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*When an architect designs her own house, 'it's like a metaphor, connecting our life with our art'*



THE HERALD-SUN | CODEY JOHNSTON

Architect Ellen Cassilly took three years to design the house she and her husband Frank Konhaus named Cassilhaus, a combination of the couple's names. The house was recently featured in a profile by The New York Times that ran with an online slide show. At top is a south view of Cassilhaus, which overlooks acres of woods along New Hope Creek.

# Art, artists in residence at acclaimed Cassilhaus

BY MONICA CHEN

mchen@heraldsun.com; 419-6636

**CHAPEL HILL** — It's sometimes said that architects have the hardest time designing their own homes.

That certainly held true for Durham architect Ellen Cassilly, 48. Her new house, with a sharp modern design that overlooks acres of woods along New Hope Creek, was built for her and husband, Frank Konhaus, and took three years to design and 11 months to build.

But the end result — an I-shaped house that attaches an artist studio and gallery to the main residential space — is to her and Konhaus a delight and a culmination of their admiration of good art and design.

"It's like a metaphor, connecting our  
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The I-shaped house attaches an 800-square-foot artist studio and gallery to the main residential space.

# CASSILHAUS

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life with our art," said Konhaus, 50, an audio/video engineer who collects modern photography.

The 800-square-foot studio has its own entrance, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. It's connected to the house by a 700-square-foot bridge serving as a gallery of the couple's art collection and providing space for receptions and parties. The residential portion, built with trapezoidal shapes and with a spectacular view to the north, is 2,400 square feet.

The house is located at 6301 Mimosa Drive and is lovingly named "Cassilhaus," a combination of the couple's names. It's loaded with personal touches: ample wall space to display the couple's collection of photographs, a trapezoid-shaped sink and even an outdoor shower on the front terrace.

"The outdoor shower was on the must-have list," Konhaus said.

Completed in November, the house has already received some serious attention, starting with a Triangle Modernist Houses tour that brought hundreds of local architectural buffs, and resulting in a recent profile in *The New York Times* that ran with an online slide show.

Since then, the Web traffic of Cassilly's firm has spiked. Cassilly has seemingly kept level-headed about the attention, saying simply that she hopes it'll lead to more interesting projects in the future.

"If I've got lots of attention but I haven't gotten interesting projects, then it wouldn't be worth it," Cassilly said. "I like good design challenges."

The artist-in-residence aspect of the house was what caught *The Times*' attention, according to Konhaus.

The couple is offering the residency by invitation only and plans to host three artists a year for no rent.

Painter Beverly McIver, who's been in the space since June, said the separation from the main residence provides freedom and independence but the connectivity provides a safety net.

The wooded lot and the architecture creates a peaceful setting, McIver said, allowing her to take a mental break from personal and familial obligations and let her creativity flourish.

"I love the space," she said. "I work harder and faster there. Things seem to come easier."

Cassilly and Konhaus also took special care to design a studio for artists' needs. The main studio space has padded flooring for comfort. Various furnishings in the kitchen

can be moved around for more space, and the studio has its own deck for the artist to step outside and soak in the great view.

"Many of our friends are artists and we love art," Cassilly said. "How better to be around it than to have this?" added Konhaus.

The design scheme incorporated functionality with a trapezoidal design in which the lines of the house, inside and out, do not meet straight 90-degree angles.

"The room just felt very active and dynamic that way," Konhaus said.

Cassilly explained the trapezoids also resulted from a desire to open up to the northern view of the wooded lot as well as to protect Konhaus' photography collection from exposure to sunlight.

"So by its nature, it gets wider to the north and skinnier to the south," she said.

The northern light is brightened with narrow clerestories on the top of high walls and at the bottom of the walls in the gallery.

The couple also installed a cistern and the house has achieved the lowest Energy Star rating available for residential properties.

"This area has the third largest concentration of such modern architecture in the country," said George Smart, director of Triangle Modern-

ist Houses. "Ellen's is one of the newest, most outstanding examples of this design."

The *Times* story was just the latest in a series of high profile activities involving Cassilly and Konhaus. The couple brought French artist Georges Rousse to Durham in 2006 for a much-touted public art project, transforming empty department store space downtown into works of optical illusion and art.

Cassilly, whose business is located in downtown Durham, also oversaw the move and renovation of mid-century architect George Matsu-moto's small, Asian-inspired house in 2005.

Cassilly and Konhaus both settled in the Triangle after working in such places as France and Switzerland. Cassilly used to teach at N.C. State University and, in addition to modern design, has worked on historic renovations and on community spaces like the Durham Farmers' Market. One of her next projects will be for Fullsteam Brewery in downtown.

One of her chief design principles: Build a structure to fit its surroundings. Old farmhouses and sleek modern structures have their own charms in their own environments.

"They're both true to their form and location," Cassilly said.