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JOHN GALLAGHER

## 45-degree angle

Detroit architect's first home turns corner on modern design

November 11, 2007

Roger Margerum is home.

One of Detroit's pioneering African-American architects, Margerum, now 77, and his wife, Fran Margerum, 71, recently moved into their new home on Detroit's far east side.

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Apartment dwellers for decades, Margerum designed the home both as his wife's dream house and as a challenge to conventional ideas about house design.

Too many new houses today, he said during a recent interview, are oversized McMansions with little or no architectural merit.

"I wanted to stretch it," Margerum said. "You go that far and then maybe you can fill in in between, but how far is 'that far' and is 'that far' possible? This is what I'm trying to do here."

The house in the 400 block of Kitchener, not far from the Detroit River and the Grosse Pointe Park line, is unusual on several fronts. Most houses face the street head-on. Margerum's faces the street at a 45-degree angle, opening up the views both to the neighborhood in front and to a private marina to the rear.

That's all the more unusual for being built on a traditional Detroit residential street defined by its bungalows and front porches. "I think opening up this house on a 45-degree angle can open up these streets, rather than regimenting them up and down," he said.

Then, of course, there are the red and white diamond patterns Margerum put on the front of his house. The geometric shapes are based on the same 45-degree angle and carry into an angular, light-filled interior.

Defined by those angles, the main floor seems to float in space looking out through the rear glass walls to the private marina nearby. The kitchen and family room are off this main room.

Margerum keeps his studio in a small attic-like space upstairs. The bedrooms, garage, and laundry room are on a lower level.

### Modern meets traditional

Although unabashedly modern, the house reflects Margerum's interest in the older crafts tradition. Many of the systems in his house are unique designs, or demonstrate new uses for traditional materials.

He used off-the-shelf plumbing pipe for stair rails. He created semiprivate bathrooms for himself and his wife, but the bathrooms, entered by separate doors, share a bathtub in the middle.

Uniqueness doesn't necessarily mean expensive. The Margerums spent \$220,000 to build their 3,000-square-foot house, or less than \$75 per square foot. By comparison, developers of new riverfront condominiums are asking in the \$300-per-square-foot range. Perhaps the biggest irony of the new house is

that it's the first time in his adult life that Margerum has lived in a house and not an apartment. When the time finally came in his 70s to create a dream house, he was ready.

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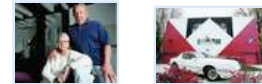
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(MADALYN RUGGIERO/Special to the Free Press)

The angled eaves' design camouflages utility equipment at the rear of the Margerums' house.



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"People say, 'You designed this? How long did it take you?' I say, 'Fifty years,'" he said. "Because it does. That's how it happens."

**Addressing global warming**

Steve Vogel, dean of architecture at the University of Detroit Mercy, has known Margerum for many years and applauds his challenge to conventional house design.

"In this era of global warming and sustainability and all that, building 6,000-square-foot houses at 40 Mile Road makes absolutely no sense. I think building smaller houses and reusing lots that are in the city or that are in the inner-ring suburbs is one way to deal with that issue," he said.

Many critics of routine house design have questioned why Americans, who go for the latest contemporary design in their cars, cell phones, and clothing, still want echoes of historical styles in their houses.

"We really have to talk about what is 21st Century housing all about, both in terms of lifestyle and the makeup of the family, or does the single-family house even make sense," Vogel said. "Somebody has to be asking those questions. We just can't keep repeating the past."

Born in Chicago, Margerum began his career in architecture at the Chicago firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, known for its pioneering modernist designs. A newcomer to the firm, Margerum nonetheless got to work on what was one of the most important jobs in the country, the campus for the new Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

Later, moving to Detroit, he worked at the firm then known as Smith, Hinchman & Grylls (now SmithGroup) as it teamed with Japanese designer Isamu Noguchi on the design of Hart Plaza.

Later, with his own firm based on Woodward Avenue, Margerum designed schools, office buildings, and a small riverside park in Detroit in the shadow of the Ambassador Bridge.

Along the way, he served as president of the Michigan Society of Architects in 1983, and was a founding member of the National Organization of Minority Architects.

Darron Green, an architect at SmithGroup and the current Detroit chapter president of NOMA, said Margerum is a walking memory bank of black architectural history in Detroit.

"He's been there and done that, and we're really just trying to find out what he knows," Green said.

In a way, Margerum's new house is a reaction against not just look-alike suburban subdivisions but against some of the new rebuilding projects in inner-city Detroit.

"Houses are being replaced with the same housing styles, resulting in a new 'old' Detroit," he said. "In many of the completely abandoned areas, there's now an opportunity for a new Detroit image to reestablish neighborhoods with more distinction of a truly new Detroit."

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