

Stewards *of* William Morgan Architecture

By Christi Bowler Elflein | Photography by Craig O'Neal

There are people who buy houses, and there are people who buy architecture. Ron and Marchant Martin are the latter. Self-described "architecture junkies," when the couple decided to move to Florida from Atlanta a few years ago, they had their hearts set on a William Morgan home. The internationally acclaimed architect William Morgan passed away in early 2016 at the age of 85, leaving behind not only an adoring family and countless friends, but also a legacy in modern architecture. Morgan was a Jacksonville native, graduate of Harvard University and owner of William Morgan Architects.



His designs cannot be pegged to one specific style, but rather can be said to have been influenced by the earth and prehistoric monuments built in North America and Micronesia by the world's earliest cultures. His designs capture the ancient within the modern and the First Coast is lucky to have a large collection of his works.

Examples of his institutional work here on the First Coast include the Museum of Science and History (MOSH), the Police Memorial Building and the Atlantic Beach Lifeguard Station. He also designed residential homes all over the region, from Fernandina Beach to Ponte Vedra Beach with a large concentration of his architecture located in Atlantic Beach. He designed ten homes just in the one block around Beach Avenue and 19th Street in Atlantic Beach, including the well-known grassed roof Dune House.

Each home is very different from the next, responding to its location and the land it sits on.

Living in a home that is a piece of architectural history is more an experience of stewardship than it is traditional home ownership. It is the opportunity to enjoy and respect the art of excellent design and draw creative inspiration every day from its genius. But most of all, like all great art, it is chance to preserve something important to the human story. Where we live says a lot about who we are.

The William Morgan House, Built 1972

The house a great architect builds for himself is often the most interesting to study. After Hurricane Dora in 1964, an oceanfront property in Atlantic Beach north of the bulkhead was washed out and considered unbuildable. William and Bunny

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— Bunny Morgan

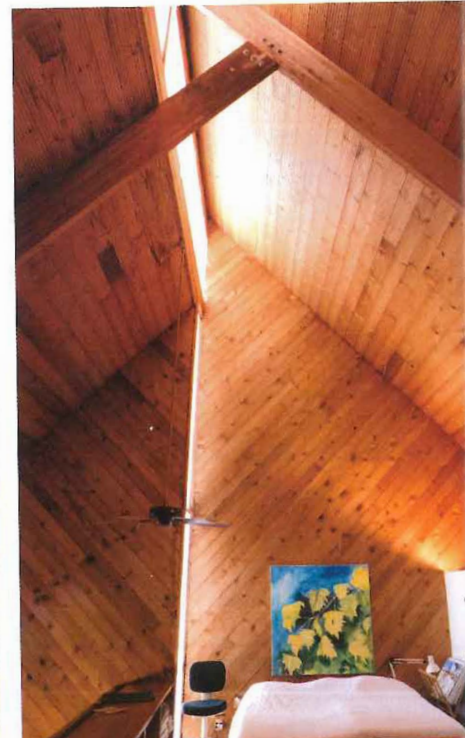


Left: Bunny Morgan, wife of the late William Morgan, and the vista from their family home in Atlantic Beach.



William Morgan designed his home to be perpendicular to the rising sun, casting unique patterns of light through skylights and windows as the star moves across the sky each day.

Morgan traveled the world to study the ways indigenous peoples built their homes in harmony with the environment, maximizing light and air flow. He was inspired by the cultures he studied and collected many beautiful works through his travels.



Morgan saw this as an opportunity and purchased one of the "unbuildable" lots, which they would eventually build their family home on.

Morgan's inspiration for their four-level home was the ancient Roman seaside town of Herculaneum. The home's design steps up the sand dune in two triangular formations, one facing the ocean and the other facing the street. The fourth level master bedroom loft overlooks the third, street level kitchen and family room. The second level, tucked into the sand dune, houses two bedrooms. And the lowest level, deemed their "wet room" acts as a storage area for beach gear.

Bunny says that there are so many things that she loves about the house. "The interior spaces are just sensational," she says. "One of the most interesting things is the location of the source of light and the movement of the sun." Light pours into the home from the large beachside windows and through side windows and skylights, creating a changing pattern of light on the four-inch wide plank Idaho pine ceilings. "In the winter time, the sun comes in the north side with light and it illuminates the Idaho pine and you can see it as it goes across. And in the summertime, the light comes through the skylight pointing to the other side of the room. And, there is a certain time during the equinox when it is exactly equal. So the building is perpendicular to the rising of the sun. It's just one of those things about [this home]. It's fun to live here and see that phenomenon," Bunny says.

William wanted Bunny to continue living in their home after his passing. "He did like this house." She recalls he said, "If I can't live in the house, at least you can." She chokes up when she thinks of possibly having to sell it one day.

The Dickinson Home, Built 1973

Maxwell Dickinson was a fellow Boy Scout and schoolmate of William Morgan's son at Duncan U. Fletcher High School. When he and wife Edna decided to build a new home on their Atlantic Beach property, they turned to Morgan to design it for them. Edna recalls bringing Morgan a book of her ideas to their first meeting. He graciously looked through it, then closed it



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— Maxwell Dickinson

and said, "Now let's talk about what you can afford." Edna learned quickly that Morgan would drive the design. He encouraged them to take a trip to the Yucatan Peninsula to visit the Mayan ruins, which would be influential in the style of their house.

The home's earth berms and terraces that step down toward the beachfront relate to the design of the Mayan ruins. The second floor of the home is more modern in style with its rectangular shape.

Spanning a total of 2,300 square feet, Maxwell says the home "is not big, but with all the openness, it looks bigger than it is ... It's a great house. The world is open around you."

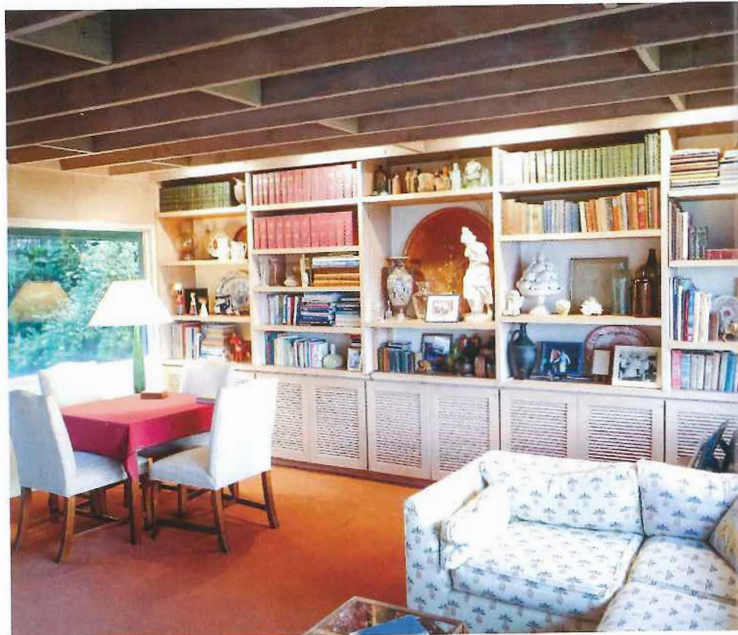
The Dickinsons have created a life in this home over the course of 44 years. They have made minor renovations, but the house largely remains the same. The most significant change was to replace the siding of the house. They could not find the original wood, so they decided that since it was a beach house that cedar shake would be appropriate. They asked Morgan's opinion and he gave his OK, saying that as long as it was real wood.

"This is a wonderful house," says Edna.

Maxwell agrees, "He's got happy campers here ... I think he did the perfect thing in the perfect place for us."



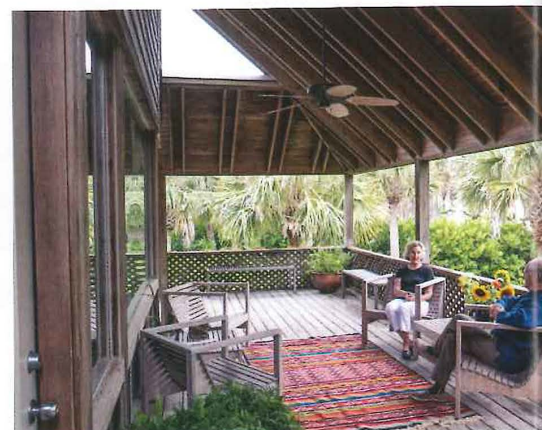
Morgan encouraged the Dickinsons to travel to the Yucatan Peninsula to visit the Mayan ruins, because he planned to model the design of their home based on the Mayan structures.



To get a full picture of Morgan's extraordinary contribution to modern architecture, ncmodernist.org has a wonderful online gallery of his work, much of which you can see locally.



Our cover photo, the Marchants' home (known as the Grady House) design is based on the layout of homes in Micronesia. Morgan studied how the wind would come in and cool the home, and placed windows strategically throughout to catch sea breezes.



The Grady House, Built 1990

Ron and Marchant Martin moved to the First Coast from Atlanta a few years ago to be close to their grandchildren. "We were interested in what makes Jacksonville interesting, different and one of the things we stumbled on was architecture and William Morgan as an architect," says Ron. Friends of theirs from Atlanta knew of Morgan, followed his work and told the Martins about him. Then one day when Ron and Marchant were visiting the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens, they happened to find a book on his work.

"Just for fun, we would get in the car and drive out to Atlantic Beach and drive around with the book and look at the houses. There are no addresses on any of them [in the book] so when we came up here on Beach [Ave.] and we saw this house, we said 'oh that must be that Grady house,'" Ron says. There was a small sign out front that said "For Sale" and they knew the house was meant to be their own.

Like other Morgan-designed homes, the Grady House was built in concert with the land that surrounds it. Concrete pillars lift the house above the sand dunes so as not to disturb them. Porches grace all three levels of the home capped with a tin roof. It's U-shaped, wrapping around a center courtyard that once was home to a beautiful bay tree.

"Mr. Morgan designed the house after antique houses in Micronesia," says Marchant. "He saw how the wind served to cool off the home, and he's done enough windows that we can open up and have the breezes."

The Martins intend to maintain the home as Morgan had designed it. Updates they've made include staining the interior rafters to better match the porch ceilings, which geometrically align to create an illusion of the continuation of the living room onto the porch outside. The Martins are also avid gardeners and have cleared away the vines that had taken over their yard. In the process they uncovered ancient 400-year-old sand oaks that sit within the contours of the sand dunes. The perfect landscape accent for a Morgan original. 🌿