

Frame of Mind

An architect couple sympathetically adapts a house designed by a Le Corbusier disciple to suit themselves.

BY LEOPOLDO VILLARDI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROLAND HALBE

FOR SEVERAL YEARS, husband-and-wife architects Alejandro Beals and Loreto Lyon walked with gimlet eyes by a modest and unkempt house in their neighborhood of Santiago, Chile. Little of the ivy-cloaked structure could be seen from the street, feeding their curiosity. “We arranged a visit the same day it went on sale,” says Beals, who saw the potential as soon as he stepped inside. “Only then did we learn that the house had been designed by Emilio Duhart.” The couple made an offer on the spot.

Duhart may not be well-known outside South America, but the



The house's structural frame is exaggerated by clerestories and recessed walls (this image).

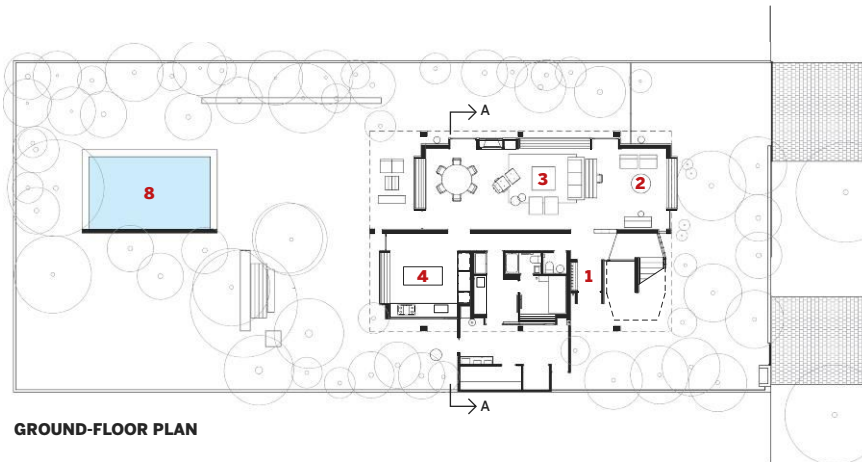
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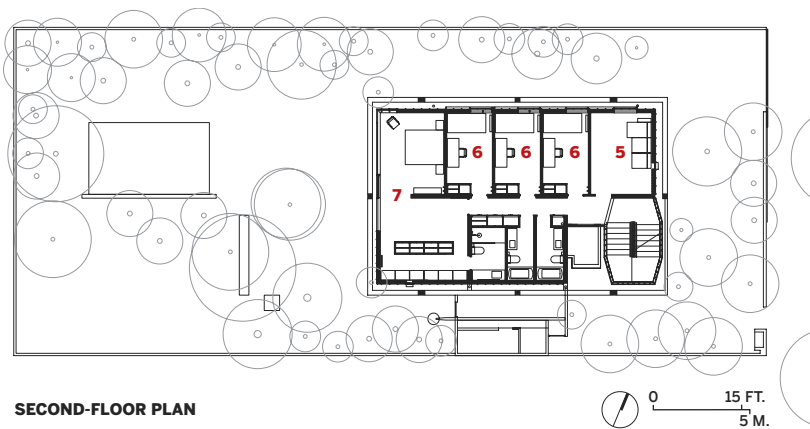
accomplished modernist studied under Walter Gropius at Harvard in the 1940s before going on to Paris, where he worked on the Chandigarh capital complex for Le Corbusier. Upon returning to his native Chile, Duhart produced one of the country's most important landmarks: the headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). In dialogue with the distant Andean topography and encompassing a full city block, this feat of humanized brutalism was also one of structural ingenuity. The building hangs from a massive concrete frame propped up on 28 hefty columns, allowing it to flex during seismic activity. At the heart of the complex, a tower spirals toward the sky. And from 1963 to 1966, as ECLAC rose from the ground, Duhart realized Casa Herman—the very house that Beals and Lyon would refashion as their own some six decades later.

Though entirely different in scale, the two-story, 2,755-square-foot dwelling shares with the commission headquarters several qualities, in particular an externalized structure rendered in raw concrete. A poured-in-place frame consisting of eight perimeter columns and two slabs, plus a single load-bearing wall down the house's long axis, largely free the space inside. This rigid logic is broken by a glazed lantern-like staircase, hexagonal in plan, that peaks above the roofline like ECLAC's conical centerpiece.

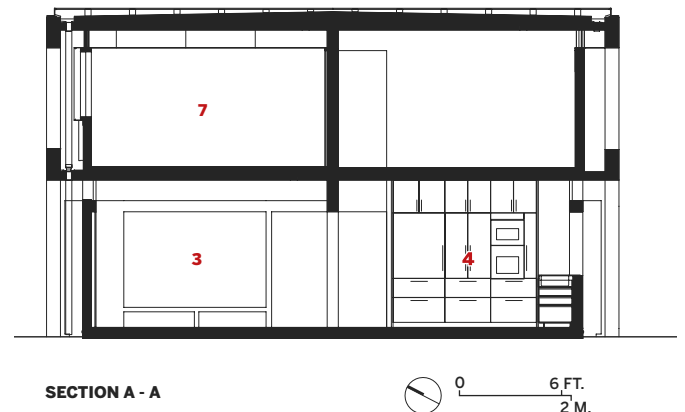
The couple always knew that some reparative work would be necessary. After all, the first owner took up residence in the house for 12 years and then sold it to a family that lived



GROUND-FLOOR PLAN



SECOND-FLOOR PLAN



SECTION A - A

- 1 VESTIBULE
- 2 OFFICE AREA

- 3 LIVING/DINING
- 4 KITCHEN

- 5 STUDY
- 6 BEDROOM

- 7 PRIMARY SUITE
- 8 POOL



The architects replaced the vestibule (above), rebuilt the glazed staircase (above, right and opposite), and changed the flooring (right).

there for 40 more. “By that point, they were having trouble keeping up with maintenance,” Beals says. “We also couldn’t determine the extent of any damage until we took down all the ivy. It was far worse than we had imagined.” The vines had compromised large swaths of already spalling concrete, necessitating careful patching. Termites and rot had hollowed out much of the timber, some of it supporting the staircase and elsewhere used for jambs, surrounds, and partitions. There was much to do.

Luckily for Beals and Lyon, Duhart’s archive is stored at the nearby Universidad Católica de Chile. The couple studiously pored over the house’s drawings. It became clear that the previous owners had made many ad hoc interventions over the years—some at odds with the original design—and that money had seemingly run dry during construction. “We tried to fix what we considered to be shortcomings while reinforcing the elements that had value,” Lyon says. For example, the architects felt comfortable



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Clerestories and large panes in the kitchen (this image) and primary suite (below) brighten the brutalist interiors.



removing or relocating non-load-bearing walls to change the size of various rooms; Duhart had indicated this very possibility by delineating, with dashed lines, several possible locations for them. On the other hand, they found the foyer area less than acceptable—its unresolved connection to the staircase ultimately led to water infiltration. They built a concrete vestibule that more carefully considers the adjacency.

But the most architectonic move involved relocating the enclosure. Brick infill, flush with the external frame—one of those flawed interventions—was removed. In places, Beals and Lyon replaced it with large windows, set back from the perimeter as in Duhart's original drawings, at once honoring his intent, heightening the structure's expression, and introducing more daylight. Where privacy is needed, new tongue-and-groove panels offer it.

With this decision and others, Casa BL, as the project is now called, is much brighter inside than its previous iteration. Partition walls were also lowered to introduce clerestories that allow light deep into the plan. Underfoot, dark red terra-cotta tiles were swapped for lighter travertine slabs. The angular staircase, once encased in frosted glass and lined with carpet, now features more transparent wired glass and blond wood treads. And without need of a maid's quarters, they adapted it as an open kitchen with backyard views.

Coming during the pandemic, the process was expectedly slow. "But, in a way, this allowed us to be more attentive and thoughtful—it was like working with an architectural model that we continuously changed at one-to-one scale," says Beals. Only a few years ago, the curious little house was nothing more than a mystery. Now, after all this work, for each other and their family, the couple's careful rehabilitation gives new meaning to the phrase "a labor of love." ■

Credits

ARCHITECT: Beals Lyon Arquitectos — Alejandro Beals, Loreto Lyon

ENGINEERS: ByB Ingeniería (structural); Manuel Gutiérrez (heating); Patricio Moya (plumbing)

GENERAL CONTRACTORS: Fariel Aravena, Juan Sánchez, Celestino Sepúlveda

CLIENT: Alejandro Beals, Loreto Lyon

SIZE: 2,755 square feet

COST: withheld

COMPLETION: June 2024

Sources

INTERIOR FINISHES: Keim, Osmo (paints/stains)