

# Survey and Research Report on the Bonnie Ethel Cone House

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Bonnie Ethel Cone House is located at 9234 Sandburg Avenue, Charlotte, NC

**2. Name and address of the current owner of the property:**

GENEVIEVE L BARNHART  
3280 KINGERY CT  
FAIRBANKS AK 99709

**3. Representative photographs of the property:** This report contains representative photographs of the property.



**4. A map depicting the location of the property:**



**5. Current Tax Parcel Reference and Deed to the property:** The tax parcel number for the property is 04934306. The most recent deed for the property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Books 16621-90.

**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by William Jeffers.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description prepared by Stewart Gray.

**8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S 160A-400.5.**

**a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture and/or cultural importance:** The Commission judges that the property known as the Bonnie Ethel Cone House possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1) The Bonnie Ethel Cone House served as the residence of Bonnie Ethel Cone (1907-2003), the founder of what is today known as the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

2) The Bonnie Ethel Cone House was designed by William M. (Murray) Whisnant (1932 - ) a noted North Carolina architect and proponent of Modernism.

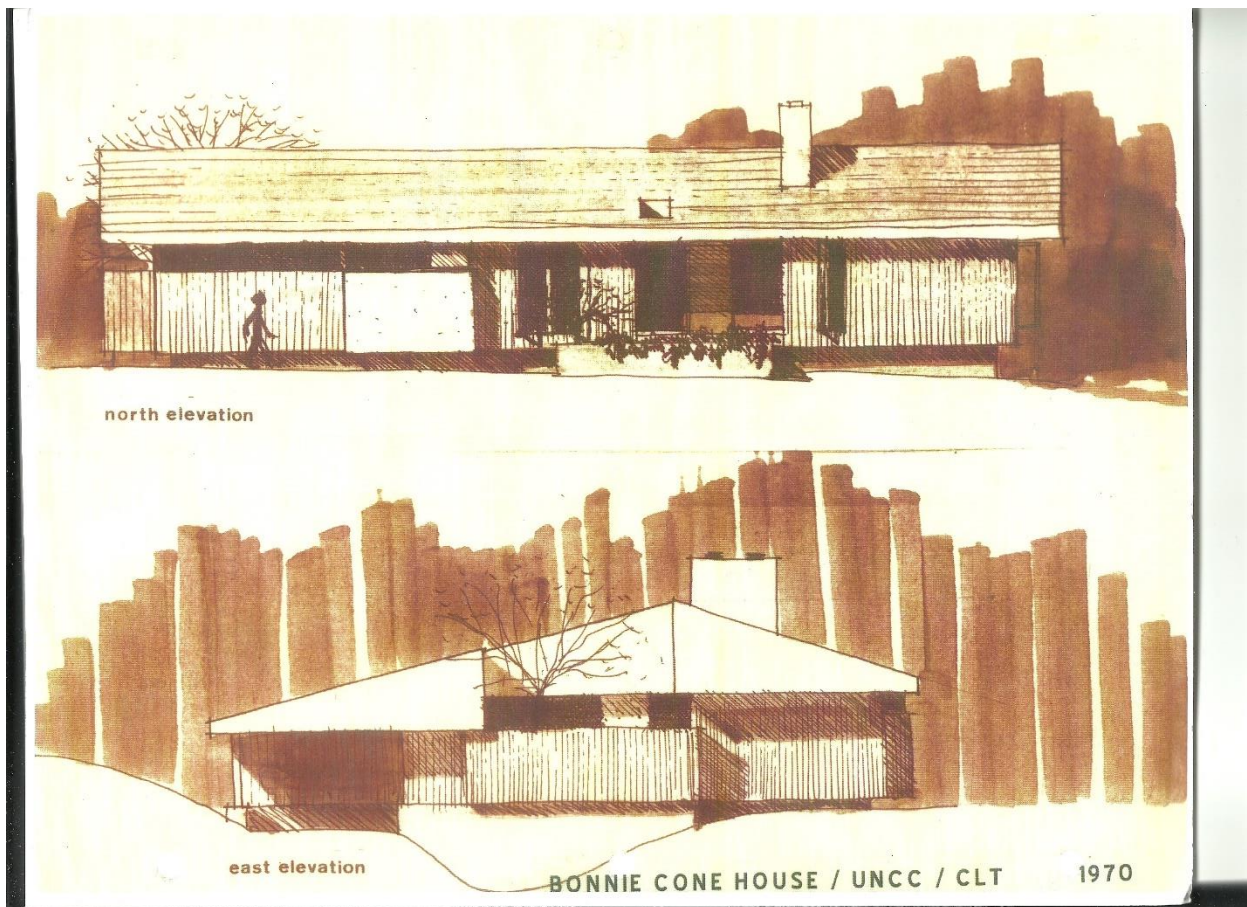
**b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association:** The Commission contends that the architectural description in this report demonstrates that the property known as the Bonnie Ethel Cone House meets this criterion.

**9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal:** The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the property is \$180,800.

**10. Portion of the Property Recommended for Designation:** The exterior of the house, and the land associated with tax parcel.

**11. Date of Preparation of this Report:** April 15, 2019

Prepared by: William Jeffers and Stewart Gray



The home at 9234 Sandburg Avenue, situated in the College Downs community, located in the University City neighborhood of Charlotte, North Carolina, is unique for several reasons. Most importantly it served as the residence of Bonnie Ethel Cone (1907-2003), the founder of what is today known as the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Trained as a math instructor, the quiet and humble Cone was herself skeptical of the task facing her when appointed director of the Charlotte Center of the University of North Carolina in August 1947, but not only did she excel at this new position, she used it as a vehicle by which to establish the first permanent, and publicly supported, institution of higher education in Charlotte.

Additionally, the house stands apart from the surrounding built environment for two other reasons – the first is that it was designed by William M. (Murray) Whisnant (1932 - ), a noted North Carolina architect and proponent of Modernism. The second reason, stemming directly from the first, is that much of Whisnant’s prominent architectural designs were for institutional and commercial application. That should not imply that Whisnant shunned residential design, he readily admits that he designed somewhere between “forty or fifty” houses – but with the caveat that “not all of those are worth getting excited about” because most of those clients were not seeking him out for a modernist design.<sup>1</sup> This was because Modernism was never able to gain much traction in the residential home market; this was especially true in Charlotte, where colonial revival architecture dominates. In terms of raw numbers, there are only a finite number of Modernist designed residences in Charlotte to begin with. As the city’s built environment continues to grow, evolve, and reinvent itself, the extant stock of Modernist-designed homes will dwindle further. Designation of the Bonnie E. Cone House serves two goals: It will recognize

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart Gray, “Survey and Research Report on the Cohen-Fumero House,” *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission*, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Survey-and-Research-on-the-Cohen-Fumero-House.pdf>.

and preserve a unique residential design by a noted Charlotte architect, while also recognizing one of Charlotte's most important educators – one whose legacy now transcends far beyond the municipal boundaries of this city to encompass a region, connecting it to a much larger world.

## **Murray Whisnant and Modernism**

Murray Whisnant was born and raised in Charlotte, graduating from Central High School in 1950. He attended North Carolina State University's School of Design, led by Henry L. Kamphoefner, a champion of the Modernist design. Modernism as a design concept came to North Carolina in the 1930's through the experimental Black Mountain College located near Asheville. Kamphoefner's appointment as dean of the School of Design in 1948 further heralded a transformation of the architecture school at North Carolina State University – from one of relative obscurity – to one of the leading proponents of Modernism in the rapidly changing postwar south. Whisnant studied under Kamphoefner and noted residential architect George Matsumoto, but credits faculty member Eduardo Fernando Catalano as his primary influence. In addition to the regular faculty, Kamphoefner also hosted visiting architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies Van der Rohe, Richard Neutra, and Buckminster Fuller. Whisnant was one of ten students chosen to study with Fuller, recalling how he “was inspired by the famous designer.”<sup>2</sup> Known colloquially by the expression “form follows function” Modernism held several principles with “an emphasis on function and utility, a concern with structure, the use of modern materials and technology, and interests in abstract beauty, sculptural form, and symbolism.”<sup>3</sup> As a form of architectural design, Modernism rejected the concepts of wealth, status, and elitism

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<sup>2</sup> Stewart Gray, “Survey and Research Report on the Cohen-Fumero House,” *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission*, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Survey-and-Research-on-the-Cohen-Fumero-House.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Sherry Joines Wyatt & Sarah Woodard, “Post World War Two Survey of Charlotte-Mecklenburg,” *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission*, <http://www.cmhpf.org/Surveys/postww2survey.htm>.

that had driven designs of the past. Modernist architects offered a new paradigm – one that reconsidered traditional values through innovative design. After graduating in 1956, Whisnant worked for several architectural firms before partnering with Charles Wheatley in 1960. Under the Wheatley Whisnant letterhead, some of the firm’s notable designs included Mann and Scott Halls on the campus of North Carolina State University, and the Van Hecke-Wettach Building at the University of North Carolina School of Law. Closer to home, the Rowe Arts Building at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte<sup>4</sup> and Carmel Presbyterian Church were also Whisnant Wheatley designs. After starting his own firm in 1978, Whisnant continued bringing innovative designs to Charlotte through projects such as the Mecklenburg County Office Building, Providence Medical Center, the American Red Cross Building and Blood Center, the offices of Pfister Chemicals, and the McDonald’s Restaurant in the Overstreet Mall complex.<sup>5</sup> In addition to architecture, Whisnant also designed “signage, logos, T-shirts, client birthday cards, furniture and bumper stickers,” noting tongue-in-cheek that “some of our best work” was done “on restaurant napkins.”<sup>6</sup>

Whisnant postulates one reason why Modernism was never able to become a more visible element of Charlotte’s residential built environment stemmed from a desire for “reminiscent architecture,” incorporating designs that are “nostalgic, and going back to what they (the homebuyer) imagined things used to be.”<sup>7</sup> There were exceptions to this point of view, two being Herb Cohen and Jose Fumero. Close friends of Whisnant, they retained his services in 1960 for the design of their home. While giving few restrictions in how it was designed, other

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<sup>4</sup> “Rowe Gallery Opens Big,” *Carolina Journal*, Volume 7, No. 3, September 20, 1971, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> “The Kamphoefner Prize,” Murray Whisnant Papers, MC 00564, Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University Libraries, Raleigh, NC.

<sup>6</sup> “The Kamphoefner Prize,” Murray Whisnant Papers, MC 00564, Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University Libraries, Raleigh, NC.

<sup>7</sup> William Jeffers, *Interview with Murray Whisnant*, April 19, 2018.

than wanting it “as far out as possible,” Cohen and Fumero did have specific needs in what they needed in a house: space for entertaining guests and displaying art and a private, yet connected space for Fumero’s parents to reside.”<sup>8</sup> Whisnant was able to meet these needs by designing the home around the concept of “rationality and logic,” utilizing a central core containing the kitchen, bathrooms, and air conditioning unit, which afforded ample space for entertaining guests and displaying art.<sup>9</sup> When completed in 1961, the Cohen-Fumero House became one of the focal points of Charlotte’s emerging artistic community and, as one of the city’s earliest surviving examples of Modernism in residential architecture, it was designated a local historic landmark in 2013.<sup>10</sup>

### **Bonnie Cone**



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<sup>8</sup> Stewart Gray, “Survey and Research Report on the Cohen-Fumero House,” *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission*, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Survey-and-Research-on-the-Cohen-Fumero-House.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Stewart Gray, “Survey and Research Report on the Cohen-Fumero House,” *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission*, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Survey-and-Research-on-the-Cohen-Fumero-House.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Stewart Gray, “Survey and Research Report on the Cohen-Fumero House,” *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission*, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Survey-and-Research-on-the-Cohen-Fumero-House.pdf>.

At the time of the completion of the Cohen-Fumero House, Whisnant was already friends with Bonnie Cone, then the President of Charlotte College. Given the directorship of the Charlotte Center of the University of North Carolina in 1947, she turned a night school created for educating the large volume of returning World War II veterans under the G.I. Bill into a two-year junior college – supported by local sales taxes and supervised by the Charlotte City School System. Cone’s dream, one also shared by many of the City’s influential civic and business leaders, was for Charlotte to have a four-year publicly supported university – and tirelessly worked toward achieving that goal – first through the establishment of Charlotte College in 1949, then lobbying local and state officials about the need for greater access to higher education in the region. She also brought this message directly to the public whenever the opportunity arose: be it through a news story about the college, a planned speech to a local civic organization, or even in her individual correspondence. Her efforts in this regard culminated with the elevation of Charlotte College to a four-year senior institution in 1964, followed in 1965 by its elevation to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte).

As Charlotte College began to develop on its campus in the northeast corner of Mecklenburg County in 1961 a new problem arose for Cone – her commute. This had not been an issue when Charlotte College was located at Central High School because she lived close by in an apartment on Sharon Road in Myers Park.<sup>11</sup> However, the long drive, coupled with her even longer workdays, prompted a decision to find a better living arrangement. Dr. Loy Witherspoon and Librarian James D. Ramer proposed a solution to her dilemma by encouraging “Miss Cone to buy a piece of property out where ours is to build her home.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “About Bonnie E. Cone,” *Cone University Center, Division of Student Affairs, University of North Carolina at Charlotte*, <https://cone.uncc.edu/about-bonnie-e-cone>.

<sup>12</sup> Christina Wright, *Interview with Loy Witherspoon*, June 3, 2010.



Witherspoon and Ramer lived in College Downs, a suburban post-World War II neighborhood designed by the John Crosland Company. Witherspoon noted that the neighborhood became a community of faculty, pointing out “at one time, there were eight or ten (faculty members) on my street (Sandburg Avenue).<sup>13</sup> Taking Witherspoon and Ramer’s advice, Cone purchased a lot on the corner of Sandburg and Millay Avenues from Johnnie H. and Jane C. Jones in September of 1966.<sup>14</sup> Crosland’s residential neighborhoods featured typical standardized design styles based on ranch or split-level homes, situated on large lots. The company, however, deviated slightly from that pattern when designing College Downs. According to Witherspoon, both he and Ramer disliked the standardized designs Crosland offered. They preferred, instead, to design their own homes. While this was not something Crosland had done before, the company acquiesced, allowing them to draw up architectural plans -- with the caveat that Crosland develop the working plans.<sup>15</sup> Crosland also made a similar arrangement with Cone, who turned to her friend Murray Whisnant to help her design her home.

According to Whisnant, the property itself presented no particular challenge: “it had a little bit of a slope and I don’t think there were too many trees we had to deal with or design around.”<sup>16</sup> A *Charlotte Observer* article highlighting her home in 1969 pointed out that she preserved most of the property’s natural wilderness by having “the trees hand cut before building began.”<sup>17</sup> Cognizant of the fact that her home needed to be both economical as well as welcoming, Whisnant utilized a basic toadstool design with the main floor extending over a brick base. Said Whisnant, “I remember that I was very interested in creating a courtyard. That was

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<sup>13</sup> Christina Wright, *Interview with Loy Witherspoon*, June 3, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Mecklenburg County Real Estate Conveyances, Book 2783, Page 441, September 1, 1966.

<sup>15</sup> Christina Wright, *Interview with Loy Witherspoon*, June 3, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Whisnant Interview.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Ingold, “Bonnie Cone Built House In The Woods,” *Charlotte Observer*, June 22, 1969, p. 1E.

my main focus.”<sup>18</sup> The courtyard, adjacent to Cone’s bedroom, was accessible via sliding glass doors and enclosed with flowers and shrubs. Whisnant also added a second entrance via the breakfast room, feeling that it was important the kitchen open up into the courtyard as well.<sup>19</sup> One of the features that made it special for Cone was that the courtyard offered privacy that a backyard could not always guarantee. However, she also wanted “the feeling of being out-of-doors.”<sup>20</sup> Whisnant responded accordingly with full-length windows in the living room and an open back wall with a sliding glass door to a patio deck off the dining room, providing her complete views of her backyard.<sup>21</sup> In his original design, the roofline was to extend over the patio deck but due to budgetary concerns, Whisnant shortened it to save money – the result that pleased Cone immensely. “I’m so glad we did that,” she recalled, “because I love to look at the moon and stars at night, and it would have been hard to crane your neck to see them if the deck had been covered.”<sup>22</sup> Contrary to rumor, Whisnant did not incorporate mathematical motifs into the design as an homage to Cone’s educational background. “Were I doing that house today,” stated Whisnant, “I’d probably focus more on the Fibonacci Numbers and the golden section,” but back then, “I can’t claim that.”<sup>23</sup> He made one change to his original plan, however: “at some point, it was decided there was enough slope to add a lower level.” With the addition, she used it as an apartment, leasing it out to students as needed.<sup>24</sup> Cone would go on to live in the house until 2001, devoted in her retirement to that which she had been devoted to as a working adult: The University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

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<sup>18</sup> Whisnant Interview.

<sup>19</sup> Whisnant Interview.

<sup>20</sup> Ingold, p. 1E.

<sup>21</sup> Ingold, p. 1E.

<sup>22</sup> Ingold, p. 1E.

<sup>23</sup> Whisnant Interview.

<sup>24</sup> Whisnant Interview.

## ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The one-story, side-gabled 1967 Bonnie Cone House faces roughly north on a suburban lot in the College Downs neighborhood in northeastern Charlotte. The neighborhood sits close to Highway 49, with the campus of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte located across the highway. The neighborhood contains mostly one-story houses dating from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and also contains two large suburban-style church campuses. The Cone House appears to be in the oldest portion of the neighborhood and is located just one block from Highway 49, and is bordered to rear by the campus of the St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church. Despite its proximity to the highway and the college and church campuses, the property has retained a distinctly verdant suburban character. The .642-acre lot slopes down towards the southwest, and the entrance to the house is slightly below street level.



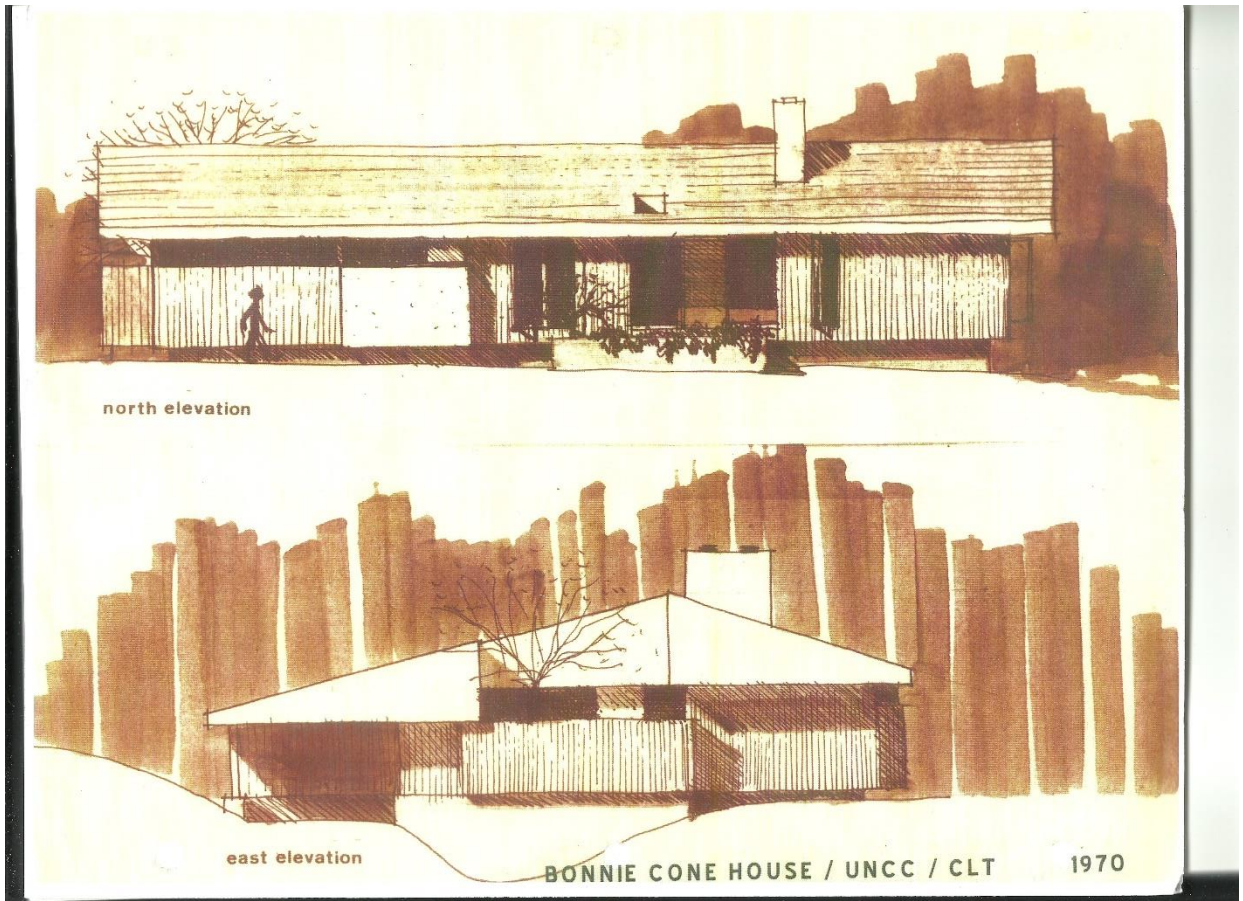
The Cone House is a Mid-Century Modern style house in the ranch-house form. The five-bay-wide façade is asymmetrical, and projects two feet past the tall brick foundation laid in running bond. The second bay from the west is a recessed porch containing the entrance, accessed by a set of wooden steps which may be of the original design. Step handrails appear to have been added. Narrow brick piers extend from the recessed foundation at each side of the porch. The porch shelters a slab door, bordered on each side by full-height direct-glazed windows. To the west of the door a corner of the interior chimney is exposed. The porch walls are covered with T1-11 plywood panels, which are used as siding on all elevations.



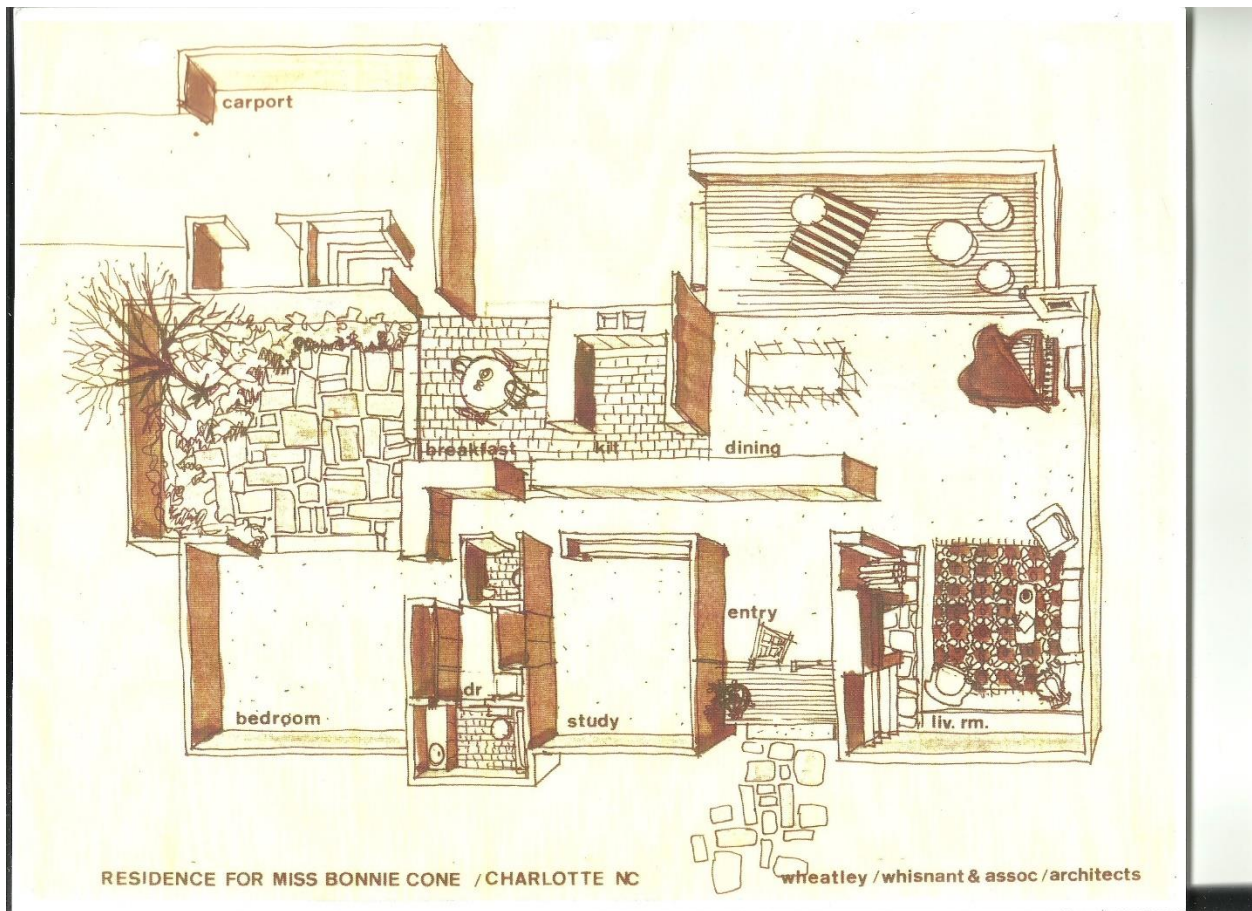
The second bay from the east projects nearly to the edge of the deep soffit. The projecting bay is brick laid in running bond. It stops shy of the soffit and is capped with a rowlock. Above the rowlock cap the bay is frame construction with T1-11 on the sides of the projecting bay, and vertical louvers on the front. The louvers screen a horizontal window. The middle bay contains a tall window that runs to the soffit and contains paired casement sash. The eastmost and westmost bays contain tall single-sash casement windows. The low-pitched roof is covered with asphalt shingles and features a relatively deep fascia. A corbeled interior chimney pierces the roof between the recessed porch and the roof ridge.



The east elevation of the house is notched-out along the ridge of the roof, leaving a half gable sheathed in flat plywood. This allows for a courtyard space bordered by the notched principal section of the house and an attached carport. This design is illustrated in the schematic plans shown below. Though it pre-dates deconstructivism, the east elevation appears deconstructed, as if the principal gable was split and was pushed to the rear of the house to create the carport. The east elevation of the principal section of the house is blank, and like the façade extends past the foundation.



A wall sheathed in T1-11 extends from the east elevation to the carport, enclosing the courtyard. The wall rests on a brick foundation and is topped with a copper cap.



The half-gable of the carport's shed roof is sheathed with smooth plywood paneling. The tall end of the half-gable rests on the courtyard wall. The south end of the carport's roof is supported by a beam sheathed in T1-11, which in turn is supported by two 4X4 posts and a small wall section near the rear of the carport. The wall section and the posts rest on a partial-height brick wall.







The carport extends past the rear elevation of the principal section of the house, but the slopes of the roofs align. The west elevation of the carport is blank.



The rear elevation features a ribbon window composed of two narrow casement sash and two wide fixed sash. To the west of the ribbon window the rear elevation is pierced by six glazed metal sliding doors. The doors open onto a deck, supported by four 6X6 posts. Below the deck is a full-height brick basement wall pierced by two sets of glass sliding doors. Between the sliding doors is an awning window set high in the wall.



The west elevation features a prominent smooth-plywood gable. The elevation is pierced by an off-centered window composed of a large fixed sash above a wide awning sash. Above the window, a second direct-glazed window is set in a recess in the gable. The sides of the recess contain louvered vents. The elevation projects two feet past the brick foundation wall, which is pierced by a single awning window.