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## Architect Mike Calvino's Work Combines Grace and Grit

By JOHN MARSH

Architect Mike Calvino thinks outside the box. It's not that he makes the effort; it's just his nature.

He admires Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright, whose work he calls Classic Modern. Of the current non-postmodern architects he is enthusiastic about Carlo Scarpa.

Calvino's work exemplifies a shared philosophy. Exceptional architecture seeks not to force a material to its limits, but to help it become what it wants to be — to honor it, not to dominate it.

It is being attuned to the innate nature of a material that is at the heart of Calvino's art. In an essay he writes about cutting padouk, an exotic hardwood from West Africa. The experience is about "feeling the texture of the end grain, the rough sawn and the

sanded surface, smelling the aroma of its oils when it is cut, smelling it burn under the heat of a router bit as it dulls, and feeling how much it resists the carbide teeth of a 10", 1 hp table saw while ripping a piece of 8/4 stock."

Calvino's designs exhibit playful, surprising intersections of one material with another, like a delicate filigree of cables and steel plugged into slabs of poured concrete. Calvino calls the technique shell and infill. In his hands it has the feel of a child's Chinese puzzle.

His work is also about the relationship of a structure to its site. His master's thesis proposed building a row of new residences behind a row of historic St. Augustine residences, matching their mates in footprint and mass rather than in style or materials — classic contrast and compari-

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The house Mike Calvino is building in Ruskin was designed to take advantage of prevailing winds and a magnificent Gulf view.



## Architecture Combines Grace and Grit



The roof and walls of the completed Ruskin guesthouse hang from 2 massive piers, much like a boat on a davit.

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son to the advantage of both.

After earning his master's, Calvino worked for Richard Meier and Partners in New York City until a friend shared his enthusiasm for some possibilities in Florida, where Calvino was raised. Those projects fell through, but Calvino had returned home and saw no reason not to stay. Undaunted, he went to work for Leshner and Mahoney in Tampa where he worked on the design for Tropicana Field.

While with that firm, he met his future wife Elaine, a computer expert. "If I had to put a time on it, I fell in love over the copy machine," Mike says, "when she strolled in with a screwdriver to fix it while a bunch of male architects stood around helplessly."

Today Mike and Elaine are the justifiably proud parents of a charismatic 20-month-old named Mary who could pose for a camera before she could walk.

Today Calvino works independently. His current project is a retirement home he's building in Ruskin for Stanley and Sharon Woodruff — a



Calvino cuts a steel beam for the roof of the Woodruff home in Ruskin.

couple of long-time empty nesters who want both serenity and room for the grandchildren. Not lavish in terms of floor space, the house takes ultimate advantage of a pristine view of the gulf through mangroves.

When complete, the house will have two towers for private areas anchoring an expansive open living space between them and a screened

space of equal square footage beneath. A spiraling ramp will complete the transition from earth to home.

The guest house was built first. According to Calvino, it was conceived as a small hotel room. "The solid masonry edge extends up 7 1/2 feet," he writes, "— a ruinous wall over which the roof system floats. Between the shell and the roof are nothing but glass and few thin cypress mullions to contain them."

Actually, the roof system only appears to float. On closer examination it becomes clear that the entire structure hangs from 2 massive piers, much as a davit holds a boat up over the water. It seems no coincidence that Woodruff owns a sailboat.

The intriguing engineering solution came in response to the fact that the guest house was built over an existing slab within 25 feet of the EPC wetland zone — the "sacred zone" within which no new structure could be placed.

Woodruff has helped with some of the finish as a labor of love. Calvino appreciates the owner's involvement; it makes the experience deeper and more collaborative. He needs help placing steel elements, but otherwise it is mostly the solitary pursuit of a builder building by hand.

The towers and ramps and "ruinous" walls reveal an element in Calvino's work that is decidedly romantic.



## Up to Code

So now code violators are criminals. For a while, the code enforcement department had called itself the neighborhood niceness council or some such kinder, gentler name.

The enforcers still dressed like the police and acted like the police — that is to say, they sometimes had this attitude: We're definitely right and you're probably wrong. Now they get to be the police.

A personal experience explains my unease. Several years ago I was living in an up-and-coming neighborhood. Yuppies were moving in, determined to gentrify.

An anal retentive neighbor complained about my lantana "encroaching on her property." I didn't take her seriously. My mistake. There were many more small faults to find and she found them.

Then, one morning I found a violation notice stapled to a tender new leaf on the beautyberry I had driven 20 miles to buy. I had planted it amidst the huge bed of ferns under the oaks in my side yard. The notice called it an unmaintained vacant lot.

I became temporarily insane. Though I could not be told who complained, the inspector mentioned that Mayor Greco had issued an edict to all city employees to be on the lookout for code violations. In other words, the guys driving fire trucks now got to decide what a yard should look like.

Heavily sedated, I went downtown and stood before the hearing master. They were very nice — gave me 30 days to deal with the car with no tag and decided my ferns didn't need to be mowed down after all.

So why am I temporarily insane again? Here's why. I know they'll go after the criminals trying to hang on to cars they can't afford tags for, because we're easier to get than the slumlords with connections.

Combined with the most modern engineering techniques, this element becomes even more evocative. The juxtapositions of old and new, raw and finished, delight the eye.

To Calvino, a building is not an enclosure for function, or walls and windows around a floor plan. It is a mediation between human needs for shelter and nature's imperatives of prevailing winds and capricious waters.

Mike continues to practice a holistic approach in his creative life. In addition to build-

ings he makes furniture, sculptures and photographs. He also mentors architecture students and teaches at Hillsborough Community College.

And he steadfastly maintains his artistic vision. On his website calvinodesign.com is a quote from Louis Kahn: "You say to a brick, 'What do you want, brick?' Brick says to you, 'I like an arch.' If you say to brick, 'Arches are expensive, and I can use a concrete lintel over an opening. What do you think of that, brick?' Brick says, 'I like an arch.'"

## Women's Hospital Expansion

St. Joseph's Women's Hospital has broken ground on a new Physician Office Building. The \$11 million, 50,000-square-foot addition will create a lobby and central entry connected to the parking garage and will include a covered patient drop-off/pick-up area. Upper floors will contain 32,000 square feet of physician offices.

Patients will benefit from an 11-bed triage unit with direct access to Labor and Delivery. An admitting area with private

rooms ensures privacy for patients scheduled for surgery, urological exams and other procedures.

Additional amenities will include comfortable waiting areas, a coffee bar, an expanded gift shop, a health education and resource center, an outdoor garden and a chapel of ecumenical design.

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