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Sisters' Retreat

by MATT FAJKUS, AIA

"Light, space and order—these are the things that humans need just as much as they need bread or a place to sleep." Le Corbusier's observation of these three essential elements comes to mind when visiting the Sisters Retreat pool house and pavilion by Mell Lawrence Architects. Though the project possesses the typical attributes one might associate with a small recreational program, the unique quality of the design is manifest both in the overall layout as well as in its materiality and detailing, all of which embrace light in nuanced ways.





PROJECT Sisters' Retreat, Austin

CLIENT Greig and Kim Coates

ARCHITECT Mell Lawrence Architects

DESIGN TEAM Mell Lawrence, FAIA; Krista Whitson, AIA; Kim Furlong; John Castore

CONTRACTORS Nick Burkhalter Builder (Phase 1), CL Carson (Phase 2)

CONSULTANTS Structures (structural); Wes Lane + Mell Lawrence Architects (lighting)

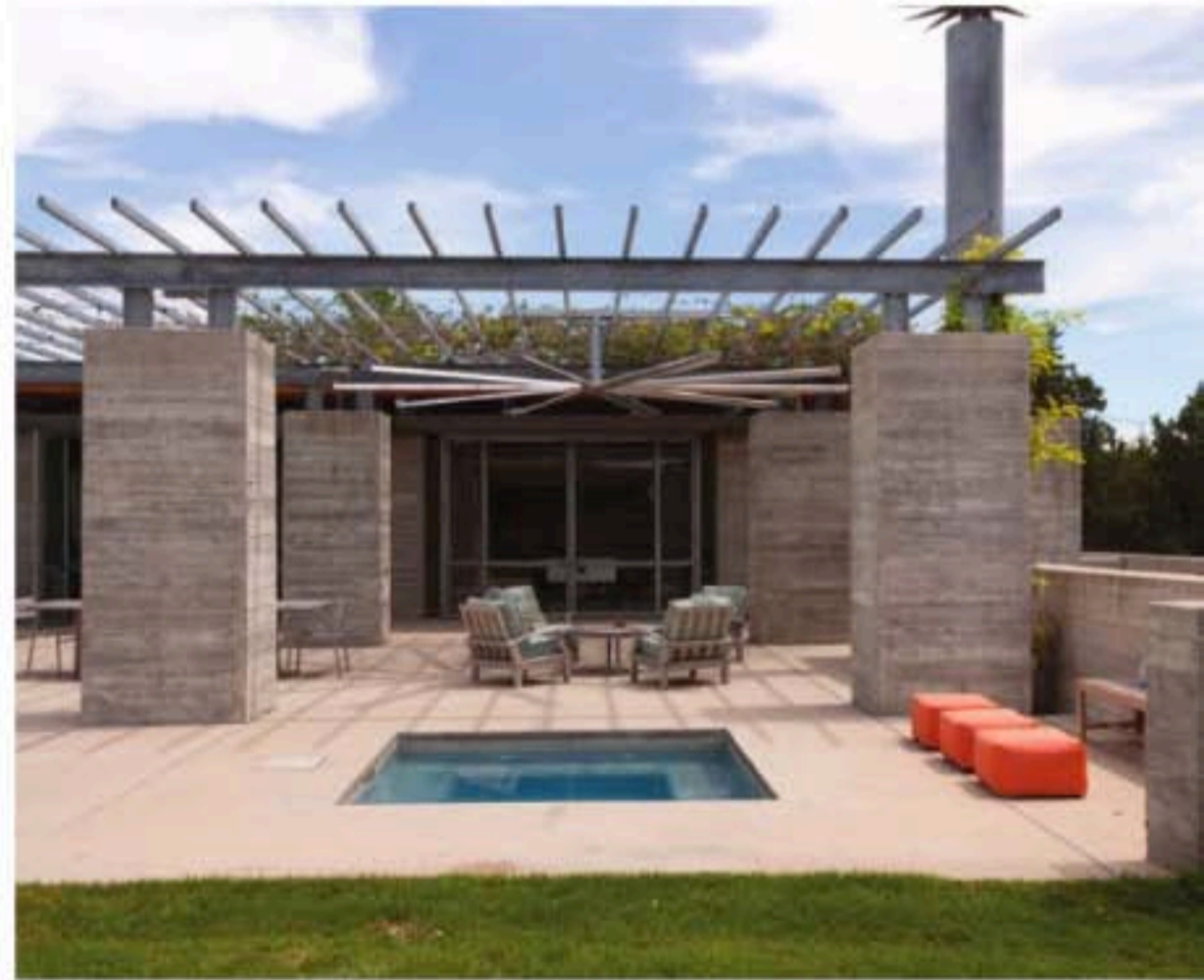
PHOTOGRAPHERS Mell Lawrence, FAIA; JH Jackson Photography

Located on a semi-urban 7.5-acre lot more than a few miles west of Austin, the project encompasses a shared pool house and play area for the families of two sisters, set amongst their small compound of homes. The site, surrounded by tall grass and within walking distance of Lake Austin, is reached by a short meander from the residences. Seen from a distance, the concrete columns are pronounced against a background of dense cedar. Harkening back to primitive forms, these monoliths appear almost as ruins in the landscape, until a closer view reveals a more intricate composition.

Upon reaching the site, the visitor encounters a concrete plinth that negotiates the sloping grade and creates a stage for the superstructure. From this vantage point above the tall grass, the structure unveils itself as an essay on form, light, and shadow. While the architect describes the layout as simply "two parallel hypostyle halls: one covered by a steel trellis, the other enclosed," the insistent rectilinear forms and massing establish a dialogue in the landscape and set up a framework for activity. The small enclosed volume – containing a small kitchen, bath, and lounge – opens to an outdoor fireplace, kitchen, patio, and bocci court. At the exterior space, the mass of the 3x4-foot, cast-in-place concrete columns is offset by the lightweight, galvanized steel trellis supported above. The trellis is partially covered with mustang grape vine, its organic lines contrasting with the rigid contours of the man-made structure. The vines also act as a shivering sieve that filters rays of sunlight through their broad leaves, which also produce a pleasant rippling sound in the breeze.

Of course, the careful consideration of light and shadow is by no means new. Eighteenth-century painters deliberated the complementary phenomena in detail, with the debate hinging on the local distribution and proportion of light and shadow. The discourse resulted in an agreed-upon three-point scale consisting of lights, semi-tones, and shadows. Although light and shadow were quantified with mathematical accuracy, the measurements neglected the effect of material surfaces and ignored how texture can fracture light. And that is precisely the point where the structural character of the Sisters' Retreat transcends scientific theory. For example, the board-form concrete columns were intentionally constructed with pronounced gaps between each plank in the formwork, which produced deeply extruded horizontal ribs in random patterns across each face. This technique emphasizes textural changes in direct sunlight, and varying shadows define and amplify the richness of the concrete masses – the columns as well as the plinth – throughout the day.

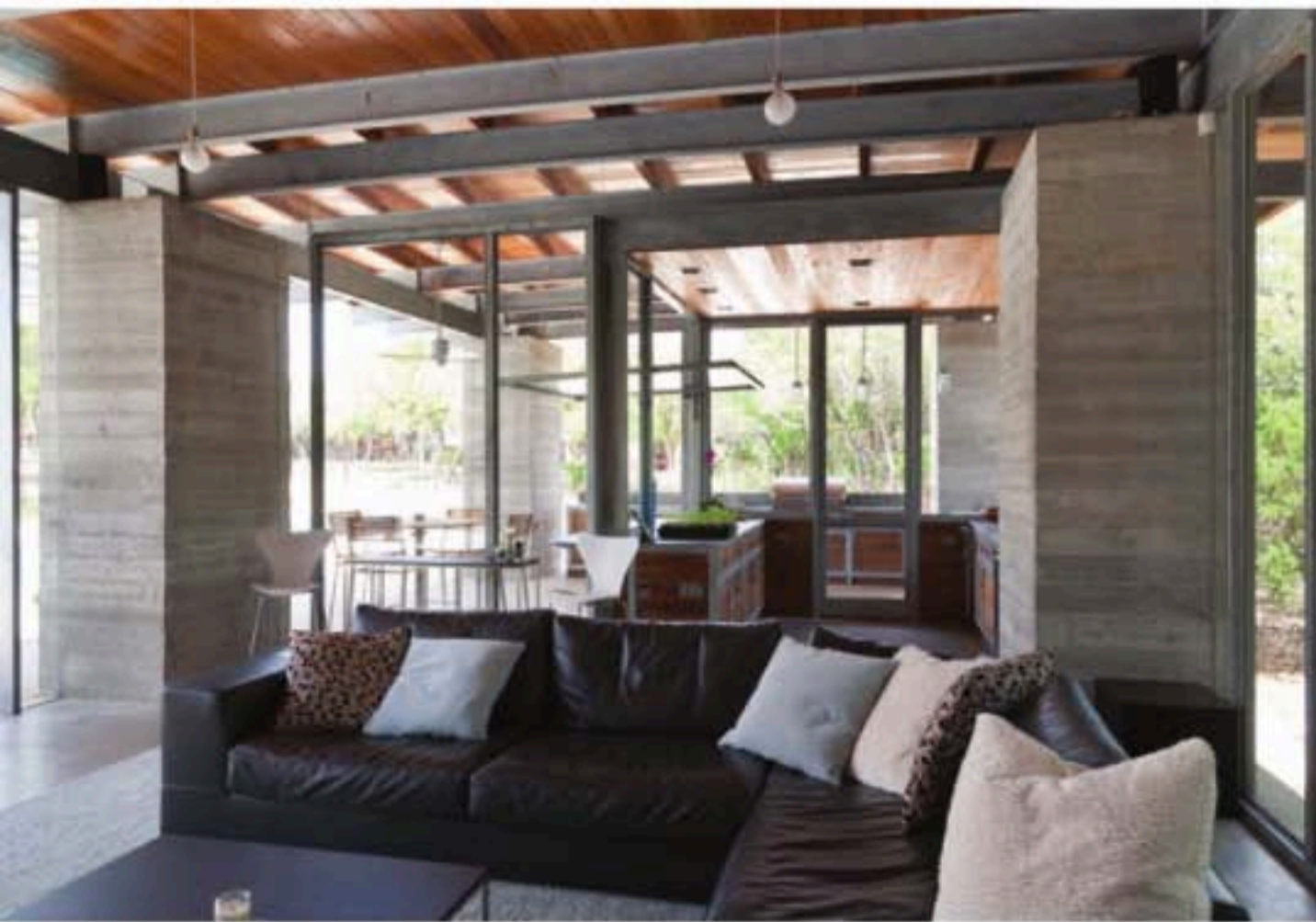
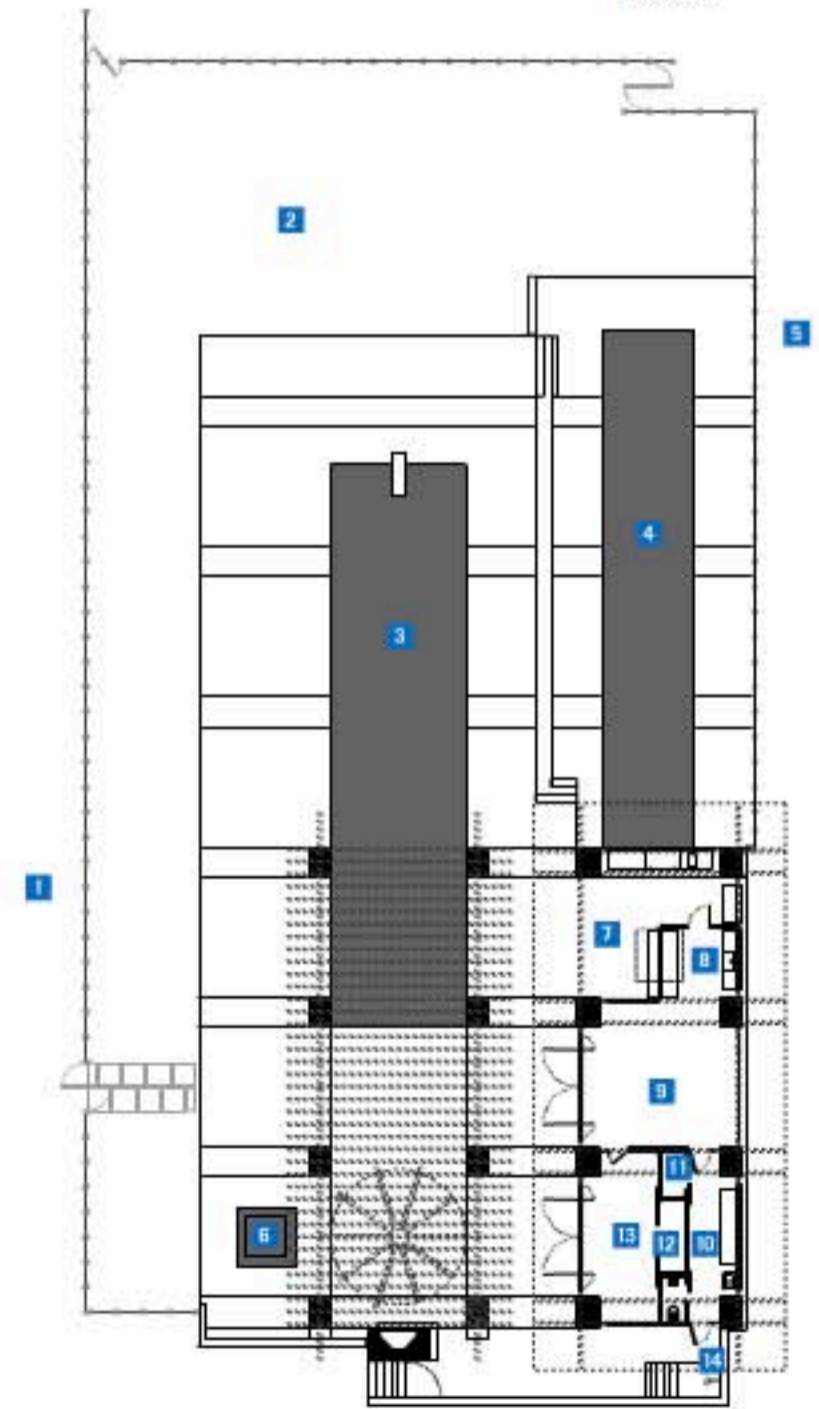
The philosopher Roberto Casati speaks of the many sides of perceived shadows – referring to them as "cognitive fossils" – and suggests that the appearances of shadows are highly elusive. He claims everything that has a form is material, except shadows, which are pure form without history or memory. Sisters' Retreat follows that logic, with light and shadow used as a fundamental basis for the design. Here, the architect composed with light, choosing to embrace shadows by deploying the unpretentious material and unorthodox construction assembly. His project stands defiantly opposed to the homogeneously consistent ambient light characteristic of many contemporary buildings in which diffuse daylight, while appropriate in certain situations, often eliminates shadows, as well as brightness or glare, within the space. Lawrence's design instead capitalizes on the ephemeral nature of light and its transition between shade and shadow. This visual ebb and flow was important to the architect and was largely achieved by the trellis structure and its vines working in concert as





SITE PLAN
 ■ EXISTING
 ■ SISTERS' RETREAT

FIRST FLOOR PLAN
 1 MEADOW
 2 LAWN
 3 POOL
 4 BOCCE COURT
 5 WOODLAND
 6 SPA
 7 BAR-B-Q AREA
 8 KITCHEN
 9 ENTERTAINING ROOM
 10 BATHROOM
 11 CLOSET
 12 STORAGE
 13 GAME ROOM
 14 SHOWER



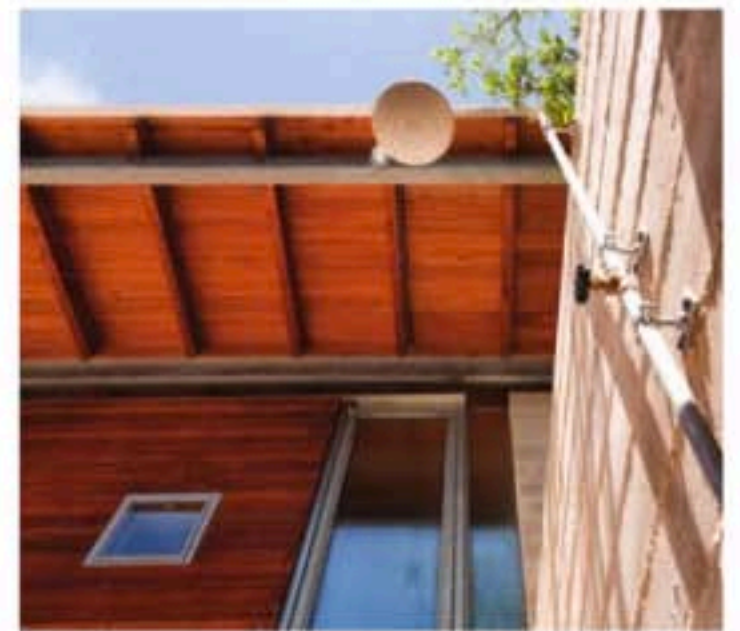
a highly controlled patterning device that animates the spaces with sun and shade throughout the day. Under the trellis exists an outdoor dining area refreshed by an 18-foot-diameter industrial fan that also serves as an effective bug deterrent.

A tall fireplace terminates the exterior axis, its galvanized metal flue affixed atop a hearth of solid board-form concrete with signpost bolts through a large steel plate. This straightforward assemblage is offset by the whimsical expression of a sunburst-shaped chimney cap. Other architects might be more reticent. Despite such playfulness, which shows through in Lawrence's gregarious personality, he is serious about the architectural tectonic and is invested in the rigors and logic of building assembly. Case in point: to reinforce the grid, all columns were held off of window frames to remain unencumbered, allowing the enclosed areas to seemingly float within the interstitial spaces. The primary structure of cambered steel lateral members supports fir beams and cypress decking. Oversize pivoting steel doors and windows provide cross-ventilation and connect indoor rooms to their outdoor counterparts, blurring the line between inside and out. The small enclosed space, designed two years after the construction of the open-air trellis and pool, does have heating and cooling, though the mechanical system is only intended to be used as the exception. The entire structure, including the interior, was also designed to be indestructible, at least to the extent that all fixed interior surfaces and materials can be hosed down when needed.

The design is a constructed framework for recreational rituals, enabling them, but not overdetermining them by imposing a stylized environment in which the user feels obliged to conform to the behavioral preconceptions of the architect. However, the unpretentious yet careful construction and materiality propel the project beyond an exercise in minimalism. The desaturated tones of the material palette are intrinsic in the true nature of each respective material, as there are no painted surfaces nor veneers throughout. Rather than being simply reductive, the restraint from architectural "flair" is meant to achieve a state of quietness. Thus becalmed, the occupants can fully enjoy the surrounding landscape and the sky above, and perceive the circadian passage of light through all of the shades between daytime and dark.

At night, the enclosed part of the program glows and casually draped strings of lights playfully dangle across the structure, and in one instance cling to a nearby tree. Light subtly glistens off the crushed oyster shell surface of the bocce court. Occupants can bask under various levels of sunlight and warmth by day and under the moonlight and stars by night. The structure allows for an evolving series of seasonal spaces, where multiple occupants can choose different degrees of daylight or shade, or gather in front of the fireplace at night. The design embraces the sun and climate, welcoming the weather in and around the building in varying capacities. The trellis enables a seamless flow through the program, helping the eye to transition from inside to out. The rugged yet refined structure simultaneously protects from and connects to nature and sunlight, providing a moment of repose from hectic lives, in a more meaningful fashion than the word "recreation" implies.

In addition to starting his own practice, Matt Fajkus, AIA, is an assistant professor at UT Austin's School of Architecture.



RESOURCES CONCRETE MATERIALS, RETAINING WALLS, CONCRETE MATERIALS: Boothe Concrete; FENCES: Viking Fence; DRAIN GRATES: Urban Accessories; GALVANIZED STEEL: Spillar Welding; METAL ROOFING: Berridge Manufacturing (Jaeger Roofing); GLASS AND DECORATIVE GLAZING: American Flat Glass; WINDOW FILM: 3M (Austintatious Blinds & Shutters); TILE: Architerra; PAINT: Benjamin Moore; FIREPLACE: Isokern; FANS: Big Ass Fans, Modern Fan Co.; LIGHTING FIXTURES: Alexander Marchant; PLUMBING FIXTURES: Elkay, American Standard, Duravit, Dornbracht, Toto; APPLIANCES: Bosch, Scotsman, Kitchen Aid, DCS, Viking; FURNISHINGS: Jesse, Design Within Reach, Anthony's Fire + Patio, Greenhouse Mall