The program for this project began with a desire to design a house for my parents. As they approach retirement, they have begun to search for a house that they can purchase and dwell in for many years. They desire several qualities for their retirement house and its setting that will help them shape it into a home. Because of the difficulty in finding this special place, we discussed the possibility that they would purchase the piece of property and I would then design them a house that would incorporate the qualities they desire. In order to prepare myself for this endeavor, I decided to design a rural house for my thesis.

The requirements for their property are for it to be several acres of land with a possibility for horses, preferably a stream nearby, and a very rural, very private setting with no possibility for large development in the near future. The requirements that my parents established for the house include: a large kitchen, flexible living room and dining room, one or more fireplaces, two bedrooms, master bedroom suite, outdoor area for barbecues, areas for planting, little or no hallways, two car garage that does not face the entry from the road, workshop area, and all spaces to be light and open.

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**house** (n., adj. house; v. houz), n., pl. houses (hou'ziz), v., housed, housing, adj. -n. 1. a building in which people live; residence for human beings.

**Home** is a container of soul. The roof and walls shelter and nurture the spark of life that animates our modes of dwelling. They define the setting where soul is transformed from raw energy into the myriad experiences of living.
The site of a building has a profound impact on its architecture. In order to better understand the concept of a house being dependent upon its site, I studied the town of Harper's Ferry, West Virginia.

I chose this place because of its charming architectural character created by its buildings which are dependent upon and integrated with their harsh natural site. The terrain of limestone ledge formations is quite similar to the chosen thesis site which is located in the Shenandoah Valley further south.

Harper’s Ferry was built on a peninsula created by the convergence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers. The limestone ledges that rise up from the rivers create natural terraces on the land which became the foundations for the buildings of Harper’s Ferry. Though the settlers must have struggled with the need for survival, it is evident that the tradition of skilled craftsmanship and a subjective sense of place guided their hands to build the aesthetically pleasing buildings of stone, brick and wood. The result of such care is a town of buildings, streets and sidewalks aligned partially on the orthogonal and partially by the hillsides and rock ledges, creating an aura of a coexistence between man and nature. This is the feeling which should be evident in any rural home. Instead we see today so many developments where houses are strewn across the landscape with no regards to site.


If we do not learn how our homes can care for the soul, there will always be a gap between who we are and where we live. We inevitably create dwellings of loneliness and alienation.

The most important aspect of a home is its ability to comfortably support the gathering of family and friends. Because people assemble for different types of occasions, there must be a variety of places for gathering. These include: places to view, to eat, to socialize, and to gather for warmth. The spaces should be flexible as the functions could be large or small, formal or informal, public or private.

Because the home is in a rural setting, its openness to the environment is extremely important. One should be able to not only view the outside, but also feel as though they are living within nature. Rooms are therefore created for the interior as well as the exterior, as the separation between indoors and outdoors becomes nondescript.

The houses are made of stone walls and wood and glass walls. The wall made of stone expresses the natural site and is an extension of the site. It is the basis for differences amongst the four houses. The wall made of wood and glass expresses the man-made and is based upon an established grid. It is the basis for the similarities amongst the four houses. The harmonious meeting of the two becomes a part of the transition between the natural and the man-made.

...the house must be seen as an addition to nature, by which natural space is completed and made habitable for us.

Dom H. Van Der Laan “Architectonic Space” (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1983), p.1

The materials and architectural elements are an expression of each house as a transition between the natural and man-made, the interior and exterior, and the earth and sky.

The four house diagrams illustrate the relationship in plan of the stone (black) next to the interior spaces formed by glass and wood walls (grey) and the resultant exterior spaces of courtyard and balcony (white).
Similarly, as one ascends a flight of stairs, he or she transitions from the ground to an elevated plane. The space of the stairwell can create a feeling of being a part of the earth, a part of the sky, or somewhere between the two. Steps, therefore, are an obvious transition between the earth and sky.

The materials and architectural elements are an expression of each house as a transition between the natural and man-made, the interior and exterior, and the earth and sky.
The transition between inside and outside is formed through spaces which could serve either interior or exterior functions. The courtyard, a horizontal transition space, is a private exterior room made of stone where people gather to eat. In contrast, the balcony, a vertical transition space, is a public exterior place made of wood where people gather to view the landscape beyond the boundaries of the home.

The materials and architectural elements are an expression of each house as a transition between the natural and man-made, the interior and exterior, and the earth and sky.
Light is the element of architecture which is sculpted by the others. While the glass and wood enclosure wall directs the entering natural light, the hearth is a source of man-made light. The room created between the two becomes a gathering place for warmth and storytelling.

The major room of each of the houses comprises of a living/dining room area separated from the kitchen by a fireplace open to both sides. The hearth on the kitchen side becomes a sitting area while on the other side it serves as a focal point to the living/dining room area.

The materials and architectural elements are an expression of each house as a transition between the natural and man-made, the interior and exterior, and the earth and sky.
Within the rural landscape of Shenandoah County exists a small cabin, located off a dirt road at the base of a hill and meadow. Now a summer weekend getaway, the cabin was originally a homestead built in the 1700s. Left over memories have survived as stories of life in this home on the American frontier. War, age, and a humble lifestyle are what have given the cabin its character and life. It is the marker of the beginning of a path which winds through the adjacent property. It was the reflective journey along this path and the discovery of four special places that determined the number and location of the houses for this thesis.

A home for the soul is not a final destination. It is a process of self-discovery that deepens over time. We may seek a dwelling place where stability and contentment are attained once and for all, but this does not seem to the nature of a soulful life. As soon as one goal is achieved, a fresh desire arises. The pleasure of the soul appears to be found in the journey of discovery, the unfolding revelation of expanded insight and experience.

Anthony Lawlor, “A Home for the Soul” (Clarkson N. Potter/ Publishers, 1997), p 218
where one stops, looks, and recognizes memories of a home that does not yet exist. It is at these places where a site is discovered through one's desire to find meaning within the emptiness of

Emptiness may resound without sound, may be filled by its potential to be filled, and make open what is complete... When we speak of the "draw" of a good fireplace, when we feel the pull of an empty room for us to enter and dwell there, when we see something incomplete the chance for continuation or find in things closed a gate... there is emptiness.

Michael Benedikt, “For an Architecture of Reality” (Lumen, Inc., 1987), pp. 50-56