

American Pragmatist

Laban Wingert's Architecture



“My whole demeanor is really one of realism and the facts,” says Laban Wingert. “The facts,” which he pronounces with a terse gulp, makes a listener flash on Karl Malden, but substitute Malden’s raincoat and porkpie hat with the sporty vest and bright *mouchoir* Wingert’s got on. He pops a CD of show tunes into the car stereo and zooms his black Volvo uphill, fast. The vernacular of our Mora County surroundings, as we race through the sere hills, pleases him: a few adobe ruins, old barns, pitched northern New Mexico roofs. “One more white picket fence, I was going to *scream*,” is how he describes a drive through another countryside, in Brewster, New York, where a friend lives. Luckily, when he got to her house, “she didn’t have one,” he says. Shout of laughter.

The architect loves his Volvos, is fond of watching sailing races in the south of France, and is an inveterate storyteller. The subjects for an afternoon’s ramble might include novelist Henry James and the civilizing nature of architecture, Danish modernism and the social programs behind it, or the minor scandals of institutions and boards. With a slightly mischievous glint—the Red Baron behind the wheel—Wingert manages to be small-c catholic in his interests, with a grand sense of humor. But he’s dead serious on one point above all: that architecture exists, first and foremost, to answer human needs.

Wingert thus identifies himself as an architect-programmer. When he studied architecture at the University of Texas at Austin in the late '50s (graduating in '63), “the professors pushed Mies.” He says he wasn’t buying. >

ILLUSTRATION BY AARON BOHRER





His pragmatist self sat uneasy with the hypothetical nature of much architecture. As a thesis project he designed a Presbyterian church—and had to immerse himself in the theology in the process. Although the church was never built, this initiation was useful later on, he notes, when art patron Virginia Dwan asked him to be the architect of Dwan Light Sanctuary in Montezuma, New Mexico (see page 92).

Wingert's career as a programmer first gained steam in Houston in 1965. "Caudill Rowlett Scott was the first architecture firm that codified programming as a process, which caught my pragmatic attention," he says. Working for CRS for nearly six years (1965–1970), Wingert gained experience that led to international consulting work in the 1970s. He planned new housing communities in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, in response to the doubling of oil production. Wingert also had begun to live in Santa Fe, to which artist Forrest Moses had introduced him in 1969.

Wingert's first major Southwestern institutional client was the National Center for Atmospheric Research in

Boulder, Colorado—exemplary, he says, of a think tank that wanted a new building but didn't think about what was really needed. A bigwig of the organization told the architect, "I want this building so complex that you cannot find my office." That remark's results proved "disastrous," says Wingert, never one to mince words about buildings gone bad. "After eight years, they threw their hands up in exasperation at the building's dysfunction," he says. His role was in part the diplomat, reconciling competing interests; in part the researcher, bearing notepads and questions—a process of architectural information-gathering that makes a programmer march.

In addition to institutional work, he began some 25 years ago to design and remodel houses for art collectors, whose programs, he relays cheerfully, often tend to start with the line, "I just bought this awful house." Today his client roster includes an esteemed list of patrons and collectors—Thaw, Phillips, Dwan—some of whom commission art galleries in the public realm and also lead private lives in which they can be peripatetic about real estate.

Wingert acknowledges that the estimable art-collecting crowd became his bread and butter in part through luck and timing. But he is also manifestly proud of the work he did in 1977 for New Mexico's Legislative Finance Committee, when a study he had worked on recommended buying the land on which the current expansion of the downtown History Museum is taking place. Relates Wingert: A good programmer must be attuned to the present *and* anticipate the future.

So don't get lost in reverie as you soak in the red of these ranch buildings that seem to borrow the sedge fields from an Andrew Wyeth painting. Wingert wants to be sure you understand that this is not just affectation: "Looking for the detail is the programming part of site analysis," he observes. At Twin Willows Ranch, that detail was an existing barn along the property's boundary with the road. Its iron-rich-blood color and corrugated patina make it venerable with character. Often Anglos lack reverence for the rural New Mexico past, notes Wingert, which he finds lamentable.

Ultimately, through the four projects shown in this photo essay—Dwan Light Sanctuary, Twin Willows Ranch, and two residences—it is apparent that programming leads to a self-assurance for this architect that has been true since his first big job, in 1964, working on the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. "Architecture really is a bit of sociology," Wingert says. "And as a programmer, I can have confidence that everything I've designed is there for a reason."

The stables (above) and foreman's quarters were in the first phase of the Twin Willows Ranch development in Mora County, about 100 miles north of Santa Fe. Wingert took his color cue from an existing red barn at the roadside (pictured on the previous spread). Says the architect-programmer, "I wanted to avoid the Anglo coming in, totally modifying what's there, which tells the locals, 'We don't like it the way it is.'"

This high-valley ranch, a quarter horse facility, sits on 3,000 acres. The tall walls of the stables and working areas break the wind that blows across the plains. The foreman's quarters (not shown) nearby connects to greenhouses that grow winter vegetables.



Above: An existing “modest ranch house,” says Wingert, was also on the property when his client bought it. Like the red barn, that house also provided a sense of history for the expansion that Wingert designed and had built of Rastra blocks. He envisioned the house’s gardens confined inside stone walls. An extrawide front door (opposite, top left and right) and spacious portal (bottom), along with the house’s more puritan lines, speak to context and shelter in the open landscape. The house wraps around an interior courtyard that permits dogs to go outside at night without exposure to the frontier.

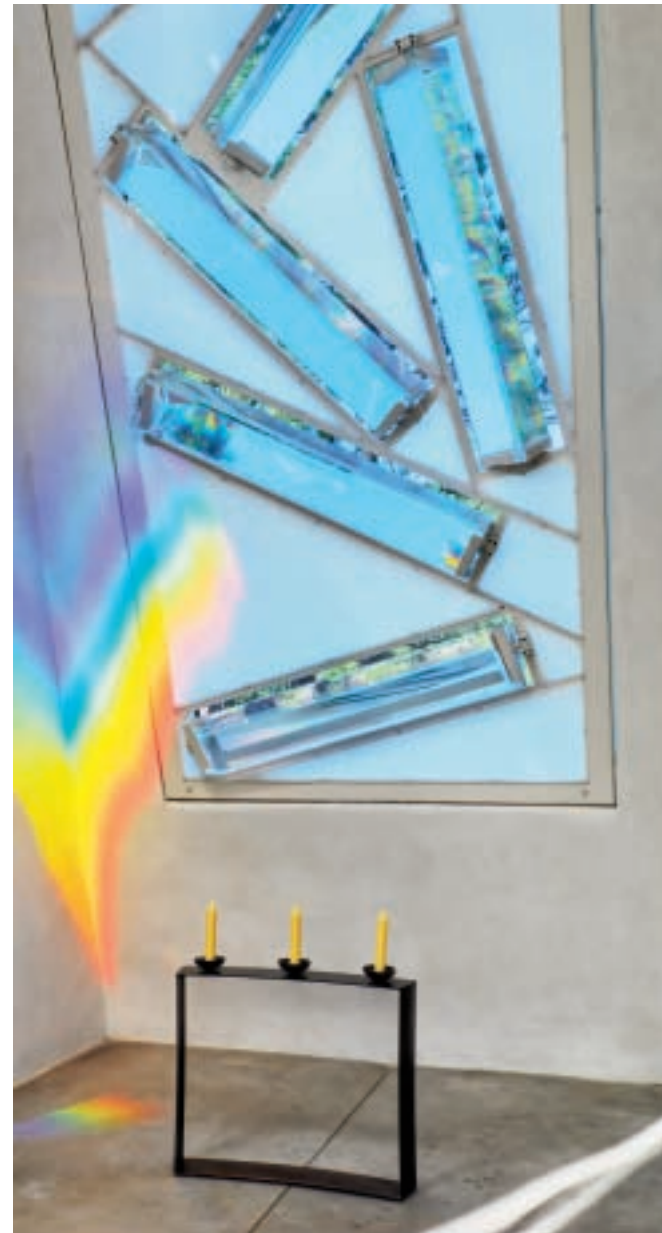
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A windswept pastoral: Hand-crank French casement windows (above) open out to the fields from the master bath. Opposite: The kitchen and dining area (top) extend to the great room (bottom), which houses the owner's stellar photography collection. Wingert also acts as interior designer—he chose French matelassé coverlets in a Provençal village for the house's beds and is shopping for a "gypsy tent" that is currently made only in Southern France. The pale blue-gray of these tongue-and-groove ceiling planks imitates the subtle gradations of daylight on a summer afternoon.





Dwan Light Sanctuary: The Universality of 12

The sun, remarks Virginia Dwan, is the driver of all life on earth, the essential giver.

“I was daydreaming,” says the art patron about the conceptual origins of Dwan Light Sanctuary. From her “sitting one day quietly musing on the seeming universality of the number 12” emerged a collaboration between Dwan, artist Charles Ross, and Wingert.

The three of them created a circular building with white plaster walls scored by quadrant lines, prism-shot windows, and a square aperture that frames the North Star. Ross created the Plexiglas prisms, which stud the windows like jewels and break daylight into spectral angles that play phenomenally on the white *bancos* and gray concrete floors. Units of 12 are integral to the sanctuary. There are three windows. Two in the walls, each with six prisms, face

southwest and southeast, respectively. The ceiling aperture has 12 prisms. At night, a visitor can contemplate the North Star through the square glass panel high in the wall by sitting cross-legged inside a circle inscribed on the floor.

“Christ in his halo always wears eight stars; the virgin always has 12,” observes Dwan, noting her interest in the virgin’s association with a more expansive numerology. “There are 12 tribes of Israel, 12 spokes in the Wheel of Life.”

The Light Sanctuary, however, is a nondenominational space for contemplation. The recurrence of 12 across religious and symbolic traditions all informed Dwan’s fascination with the number—yet in envisioning the sanctuary she came to feel conviction that the space should eschew any concrete representation, like the names

of the 12 apostles. The sanctuary is plain yet spectacular, a unity in action of light and the body perceiving. Dwan says, “I’ve come to believe that in essence, all religions are the same.”

Dwan Light Sanctuary was dedicated in 1996 and held a concert by Philip Glass (piano) and Jon Gibson (flute). Two Tibetan mandalas have been created inside it. And when women from Serbia and Croatia held peace talks during the Balkan conflicts at United World College–USA (on whose campus the Light Sanctuary is), Dwan discussed with them the notion of universality. “They didn’t really want to communicate with each other,” she says. To that conundrum, among others, the Light Sanctuary came to seem essential, she expresses, as “a counter move to all the horrors going on in the world.”

The process of imagining the sanctuary and finding the site of United World College–USA in Montezuma, New Mexico, took five years. At the 1996 dedication seven religions were represented, Dwan says. Cornmeal offerings were made, a shofar was blown, petals were strewn, and blessings were heard from a Muslim Pop artist, the abbot from Abiquiu’s Monastery of Christ in the Desert, a Tibetan monk, a Catholic priest, the rabbi who wrote *The Way of Flame*, a Hindu, and a Navajo medicine man.

“Laban made the whole thing work,” says Dwan about the process of designing Dwan Light Sanctuary with artist Charles Ross and architect-programmer Wingert.



Downstairs, upstairs: Tasked with designing a residence for an artist, Wingert converted a Tesuque barn into a clean, two-story loft space. The living room (above) doubles as a working studio for the artist, who makes photography-based mixed media. In the loft bedroom, white walls and clean lines draw the eye out to the tree canopies of the neighboring ranch.



Virginia Dwan likes what she calls “hidden sources of light.” The clerestory that Wingert specified for her Santa Fe living room washes the walls. The pair of golden wings are Mexican; Wingert and Dwan shopped for them at an antiques fair in Santa Fe. At night, downlights from the clerestory continue the illuminating effect. ✿