

INTERIOR DESIGN

A photograph of a modern building's courtyard. The foreground is dominated by a wall made of horizontal wooden slats. Behind this wall, there are some green plants. In the background, a multi-story building with a light-colored facade and a balcony with a metal railing is visible. The sky is blue with some green trees on the left side.

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The Shorthand House



FRANCOIS DE MENIL HAS GIVEN NEW MEANING to the phrase “smart house.” For a residence he created a few blocks from Rice University in Houston, “smart” refers not to cutting-edge computerized building systems, but to the rationale governing the project. The Shorthand House, as he calls it, is one of the architect’s most thoughtfully conceived residences.

Located on a 55-by-100-ft. lot, the Shorthand House seeks to re-evaluate traditional space planning by analyzing the myriad ways in which a client engages a house. This house is designed specifically to encourage its occupant, Elsie Cozens, to explore changing spatial conditions. Originally, the client approached de Menil with fairly standard expectations. She envisioned a house comprising a sequence “of rooms with different func- →

Above and opposite: Exterior views show the house’s rectangular volume finished with white stucco and a mahogany shutter system along the east elevation. The courtyard is composed of Japanese river rocks and concrete pavers set on sand for drainage.

BERTOIA CHAIRS: KNOLL. CONSULTING ENGINEERS: OVE ARUP & PARTNERS. BUILDER: BUILDERS WEST. CONSTRUCTION CONSULTANT: HUGHES BUILDING & DESIGN. LANDSCAPE: EILLIAM HARTMAN.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL WARCHOL





tions attached to them,” de Menil recalls. Her modernist inclinations dictated that her new house would differ from the surrounding works of modest, '50s bungalow architecture, many of which had been enlarged over the years. This expectation of a modern structure allowed de Menil to “translate the program she wanted into something architectural that would enhance the site.”

The architect’s preliminary investigation took cues from the client’s profession as an administrative assistant. “I looked at her shorthand usage,” he says, “and I learned how the Pittman shorthand technique breaks down sound into graphic strokes.” De Menil embraced an analogous strategy for ordering space. Analyzing essential domestic functions both physical and symbolic, the architect approached traditional rooms as “phraseograms for living.” Taking his investigation one step further, he considered adjacencies in terms of “combinatory possibilities” and how the client would effect those combinations. “The process,” he says, “was a powerful tool.”

From its two-story exterior, the house is a deceptively simple rectilinear structure. Limited to a finish choice of stucco or brick by the developer, de Menil opted for the former. Stucco, with its lighter sense of materiality, would allow the project to read as “less mass and more skin,” he explains. The 72-ft.-long ground floor is organized as a continuous living space with one elevation dominated by glass doors overlooking a courtyard of concrete pavers and Japanese river rocks. The envelope is a restrained composition of white walls and ebonized oak floors, with two masses of freestanding maple cabinetry that articulate various zones. All appears incredibly open; the overriding impression is one of sunlight and volume. Yet exploration of the house leads to discovery of the flexibility and complexity just beyond the surface.

Throughout the house, de Menil’s “combinatory possibilities” allow areas to be opened or closed off to one another in response to varying needs and situations. Entering visitors either have visual access →



Opposite, above: The 72-ft.-long ground floor is essentially an open space built on an eight-ft. module. Sliding doors incorporated in the freestanding kitchen cabinetry conceal storage.

Opposite, below: Sliding doors conceal the study’s work surface. Says de Menil, “Within the overall spatial continuity of the building envelope, shorthand ‘rooms’ exist when needed and fold away when not required.”

AALTO STOOLS: ICF. DINING CHAIRS: THONET. BARCELONA TABLE, SLING CHAIRS: KNOLL. LE CORBUSIER SOFA: CASSINA. EAMES CHAIRS: HERMAN MILLER. SAARINEN TABLE: KNOLL.

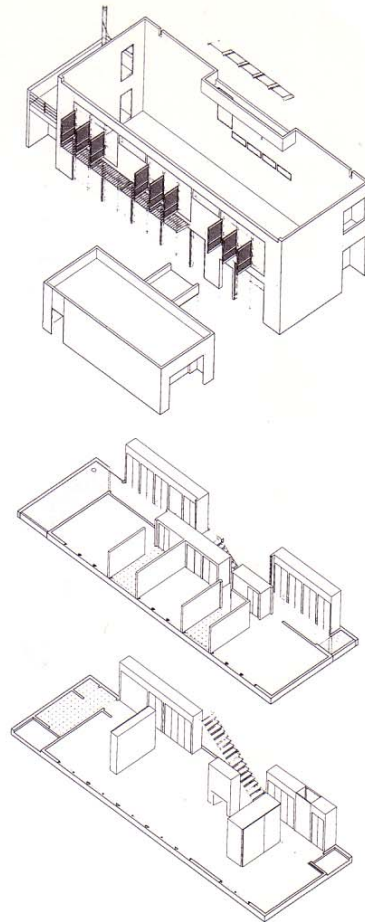
Above: View from the open study through to the kitchen along the courtyard elevation.



to the living area or they can be enclosed in a more formal entry vestibule depending on the position of a pivoting door. A similar device is utilized in the study, located to the left of the entry as the first in the sequence of living spaces. In French, the word for office is *cabinet*, and de Menil engaged in a type of word play to devise the area's solution. Centering the study beyond the first of the wood volumes or cabinets, he built a workplace that can be open or closed to the main living area depending on the position of sliding doors that constitute one face of the cabinetry. At the opposite end of the ground floor, the second block of cabinetry contains sliding panels that open or enclose the kitchen zone while revealing or concealing storage for the client's china and serving pieces. The sliding panels are painted white on the living room face and are veneered in wood on the sides that open to the den or kitchen. This way, de Menil explains, "one reads a consistent treatment of wood volume against white walls."

With its emphasis clearly on architecture, the house needed little in terms of adornment. Furnishings, minimal in quantity, consist of classics by Le Corbusier, Mies, Eames, Nelson, Bertoia and Saarinen as well as old Persian rugs and some simple antiques from the client's collection. The sole piece of art is a Max Ernst painting at the fireplace. →

Opposite: The open living expanse is almost loft-like in its composition. "I came to [the solution] through simple moves," says the architect. "What defines one space from another are things that move."
Above: The study opens onto a private rock garden.





The 3,000-sq.-ft. house, less than a year in construction, holds obvious delight for the client as she generously makes it available to visitors and architectural tours alike. And as for the architect, "it becomes clearer to me what we did the more I experience it," he says. "I feel it's been a breakthrough type of experience." De Menil is currently designing another house in Houston for clients who admired the Shorthand House while driving by it. "The challenge," says de Menil, "is to continue to investigate and work with the suburban site, bringing spatial awareness and potentiality to it."

Credits are shared by project architect James Moustafellos, the project team consisting of Vicken Arslanian, John Blackmon, Stephen Mullins, Amy Nowacki and Lavinia Pana, plus model-maker John Bennett.

—Edie Cohen

Above: The master bedroom, a study in simplicity, is furnished with vintage pieces taken from the owner's previous residence.

Opposite: The second floor's long corridor provides access to the master bedroom and two guest bedrooms. Despite Houston's heat, ample windows and skylights allow sunlight penetration.

