described Todd's award-winning house as "more Mies than Mies." There is a grand sweep to the central spaces, which lock around the walnut-sheathed core. The larger house finds a muted echo

in the more intimate Bolsover structure. The Bolsover furnishings are mellower: Windsor and Tugendhat chairs coexist.

Key to both houses is the element Todd considers of paramount importance in planning the modern house: the centralized kitchen. "There are no servants anymore, very few even in River Oaks," he asserts. "I grew up in a big three-story house in Philadelphia with two acres of lawn in front, served by a staff of nine taking care of everything from gardening to chauffeuring. Now, with servants at a minimum, it makes extraordinary sense to locate the kitchen right in the center of a house." While the Shadowlawn kitchen is hemmed in between the living and sleeping areas, its only natural light coming from a smallish skylight, the Bolsover kitchen benefits from a glazed north wall facing the house's inner court.

A high-walled court, reminiscent of one at the earlier house, on the south side of the Bolsover house runs along Hazard to form an entry alley, centered on steel gates facing Bolsover. Part of what gives the new house its youthful feeling is the buoyancy of the light-reflecting white steel structure, white drywall interior, grey-flecked white terrazzo floor, and light grey-brown brick. The details are similar, though sharper and more articulate at the Shadowlawn house: the black steel fascia has a crisp channel reveal dear



Todd House, plan.

Drawing by Neil White

to Todd that is missing from Bolsover. "It cost too much to repeat that," Todd notes regretfully as he gently segues into a mantra concerning masonry modularity. Otherwise the diverse parts of the assembled new structure are as carefully and thoughtfully ordained as in the earlier, more expensive house. He is well known for his passion on the subject of the performance of materials. He draws full-scale details, with every brick in wall elevations and dimensioned plans as precise and succinct as his intentions. He sketches and slaps his extended hands together at right angles, illustrating how wood members should relate and fit. Suddenly he asks: "What size does Sheetrock come in?! Aha! 'Eight foot and ten foot' — every architect gives the same answer. None of them know there is nine-foot Sheetrock!" The Bolsover ceiling height is 9 feet 2 1/4 inches high with a 3/4-inch reveal at the ceiling and a 1 1/2-inch recessed base at the floor.

Many architects from his two generations of Rice design studios still see Todd regularly. Members of his first graduating class of 1955 meet once a month in Houston for lunch. Mel Hildebrandt, one of the '55 regulars, comments on Todd as a teacher: "Three things about him stood out. First was his enthusiasm for architecture. He made you believe it was important. Second was his interest in each person individually; there was the sense that one had personal value. And third, he made me believe that I could achieve. I owe him a lot."

Another member of Todd's first class is Benson Ford, who through Todd's encouragement and tactical help went on to the wider world of Princeton on a scholarship. "Yes, Andy made the

Princeton experience possible because he believed in me, a kid from Pasadena, Texas. First Andy at Rice and then Jean Labatut at Princeton were the great influences on my life. I vividly remember Todd sitting with a group of students holding this block of wood, mahogany, I believe, turning it over in his hand and asking: 'What is this piece of wood all about? What do you do with it?' We were stumped, of course. It was an oarlock from a Venetian

gondola. He was pushing us to analyze, visualize, and seek answers based on the evidence. This bone-lean oarlock was very beautiful and puzzling but, secretly, perfectly functional. That was his and Labatut's way: charging us to find our own answers about truth, clarity, and simplicity." (Ford later was the contractor for the Shadowlawn house.)

"What we tried to teach were *principles of good architecture* in its various guises," Todd explains. "Then, in Labatut's words, we told them to 'close the book and create a forgetfulness' and move on. I wanted them to find out what was *good* and learn to like it. There are things that make good architecture that you don't see. There must be a moral framework. Yes, sure, virtue is its own reward — it's the only reward you really get." ■