

Bill Deal

distinction

HOMING IN



For hundreds of people, wealthy and poor, an architect's ears and eyes and pen have made real the merely imagined.

by Janine Latus

photography by Eric Lusher

Architect Bill Deal jots a note on an already-crowded piece of paper and sticks it back in his shirt pocket. He does this constantly, writing down ideas, penciling possibilities. Sometimes when he and a client are talking he'll sketch out a series of thumbnails that he'll later send to the client with a note saying, "Am I close?"

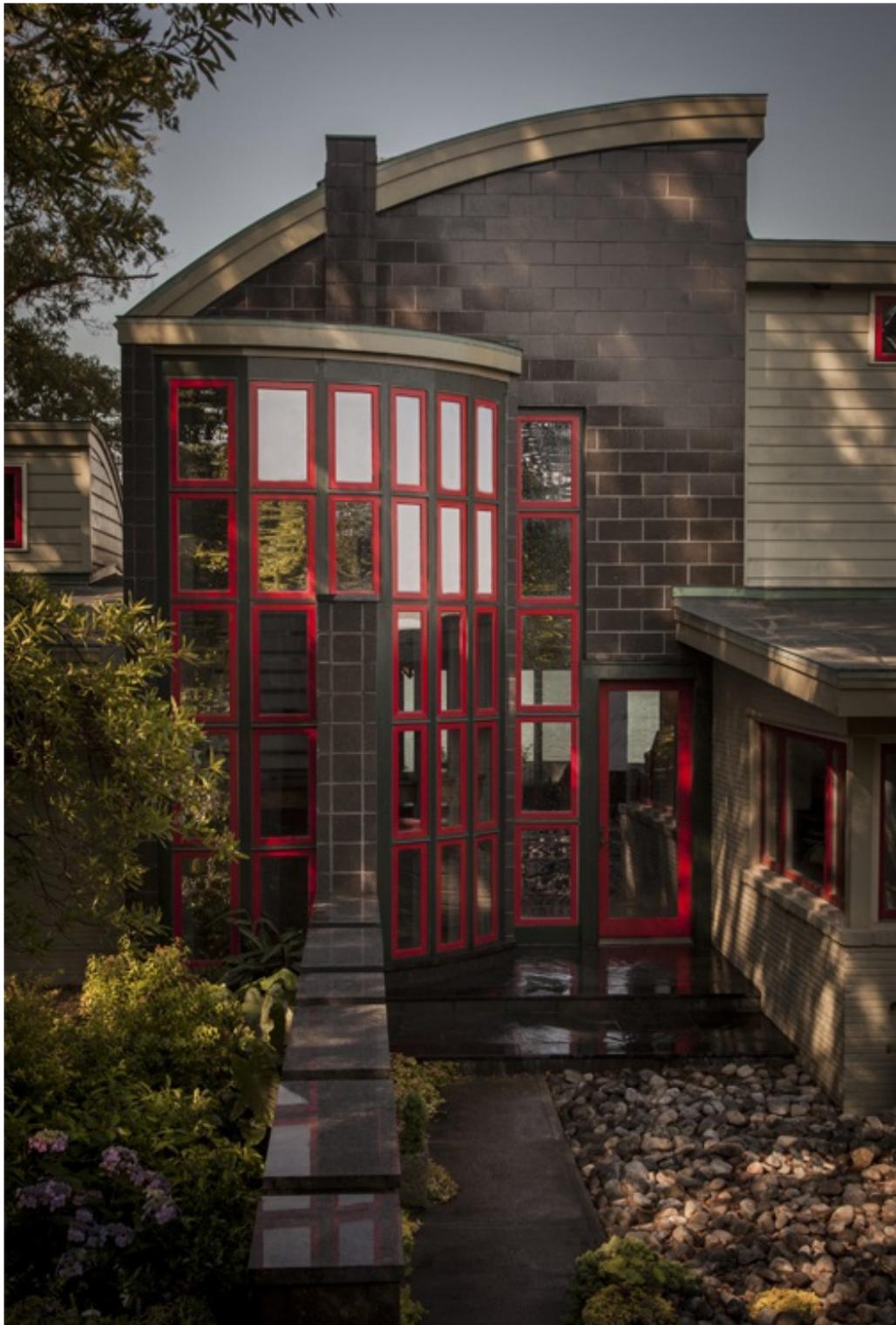
Thus begins the collaboration. First the listening, then the sketching, then the ideas sent to the client and the client responding, then more ideas and more conversation, the possibilities expanding and then falling away, until what's left is what suits this particular family and this particular structure.

Those sketches, those back-and-forths, those moments of inspiration have changed the lives of families and congregations, the affluent and the lowly, the elderly and those barely above homelessness, the people who daily walk through doorways and into spaces designed by Deal.

Deal is owner of Pentecost, Deal and Associates, an architectural firm he bought from the well-established Ray Pentecost in 1987. It's a business built on word of mouth, and Deal can drive through neighborhoods pointing out a kitchen addition he did here, a second floor there, a complete rehab around the corner - hundreds of houses, schools, churches and other buildings throughout the area, each designed to meld the existing building with the clients' needs and dreams. "It takes a lot of focused listening, not just to what they say but what's between the lines," he says. "To me that's the most interesting thing I do, trying to get inside the head of the client and interpret what they want in their house. It's a very personal thing."

He visits their home and watches how they use their space. He asks them to bring in pictures of what they'd like. He studies the neighborhood, the piece of property, the bones of the building, all the while percolating ideas. It's a process that generally takes half a year.

"The sketch is just the starting point, so when you go from that one to the next it's a series of iterations that evolves into something that's totally who they are," he says. "Not who I am, who they are."



In 1987 Norfolk Southern's David Goode was transferred rather suddenly from Roanoke to Norfolk to run the railroad, and he and his wife, Susan, bought a neglected ranch house in Algonquin Park, right on Tanner's Creek. The first thing they saw when they walked in was a wall. The windows were small, the rooms were dark and the yard was so overgrown they could barely see the water.

"It was hideous when we bought it," says their daughter Christina.

But they could see the potential, and on the advice of a neighbor they called Deal.

The first thing he suggested was that they knock out the entryway wall and open the dark living room and dining room into a sunny salon.

“It’s the whole notion of coming into the space in that front foyer and making the angle of vision as wide as you possibly can,” Deal says.

He talks of light, of opening the oculus in the vertical dimension, of stacking one set of windows on top of another so light penetrates farther into the room. At the Goodes’ he added skylights to a dark den, and custom-made clear-story windows high in the wall that let in light but also frame the contorted branches of the live-oak trees outside as if they were art.

Over the course of more than 25 years he has raised the roof on part of the house to add a second floor to accommodate the Goode teenager’s need for a place to hang out with her friends, turned a wing of the house into an expansive library and added a master bedroom wing with a gallery wall designed to showcase some of the Goodes’ extensive collection of paintings. The long relationship shows in how the Goodes and Deal talk over each other and laugh about bumps and successes in the process. The Goodes wanted to pull up the den’s terrazzo floor and Deal persuaded them to keep it. Deal wanted to add a second floor on the whole house and put a balcony around it, but the Goodes didn’t think they needed the space. Now they do, and as they talk about it Deal pulls out his piece of paper and writes himself a note.

When Deal suggested building a privacy wall outside the window of the master bathroom the Goodes couldn’t picture it, but now one of their favorite Deal touches is the private Japanese garden right outside the jetted tub. He had seen something similar on a trip to Florida and loved how it let more light and nature into the room and negated the need for curtains.

The Goodes and Deal sometimes joked that they should just tear the whole place down, but now they have a home that’s customized to their wants and needs.

“What he gave us was a place to live,” David Goode says. “There’s a lot of good art in here and we entertain some, but basically this is a living house. We’ve been very happy here.”



Deal was even more bold on a remodel for Toy and Gail Savage, who had moved from their longtime home in West Ghent to a point of land surrounded on three sides by the Lafayette River. The house was built in the '50s, a practical, L-shaped, low-slung ranch with tiny windows across the front and a nondescript entryway.

The Savages planned to spend the second half of their married life there, and they challenged Deal to bring them a big concept worthy of the piece of land. When Deal made suggestions they'd come back and push the envelope further. The roof came off, a master suite and balcony were added, a striking two-story granite-faced wall was built down the middle of the house, dividing the public side from the private side and pulling the visitor from a landscaped front entry court through the house and out to an elevated terrace overlooking the river.

Down one arm of the L he added a copper roof over a curvilinear monitor that hides the heating and air conditioning but also allows natural light down the long hallway. A built-in bookcase swings out as a door, connecting the living room with a more-private den. There's a butterfly-shaped roof over the addition and red frames around the windows.

As the design evolved he plugged ideas into a CAD program and created a picture of what the house would look like when it was done. When it came down to details, though, he got out his pencil.

"The computer is a valuable tool, but it will not ever totally replace the hand-drawn overlay process that records in a very fluid and tactile way the connection between

the brain and the hand of the designer,” he explains in an email. “Exploring alternatives with overlays of onion skin paper frees the mind to consider options that the computer sometimes inhibits.”

The house is so striking it’s a featured photo for a story in *Inform* magazine about the architect Richard Neutra, one of Deal’s inspirations.

Deal grew up in Portsmouth and went to architectural school at the University of Virginia, where the classic Lawn and soaring columns of Thomas Jefferson’s architecture left an imprint on him. He brought some of that to bear when he designed the Ricau gallery at the Chrysler Museum of Art, home to the museum’s collection of marble sculptures.

He wanted it to look like a winter garden, the light diffuse, so he designed a double-layered skylight over the whole gallery, the first to let in light, the second to filter the light to protect the art. He added a swooping stairway to add to the grandeur, and in time designed the rooms below that would be the education workshop.

He’s designed housing for people with much shallower pockets, too, including low-income senior living communities – the Tucker House in Norfolk, Trinity Woods in Emporia and Magnolia Gardens in Suffolk – all of them designed within the tight rules of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

“He and I would just spend hours tweaking and dreaming and trying to figure out how to do something neat within the budget,” says the Rev. Richard Bridgford, executive director of Norfolk Urban Outreach Ministry, which supervises the projects. “We didn’t want these projects to be HUD boxes.”

It was on Deal’s first major job that he learned some of the listening side of his skill. He was redesigning the sanctuary of Holy Family Catholic Church in Virginia Beach, and Father Jim Dorson questioned every thought in the design process. Deal would present something and Dorson would say, “Have you considered this?”

“I was brand new, fresh-minded like a kid in kindergarten,” Deal says, “and he was trying to teach me to explore who they were, how they wanted to go about the liturgy and furnish their space. It was a wonderful experience.”

In Larchmont he updated a turreted Victorian owned by Shep and GiGi Miller into a home nearly twice as big, its family room lined in cypress paneling salvaged when the manor at Sajo Farm was being taken down, Shep’s office walls covered with mahogany paneling that used to grace the walls of the Harbor Club in the Bank of America Building – the goal being to respect and strengthen the home’s connection to the past.

“To me it’s like standing on the shoulders of people who were very good then and just trying to make the home better for today’s lifestyle,” Deal says. His work blends art and math. Each soaring dream has to be drawn on paper in minute detail so craftspeople can turn dreams into brick and wood.

He quotes the renowned architect Louis Khan: “A great building ... must begin with

the unmeasurable, go through measurable means when it is being designed, and in the end must be unmeasurable.”

For Deal the satisfaction, too, is immeasurable.

“It’s the notion of seeing something in your mind, putting it down on paper and seeing it in three dimensions, and then having somebody occupy that,” he says. “There’s nothing more rewarding than to go back and talk to clients and see them using the spaces, because something they never really thought would happen has happened.

“It gets you up in the morning wanting to go to work.”