



Architect Michael Calvino's design for this home on the Little Manatee River in Ruskin features four arching wooden beams. Calvino stretched cypress planks on a mold to create the beams.

Photos by St. Petersburg Times

## One-man showpiece

Mike Calvino, a graduate of UF's College of Architecture, has built most of his first major project with his own hands

By S.I. ROSENBAUM  
St. Petersburg Times

**T**he house looks like a ship, or a shell, or a superhero's secret fortress.

It soars up three stories, seemingly anchored to Earth by four huge wooden beams arching toward the Little Manatee River. The top floor juts into empty air, hanging from the long curve of the wooden roof.

Architect Mike Calvino's first major project seems to belong to an altogether different planet from its single-story-bungalow neighbors on Canal Road in Ruskin.

The only thing more remarkable than the building's design is its construction.

In the five years since the house was commissioned, Calvino has built most of it with his own hands.

Calvino, 34, dug the foundation, poured the concrete, even stretched cypress planks on a mold to create the unique wooden beams.

"He's had a hand in making every single part of this place," said Brad Cooke, a University of Florida student who is part of Calvino's two-man crew this summer.

It was the only way to preserve the integrity of his design, ARCHITECT on Page 10F



Architect Michael Calvino cuts galvanized steel pipes for a balcony rail. Behind him are planks of eucalyptus, which he cut by hand from a fallen tree.



# ARCHITECT: 'He's going to be famous'

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Calvino said.

If he used a general contractor, he said, "the design would constantly be cut back ... there would be someone else controlling the end product. It would always get changed."

Besides, he said, "I love to build. I love to have my hands on the thing I'm making."

## Not-so-simple house

Calvino grew up in Orlando. As a kid, he built plastic models from kits. Then he re-created each part of the model in wood, from scratch, and built it again.

He studied architecture as an undergraduate and then as a graduate student at the University of Florida. After graduation, he worked in the New York office of legendary architect Richard Meier.

Calvino was happy there. The atmosphere was a heady mix of commercial work and intellectual debate about principles of design, light and shadow.

But in the late 1990s, he took a chance on a friend who seemed to have freelance design work lined up for him in Orlando.

The friend's promises fell through — "none of it was true," Calvino said — and instead Calvino ended up designing the additions to Tropicana Field with the now-defunct Tampa architecture firm Lescher and Mahoney.

All the while, he was moonlighting as a designer, building everything from coasters to furniture to a space-age garage for a family in Tampa.

Then in 2000, a friend introduced him to Stanley Woodruff, then 66, who had just bought a piece of land in Ruskin and was looking for an architect.

As Woodruff remembers it, the mutual friend, Tampa sculptor J.J. Watts, told him Calvino was "the sharpest thing she'd ever run across in her life."

Woodruff, a retired prosecutor from Macomb County, Mich., had always been of conservative tastes. He told Calvino what he was looking for: "a simple house with a bedroom on the right and a bedroom on the left."

"Then I went to his loft," Woodruff recalled, "and there was this model of something out of 'Star Wars.'"

Even now, Woodruff can't explain why he and his wife, Sharon, took a chance on the ambitious young architect who had never built a house. It is, he conceded, perhaps the craziest thing he has ever done.

"All of my friends at first told me I was nuts," he said. "Then as time went by, and they saw what Mike was doing, they were flabbergasted. It was a gamble, but it was worth it, because the kid is so talented it's unbelievable."

## It's beautiful, but . . .

At first, Woodruff showed Calvino's plans to traditional builders. They all said the same thing: "Oh, my God, it's beautiful. But I don't know how to build a house like this."

After the general contractors turned Woodruff down, Calvino offered to build the house himself. But he realized it would cost more than the \$200,000 Woodruff wanted to pay.

Calvino said he could do it for roughly \$400,000. Woodruff agreed.

Calvino has spent more than \$400,000, but he doesn't mind, he said. He views it as equivalent to paying the interest on a small-business loan.

By now, he said, if he and Woodruff had used hired labor, the house, with 2,050 square feet of air-conditioned living space, would have cost close to \$1 million to build. It could be valued at twice that amount, Calvino said.

In fact, some neighbors are concerned that Calvino's house will raise their property values, and hence their taxes, said Nancy Wilson, 52, who lives across the street in a single-story house.

"The neighbors call it Fort Ruskin," she said. "They say it doesn't look like a house at all."

But Wilson said she's personally thrilled to watch the house go up.

Like most neighbors, she's gotten to know Calvino, and she's fond of him. "He's going to

be famous," she said.

## Education of a lifetime

Daniel Currea, a 26-year-old USF grad student, is welding steel high above the ground, making a bridge from one of the house's lofts to the other.

Currea met Calvino when he was a student at Hillsborough Community College, where Calvino teaches architecture. This summer, Calvino asked Currea to work on the Ruskin house.

"I'm so proud to be a part of it," said Currea. "This is probably the best thing I've ever done."

Currea and Cooke, 19, have spent the last few months working on the house. They say it's the education of a lifetime.

"This is just stuff used in regular construction," said Cooke, pointing to the steel railing that traces a graceful curve along the length of the house. "But Mike knows how to get what he wants out of it, how to make art out of it."

The house is as unique in its details as it is in its general design. The kitchen walls aren't built up from the floor but instead hang from the ceiling, so that the counters and walls seem to float just above the floor.

The floor is dyed concrete, except for large wood and glass inlays — the latter letting in light from below. Stone shelves are set asymmetrically into the concrete walls in the living area, bedrooms and bathrooms, and look as if they had grown there.

All of this was accomplished by Calvino and his student assistants.

"He teaches us that it's not all about the building," said Cooke, whose father is an architecture professor at USF. "You're learning about life through making the building. Working this way is like a lifestyle, it's a way of living."

Calvino's approach is not unique, said Santiago Perez, an assistant professor of architecture at USF. Perez has kept track of the Ruskin house's progress over the years, sometimes

bringing his students to the site.

A group of "renegade" architects in Arizona share Calvino's philosophy, Santiago said. They design innovative buildings and have a hand in all aspects of construction.

"They've got clients, they've got publicity," he said. "All of them are extremely sought-after ... and all of them started more or less the same way Mike Calvino has started: building their first commission more or less on their own."

Will Calvino's work be important?

"I think it will be," Santiago said. "Here's the question: What will he do next? If this is just a one-off and he quietly slips away ... there are a lot of architects who have built one brilliant project and then disappeared off the map. For this to be important, something has to come after. Then it will be seen as his seminal work, his point of departure."

## Looking to the future

Where does Calvino's ambition lead?

When asked, he is quiet for a moment. Then he says: "Skyscrapers."

But he quickly says that he'll be happy with less. "If I just do 10 of these houses in my whole life, that will be fine. Or five — that will be enough for me. As long as I don't compromise the quality of my work."

He's standing on the second floor of the Ruskin house. It's hot, and there's thunder in the distance. From this height, he can look out over the river. In fact, he's compelled to do so by the lines of the house he designed.

Calvino is in love with the house. He could spend weeks photographing it, he says. Yet he'll have no problem parting with it when the time comes. After all, he built it to be lived in.

The house should be ready for the Woodruffs by December.

Then, Calvino will get to work on his next project.

He's not sure what that will be. But he has some ideas.

"I'm going to try to build the smallest home possible," he said.