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Great houses do not just happen. The conditions have to be created. Brian Bell and David Yocum of BLDGS have the confidence and perseverance to create the conditions for noteworthy architecture again and again.

Bell and Yocum are Mack Scogin Merrill Elam alums that come from a background of large public projects, which makes them well qualified to push the boundaries of residential architecture. Large institutional projects are very complex and involve many disciplines. On this aspect of their practice, BLDGS says, "You can't deliver a project that has holes in it. You can't leave it to someone in the field to figure out, because there is too much at stake. Our training is to figure out everything, down to the smallest detail. We enjoy it and bring that level of coordination and thinking to the smallest of our projects."

This is good news indeed for residential clients hungry for more than an impressively rendered exterior sketch. Every BLDGS project is fully engineered. Bell and Yocum consider it their obligation to educate the contractor about design intent. "The moment you move off the norm, and start proposing alternative structural approaches or waterproofing details, the contractor doesn't always have that expertise. Our interest is in creating architecture that is not necessarily something we've seen before and that goes beyond standard building techniques, so we have an obligation to figure it out. If we don't it puts the design at risk."

The extra time and effort involved in such an approach is not something in which every potential client will see value. "Our clients have all been very cognizant, very aware and want something different. They want the follow through that assures them of getting what we designed up front on paper. Inventive, perhaps even experimental, architecture is not without due diligence. It takes dedication on both our part and the client's."

BLDGS begins every project with a research phase. It's almost an historical approach, considering previous uses of the site and the people involved, in order to understand the unique conditions around each project. "Research gives us a critical frame of reference. The proposals that come out of this process feel appropriate and suitable and capitalize on the discoveries we've made. We never start a project simply by inventing an idea or approach we are looking for ideas that are as convincing to us as to anyone else."

"The ideal BLDGS client is moved by ideas and believes that while everyone has to put a roof overhead, it's how one does it that counts. Such a meeting of the minds happened recently with clients in Ansley Park. The Ansley Glass House emerged from an old structure the owners loved. The house has a uniquely urban relationship with both the nearby park and the glass towers of the Midtown skyline."

"The big constraint for the Ansley Glass House was the site," Brian Bell explains. "There was limited ability to maneuver. Lot coverage was way beyond the zoning allowance. While this was grandfathered in, our goal was to work within the pre-existing footprint." Yocum remembers how the project started. "The clients asked for two things, to get more light into the kitchen and to put a new stair in the back that connected the 1st and 2nd floors. Eventually, for numerous reasons, this led to replacing the whole back of the house."

"To get from the old addition to the new was not an immediate leap," Bell adds. The decision to keep the original house was not based on a strategy of fitting in with the neighborhood aesthetic. "The clients simply liked the old house," Yocum says. "It has good bones and presence. The old house fits the trajectory of their lives up to this time — they had always lived in old houses. But their kids are now out of college, and they have become increasingly interested in contemporary furniture, art — and now architecture. They wanted a compelling relationship between the old and new."

The glass theme resonates in many ways throughout the house. The owners feel a visual connection with the glass in the surrounding skyscrapers and are also collectors of Steven Rolfe Powell's glass sculptures. BLDGS honored these connections with an addition that utilizes open expanses of glass to let in the city. The new glass-walled bedroom is itself a sculptural element. It's an engineered marvel that hangs within a much larger space, defining the room below it and interacting with the rest of the house in an explicitly non-traditional way.



Besides glass and art, books are also central to the Ansley Glass House. "Instead of a library," Yocum explains, "bookcases are sprinkled throughout the house so the owners are always running into their books. They acknowledge that they may not yet have read them all, but love being surrounded by the things they aspire to."

BLDGS own aspirations include a practice mixed with both residential and large scale public projects. "It's compelling to have a vast contrast in size. There is satisfaction in completing something quickly, but we also enjoy the long view. It's the difference between a two year project and a four to ten year one." Bell and Yocum are energized by projects that are part of the city and spaces that aren't cordoned off or privatized. BLDGS also thrives on constraints. "Part of the beauty is how the constraints have been handled, understanding how things were accomplished. We enjoy having something to push against."

BLDGS measures each structure they have designed against four conditions. "One, that it's build-able. Two, it is within budget. Three, it will stand up over time and four, that it meets our design objective."

When asked to define their architectural style, they shy away from the word modern. They have a tremendous respect for the Modern movement, historically. "It serves as the foundation of our education and how we practice, but the term has become diluted. Today you can't call yourself a modernist because we are past that point in time. It's used as a sentimental term. We are more comfortable with the term contemporary. We are practicing in our time, influenced by things in our time. But we don't think we've achieved contemporary. We're a young practice and are still searching. There are contemporary challenges, technologies and approaches to design that we have yet to fully engage. "Given the speed with which BLDGS is becoming entwined with Atlanta's cultural engage. "Given community, it won't be long before BLDGS has secured their position at the vanguard."

Learn more about the office of architects Brian Bell and David Yocum by visiting www.bldgs.org

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