



## Power House

**A 1920s electrical substation, renovated by architect Gary Cunningham, is a new breed of residence for Dallas.**

Built in 1926 by the local electric company, the substation, now home to the Meyersons (above), was clad in red brick, with a high brick surrounding wall and Neo-Classical limestone details that fit its residential neighborhood north of Downtown Dallas. Adapting to the present, more varied context, Cunningham Architects cleaned the exterior, reglazed the windows, and added a tall gate. A sitting room (facing page) is furnished with Corb chairs and part of the owners' excellent collections of art and photography.

THE house for Morton and Marlene Meyerson marks a watershed in residential design for Dallas and, by extension, Texas. Designed by Cunningham Architects of Dallas, the house occupies a former neighborhood electrical substation built in 1923 by Dallas Power and Light in a mixed residential and commercial area literally on the wrong side of the tracks across from prestigious Highland Park. It's not the sort of neighborhood where one would expect to find one of the city's reigning cultural leaders. (Meyerson headed fund-raising for the soon-to-be-completed Dallas Symphony Hall, and it will bear his name.) Moreover, rehabilitating industrial buildings as luxury housing, while common in the East, is rare in Dallas, a city where the word "old" is used pejoratively.

Although the house's hard-edged materials—and the 20-ton crane hanging in the living room—recall its industrial past, the plan is devised from a prototypical Dallas mansion of the 1920s, according to architect Gary Cunningham. Accordingly, there is a parlor off the stairs on the first floor, with a dining room, kitchen, and library beyond. The second floor is devoted to bedrooms, while the third floor opens up into a grand ballroom.

Cunningham's choice of parti has an interesting resonance, given the client's position in Dallas society. The mansions of the 1920s are monuments to the decade when oil supplanted cattle and cotton as the driving force of the Texas economy, when Texas shed its rural skin and turned predominantly urban. Similarly, the Meyerson house represents a turning point in the 1980s as Texas shifts from an oil-based economy to high-tech manufacturing and services. Meyerson, now a private investor, has participated in that shift as president of Electronic Data Services (EDS), a company that is as much an icon of the new Texas as is its founder H. Ross Perot.

Although the ebb of oil money threatens the Lone Star State's identity, in the Meyerson house the old spirit survives. This is a home for a new breed of silicon-chip cowboy, a place to put up your boots and rest your circuits after battling a decade-long recession. The fact that it belongs to Meyerson, whose image as the duke of EDS was earnestly straitlaced, gives the project a gratifying spin.

His new home was one of five neighborhood

substations, and its brick cladding, limestone, and columned street portal suited then-residential surroundings. The building stood empty for over 20 years, so layers of not only paint and rust, but a foot and a half of guano had to be removed as the first step in reuse. "It was a trash pit when we first saw it. But when I saw the third floor, I could visualize it as a really good place for music, and that did it for me," says Meyerson, who plans to use the space primarily for chamber music.

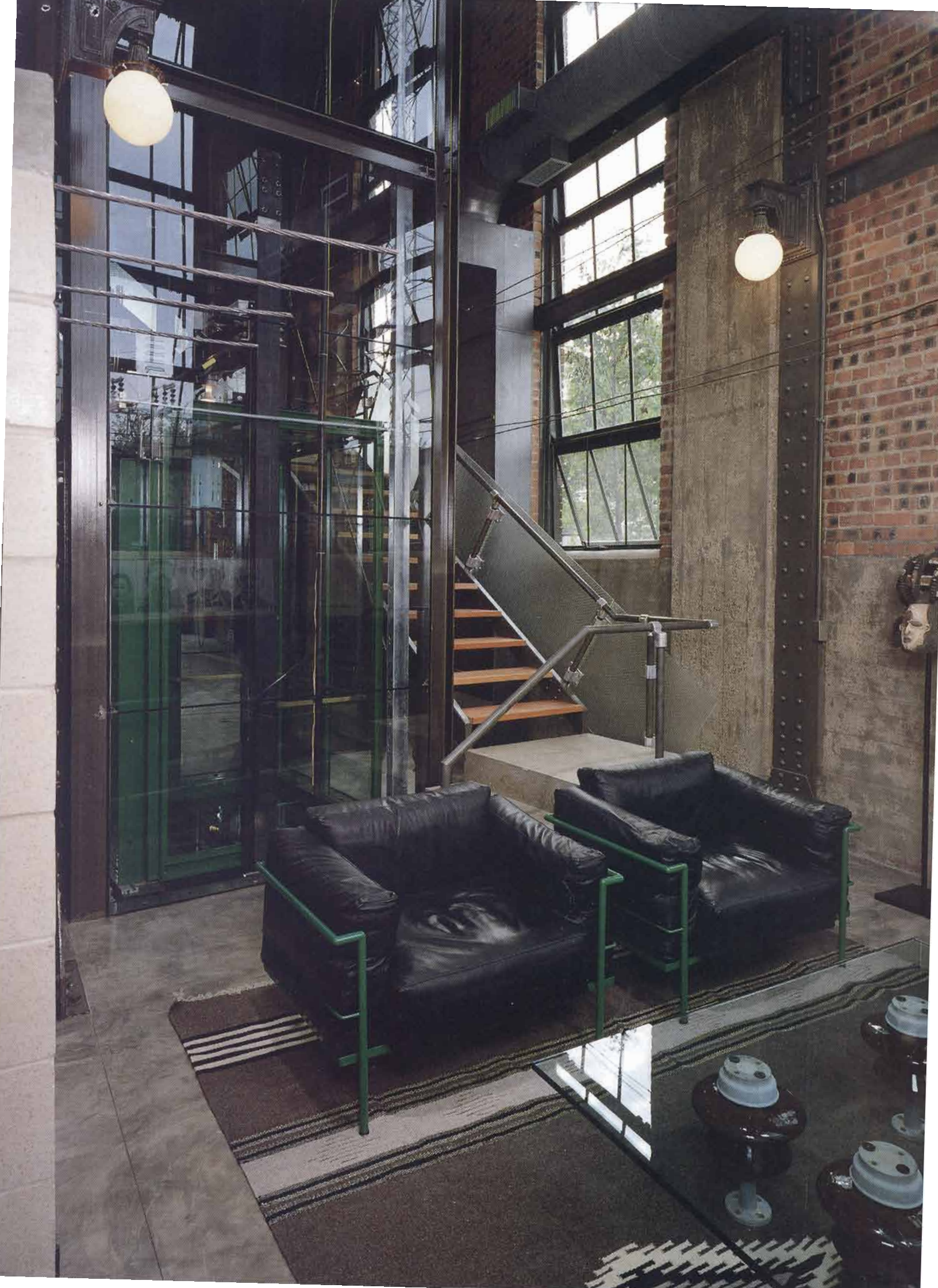
The clean-up process was supposed to buy time for the design to evolve, recalls Cunningham. But the first move in that clean-up ultimately determined all subsequent design decisions. When the first interior column was sandblasted, "the steel color was awesome," says Meyerson. Clients and architects agreed then to simply preserve the steel with a clear finish like that being applied to the brick walls.

Cleaning took five months, most of it spent tediously jackhammering a maze of concrete conduit boxes built into the second and third floors. Respect grew for the building's toughness, its resistance to change. This reinforced the initial decision to let the original materials show. "We began to think about materials and craft more and more," says Cunningham. "They had an integrity and logic that had to be matched." New additions, it was decided, would be built as discrete pavilions, both "to not touch the shell," says the architect, and to create living spaces of a more intimate scale.

With encouragement from the clients, "normal" residential materials were rejected in favor of an industrial palette. The first floor was given a new topping coat of concrete. The second-floor bedroom pavilions were built of limestone aggregate concrete block with glass clerestories. Doors and stair-treads were made of industrial grade fir. Stair rails were constructed of steel pipe and off-the-shelf connectors with bolted-on wire glass. Plumbing and wiring were left exposed. And the crane, which came in handy during demolition, stayed. The violence of alterations was preserved, not smoothed over: thus, when doors were jackhammered through walls, the openings between wall and door frame were glazed, exposing jagged concrete and reinforcing bars.

New elements and evidence of demolition com-

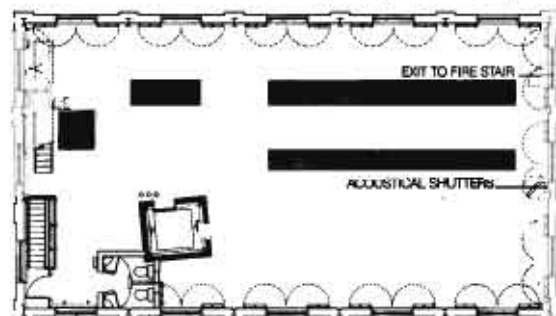
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Architect Sharon Odum of Cunningham Architects says that designing the Meyerson house wasn't like the "design, bid, build" process followed for most construction. "We went with the flow, following up things suggested by the building and by the craftsmen, who had a lot of creative ideas," she says. The project called for adapting a three-story electrical substation (three photos, right) into a single-family residence organized like a 1920s mansion (drawings far right). The building stood empty for 20 years, and the clean-up process was laborious. But when workers stripped the brick and steel of the interior, the clients agreed with the architects that the underlying colors and textures of the materials should not be concealed, but emphasized. Standard 2x4 framing and gypsum board walls seemed to lack the scale and heft that would stand up to the building; so Cunningham Architects assembled a new palette of materials—glass, steel pipe, and industrial quality wood—which are used again and again in kaleidoscopic permutations. At the same time the architects chose to dramatize their additions, treating kitchen and bedrooms, for example, as discrete objects dropped into the existing space. These pavilions are occasionally organized into sequences around gaps left by demolition as in the master bedroom suite, arranged enfilade along an electrical trough (see plans, right). The architects also emphasized breaks in the existing structure, as is the case for the new elevator, which is stripped to its mechanism, encased in glass, and positioned so that it slams into an existing concrete pavilion on the third floor, which used to hold explosive batteries and now houses restrooms. In a typical detail, the corner broken by the collision is glazed over, not patched. Everywhere structural elements are treated dramatically, more like actors than props.



SECTION



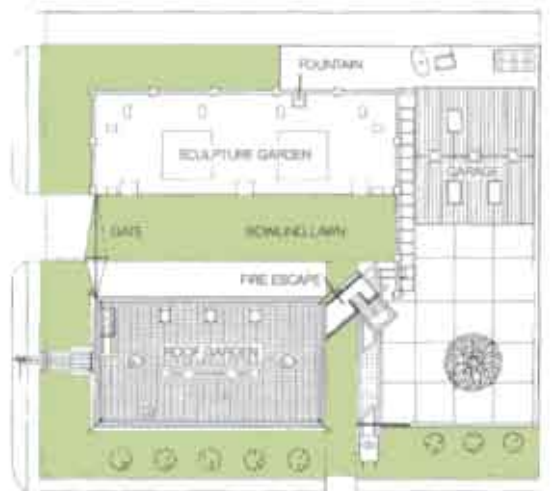
BALLROOM PLAN



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



SITE PLAN

A 20-ton crane, once used to hoist transformers and other electrical equipment, hangs in an open first-floor bay (facing page). In keeping with the house's original materials, the kitchen is a pavilion of patterned glass, and its cabinets, made of plywood normally used for concrete forms, are bolted to a steel exoskeleton. A glazed trench (just visible) under the grouped dining room tables, holds copper-clad mineral-insulated electrical lines. Orange-stained plywood bookshelves line the second-floor balcony passage. Lights are controlled by industrial toggle switches.





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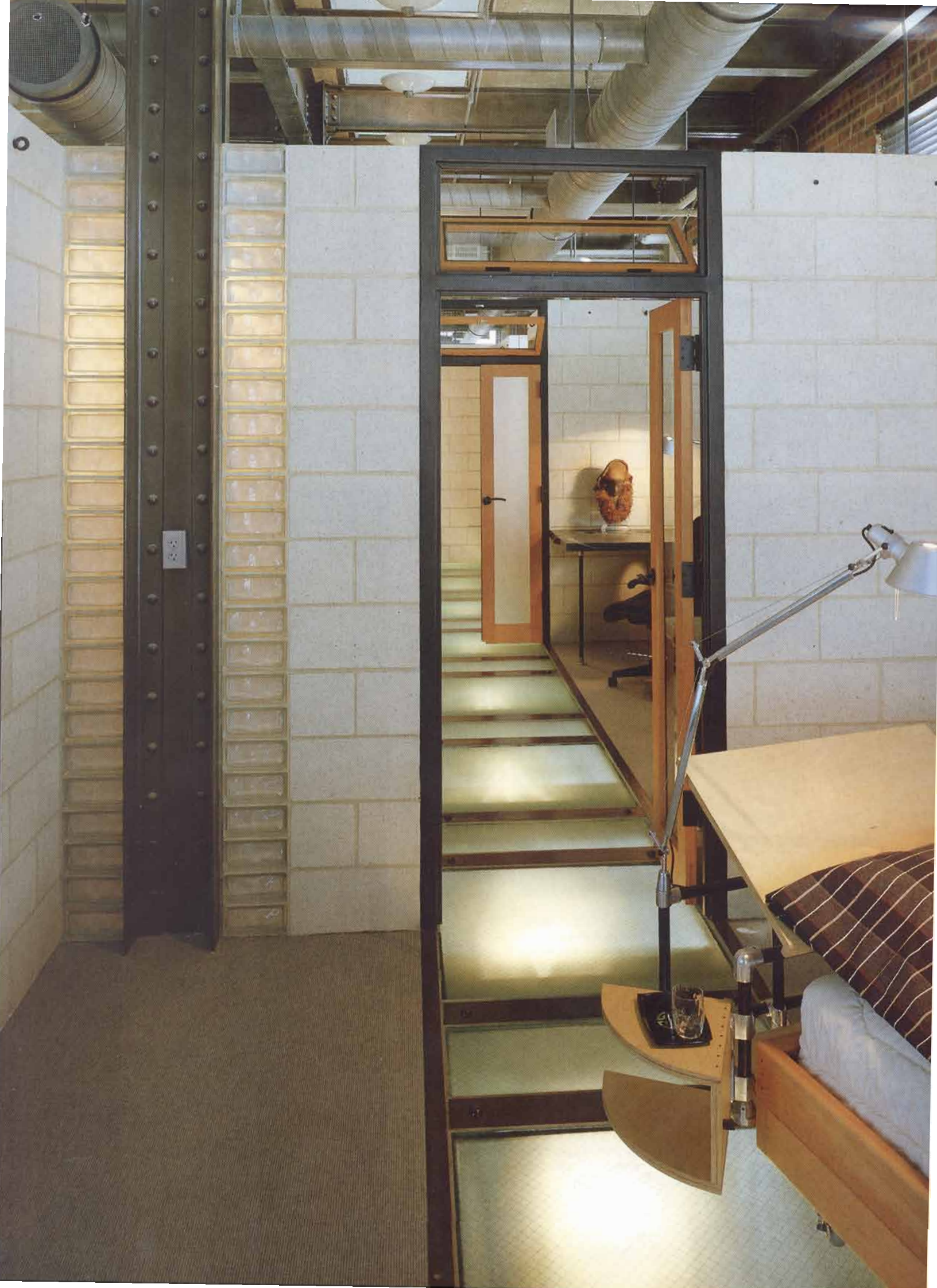
bine to distinguish the Meyerson house from typical renovated loft space like that found in Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood. The house is made a kind of museum of electricity as brutalist low-tech power supply. An existing first-floor cable trough, for example, carries electric lines from front door to back; these copper-clad mineral-insulated wires are placed under glass, and backlit by fiber optics. Holes left by the removal of concrete switching boxes in the second floor have been filled with translucent glass sandwiches, projecting bands of light through the master bedroom suite.

For a building with lots of rough edges, the Meyerson house has a generous, appealing spirit. If it doesn't say home to most people, that's no problem to its owners. Says Marlene Meyerson, "This is a place we liked that we wanted to live in; we're happy for it to be itself." **Joel Warren Barna** ■

The author is editor of *Texas Architect*.

The client chose the rolling chairs in the dining room (top left) because they reminded him of visits to his father's office in the 1940s. Storage units are made of industrial fir boards, while the guest lavatory (at left in photo) is skinned in sandblasted glass. To respect the building's obdurate character, plumbing was left exposed, and bricks broken when a door was punched through to the sculpture garden (visible at right rear in photo) were glazed in, not smoothed over. The second-floor bedrooms (top right and facing page) are housed in eight-foot-tall limestone-aggregate block boxes,

glazed for privacy up to the 13.5-foot ceiling. The new stair railings (above left) were made of steel pipe, with off-the-shelf connectors and bolted-on sheets of wire-reinforced glass. The third-floor ballroom (above right) has a ceiling of original trusses and gypsum planks that form the roof deck, along with a new maple floor. Openings to the roof and second floor are glazed. Pivoting metal window shades (perforated on one side and solid on the other, allow the room to be acoustically tuned.





Galvanized metal boxes on the roof of the house (top) contain air-conditioning equipment. Louvers were replaced by glass in existing revolving air-exhaust vents, turning them into skylights. "The wind decides where the light will come from," says architect Cunningham. Aviation lights mimic those atop buildings visible on the Dallas skyline. A new steel-pipe and glass canopy has been added above the front door (above left). Light fixtures and service meters are original. Electric lines pass through "doughnut" insulators above the door. City code required an exterior stair from the third

floor (above right); the architects used this to form a semi-transparent closure for one side of the sculpture garden. Its steel construction is intended to echo the skeleton beneath the house's quietly detailed brick skin. Steel beams cut from the interior to make room for the elevator are used as seats in the sculpture garden. The pivoting gate (facing page) is 22 feet high and 32 feet wide, with a tensioned steel frame. A new fountain falls into a concrete vault that once held spliced cables.

**Project:** Power House, Dallas.  
**Architects:** Cunningham Architects, Dallas (Gary Cunningham, Sharon Odum).  
**Client:** Morton and Marlene Meyerson.  
**Site:** former Dallas Power and Light substation built in 1923.  
**Program:** renovation of 6400-sq-ft substation as single-family residence with third-floor ballroom and new 3-car garage on 21,000-sq-ft site.  
**Structural system:** steel frame with concrete slab floors, brick exterior (existing); concrete block, steel and wood framing (new construction).  
**Major materials:** new insulating windows; security glazing (floor glass); sandblasted structural steel with clear urethane coating; polished concrete block, steel, fir (see Building

Materials, p. 109).  
**Mechanical system:** chilled water air conditioning with 7 fan units; forced-air heat, gas-fired furnace.  
**Consultants:** Raymond T. Entemann, landscape; Ellisor & Tanner, structural (gate); M.E.P., mechanical; Pam Wilson, lighting.  
**Artisans:** Vaughn Shadle, site manager; John Austin, Bruce Anderson, Marlie Black, David and Pete Carapetyan, Dan Devey, W.K. Electric, Mike Foltz, Sean Grigar, Dana Haywood, Warren Hill, Leeda Jester, Craig Langel, Pete Lewis, James O'Hara, Jeff Ricci, Ladell Ritchey, Jeff Shultz, David Stark, Nolan Stefka, Craig Vaughn, Art Ward.  
**Costs:** withheld.  
**Photos:** James F. Wilson, except as noted.

