

Pitch Perfect

Tall Architects' gabled residence in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, harmonizes varied forms.

BY SUZANNE STEPHENS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW WELCH

IT IS UNEXPECTED to find a new house in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, where the end elevations subtly evoke the facades of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's Nantucket and Block Island houses of the early 1970s and '80s. Not so long ago, these kinds of gables and paned windows were frowned upon for being nostalgic. But, in recent years, such Postmodern elements have been popping up in otherwise contemporary projects, such as this one, called Rayburn House.

In the case of the 3,000-square-foot, three-story house, the designers—Tall Architects' founding principals Mark and Madison Talley—did not merely have Venturi and

Scott Brown's architecture in mind. They also credit Herzog & de Meuron's Blue House (1981) in Oberwil, Switzerland as being particularly influential, with its steeply pitched roof, overhanging eaves, and quirky placement of circular windows. As Mark laments, "Modernism stripped away the playful, leaving only expansive window planes and flat roofs." Madison adds, "It's hard not to pull from architects we admire."

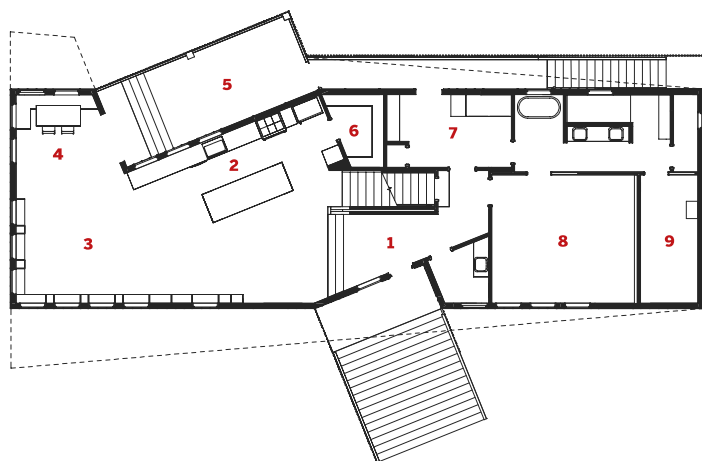
The Talleys, who opened their office in 2014 after each graduated with a B.Arch. from Mississippi State University, had another reason to be drawn to peaked roofs and small, syncopated fenestration: the husband-

and-wife team was adhering to the construction guidelines for scale, proportions of windows, materials, and colors given by the historic-preservation commission of this picturesque Southern town.

The clients for the Rayburn House (named for the street it faces) are Caroline Croom and Julian Rankin, a couple with two children. They had bought the small corner site, about a quarter of an acre, with an existing cottage. But, since the property was in a "special flood-hazard zone," the architects and owners thought it best to replace the old house with a new one, where the main floor would be elevated about 8 feet above the ground.



HOUSE OF THE MONTH



FIRST-FLOOR PLAN

- | | | |
|-----------|----------|-------------------|
| 1 ENTRY | 4 DINING | 7 LAUNDRY |
| 2 KITCHEN | 5 PORCH | 8 PRIMARY BEDROOM |
| 3 LIVING | 6 PANTRY | 9 CLOSET |

Rankin, an arts and communications consultant and author, and Croom, an art collector and consultant, met the Talleys through their involvement with a local museum. “We had a rapport before starting,” says Madison, who notes Croom’s “focused eye” and welcomed her involvement in selecting furnishings, finishes, cabinetry, and colors.

Tall Architects clad the wood-frame house in humidity-resistant cementitious boards and battens, placed according to an idiosyncratic rhythm of broad and narrow intervals. Then the firm enclosed the ground level for parking cars with a screen of wood slats, and used corrugated metal for the roof—both gestures to the budget and a vernacular palette.

To further keep costs down, the architects began with a simple rectangular plan, but angled a protruding screened porch out from the elevated main floor to the west. On the east side, facing Rayburn Avenue, they carved out an entrance, which, in turn opens onto a broad stairway projecting to the ground at another angle. In one more such gesture, the architects placed an open kitchen on a diagonal to the living area. Most of the rooms, however, are laid out on an orthogonal grid, and some levels are dropped or elevated slightly to enhance the spatial dynamic.

After visitors mount the outside stairs to the entrance vestibule, they climb several steps to the living area, where the ceiling vaults upward. Beyond the living area is a dining nook created by an arched ceiling of drywall, and from this point a few more steps lead down to the screened porch. The level changes are tricky, the architects admit, but they are important to add a sense of surprise when walking through the interior. “We wanted lower and higher ceilings to create distinct spaces,” says Mark. The duo also note that the manipulation of levels and apertures promotes cross ventilation along with more opportunities for daylight and views.

Whereas the parents have their bedroom on the north end of the first floor, the children can claim their own turf on the top level. In addition to their bedrooms and a guest room, they have a playroom, where a large unglazed opening in the south wall encourages the two boys to keep in touch with their parents in the kitchen and living area below. Near the playroom, they can enjoy a balcony that is open to the outdoors by virtue of a wide, V-shaped notch in the roof.

The architects’ playful allusions, veering between past and present approaches to



architecture, convincingly demonstrate why Tall Architects is included in the exhibition of emerging practices *A South Forty: Contemporary Architecture and Design in the American South*, at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. (on view through winter 2026). The Rayburn House has a quixotic freshness that stands out in its environs without being showy. And it reminds us of Philip Johnson's famous saying "You cannot not know history." But you should experiment with that history as well. ■

Credits

ARCHITECT: Tall Architects — Madison Talley, Mark Talley, principals; Morgan Warmath, studio director

ENGINEER: Terry Moran Engineering (structural)

CONSULTANT: Architerra (landscape)

CONTRACTORS: Round 2, Dennis Frulla

CLIENT: Caroline Croom and Julian Rankin

SIZE: 3,080 square feet

COST: withheld

COMPLETION DATE: January 2024

Sources

ROOFING: Galvalume

WINDOWS/DOORS: Sierra Pacific, Pinkys

INTERIOR FINISHES: Sherwin-Williams (paint); Fireclay, Popham Design (tiles)



A staircase (above, left) leads to a vestibule with niches (above) and the combined living/dining area (this image). The childrens' rooms are upstairs (opposite).