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*The Chicago architect's  
material inspiration*

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at the MFA*

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MÁZE: SÁMI PEOPLE OF NORWAY

# INSTANT ANALOG

*FOUR ITALIANS, FOUR CAMERAS, ONE PHOTOJOURNAL*



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*THE COMEDIAN ON DESIGNING  
HIS HOLLYWOOD HOME*

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## Living in Nature

### Architect Mell Lawrence's environmental inspiration

"From afar, we see what the forest looks like collectively—a grey silhouette in the distance. Moving closer, details reveal themselves: each individual tree, the leaves, the branches. We can move even closer: as close as the bark, noticing the texture, realizing even at this point, [that] with a magnifying glass or a microscope we could see more," says architect Mell Lawrence, revealing his inspiration to be the symmetry, patterns and colors of nature—all aspects that permeate his home design projects.

Lawrence's Mod Cott guesthouse in Lake Buchanan, Texas, exemplifies how such a deep look at nature inspires his design, a layered perspective that he says "celebrates the extraordinary within the ordinary." As in Lawrence's description of the forest, the Mod Cott house first appears as a simple silhouette. However, when viewed at different angles and distances, more and more is revealed about the home and the ways in which it draws on nature for inspiration. Clean, vertical lines draw the eye toward the sky, with a broad overhang reaching out into the surrounding environment. Large glass panel windows reflect the landscape and bring nature indoors.

Although Lawrence says his choice of materials came from an aesthetic pull befitting of his preference for modern design, they are extremely practical choices for such a warm climate like Austin, where, according to Lawrence, the heat tends to "fight and beat up" on the exteriors of homes, conditions that are too wearing on regular wood and paint. Lawrence's design palette includes low maintenance materials like corrugated and galvanized steel, and poured concrete and limestone harvested by local masons, which provide both durability and affordability.

Another project derived from his natural inspiration is Concrete Studio, made entirely, as the name suggests, of poured concrete. The building appears simple from afar and fits in naturally with the surrounding environment, with a raised concrete walkway that winds through the natural foliage. However, more details are revealed as one moves closer to the building itself, with the exterior of the building resembling magnified bark. The exterior of the building is a series of angular planes that come together to form a boulder-like construct. Layers of concrete overlap and create movement, making an almost Cubist surface out of a typically static material.

*Text by Caitlin Fitzgibbons*

*Opposite: The Mod Cott guesthouse in Lake Buchanan, Texas.*

*Mell Lawrence:* "From afar, we see what the forest looks like collectively—a grey silhouette in the distance. Moving closer, details reveal themselves: each individual tree, the leaves, the branches. We can move even closer: as close as the bark, noticing the texture, realizing even at this point, [that] with a magnifying glass or a microscope we could see more."





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1. Kitchen inside the Mod Cott guesthouse
2. Mod Cott's façade features galvanized steel and large glass panels









*Mell Lawrence: "My feeling about infinite scale in nature makes me feel more free from any doctrine or dogma of style."*

*Layers of concrete overlap and create movement, making an almost cubist surface out of a typically static material.*

- 1 Bathroom in the Mod Cott guesthouse
- 2 Path outside the Mod Cott

Lawrence acknowledges that each of his nature-based projects has a personality all its own. The Wilde Haire Ranch showcases a vibrant red hue on its exterior, created using painted Hardy board, a durable material that holds paint well even in the hot climate. The exterior color was inspired and selected by the homeowner, a graphic designer. This back-and-forth creative process is an aspect Lawrence encourages. "I am drawn to modern and minimal architecture, but clients are often not, and I prefer to respond to clients. That's when the best work is produced," he says. The bold color choice went on to inspire other such projects, including the

lime green Anita house in Austin, TX. "My feeling about infinite scale in nature makes me feel more free from any doctrine or dogma of style," Lawrence says.

Just as nature continues to evolve, Lawrence continues to look for what inspires him—starting with a deeply rooted foundation and aiming for limitless growth. ❧

*Caitlin Fitzgibbons is currently living and working in Chicago, studying and performing improv, and writing a people-watching column for [www.UPChicago.com](http://www.UPChicago.com)*