

ATLANTA

# Playing House

Haus Gables doesn't ask to be taken too seriously, but it would be a mistake to do otherwise.

By Zach Mortice

Haus Gables both fits in with its neighbors in Atlanta's Old Fourth Ward and stands apart from them. The house, designed by architect Jennifer Bonner, looks to the single-family-home typology as a point of departure, both celebrating and critically exaggerating its features.



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There's an irresistible meta-critique at the heart of architect Jennifer Bonner's Haus Gables in Atlanta, asking: What if you blurred the lines between real architecture and the media and methods used to simulate it, namely drawings and models?

A professor at Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) with a practice of her own, Bonner is fascinated by this potential interchangeability. She exhibited a maquette of the recently completed house at the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial; the wooden "dollhaus" with hinged walls that swung open exposing the interiors was moodily photographed to emphasize the design's riot of roof gables, which lay somewhere between McMansion convention and German expressionism. The real Haus Gables is scaled up to 2,200 square feet, and walking into it reveals how little has changed in that translation.

It even has the tectonics to match. The two-story, two-bedroom house was assembled from 87 cross-laminated timber (CLT) panels bolted together with foot-long screws. These massive custom-milled panels, up to 9.5 inches thick and 34 feet long, provide both structure and interior



Top: The house is crowned by six gables—intersecting planes of cross-laminated timber—which define the experience of the interiors.

Above: Bonner, who is from Alabama and taught at Georgia Tech before Harvard, studied and cataloged gable types throughout Atlanta; these eventually formed the basis of the house's riotous ceiling geometry.

surfacing. The sheer material heft and lack of seams in the woodwork make it easy to imagine sliding an entire floor or wall into place, as in a dollhouse. The interior finishes are accordingly playful: An Instagram-influenced millennial-pink vibe abounds, and the overall color palette is heavy on sunny hues (marble-patterned vinyl tile in a canary yellow) and cool pastels (teal vinyl tile called Speckled Caribbean Cruise). Upmarket faux finishes, including Italian tiles that impersonate terrazzo and marble, move from the floor and up the walls at wainscoting level. (Bonner hand-drew the placement of the finishes for the contractor.) Some of the tiles are only one-sixteenth of an inch thick, "stuck on the wall, like a sticker," she says.

These winking moves belie a cunning spatial complexity. The intersecting CLT planes that form the ceiling of the house dash down toward thresholds and dart back up over living spaces. The outline of one peak forms a loggia, and another poignantly frames a child's bedroom.





At moments the ceiling geometry gathers in an uneasy, jagged equipoise, while at others it flattens out completely. The house's insides seem to expand and contract like an accordion.

"It's four times bigger inside than it is outside," says Mack Scogin of Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects, Bonner's colleague at the GSD and unofficial dean of Atlanta's community of experimental architects. "As we say in the South, she's somethin' else."

"Somethin' else" is a decent summary of what Bonner is after with this project. "We can't just keep doing the same old paradigms," she says. "This house did not start from looking at Mies's Farnsworth House. It's not coming from the canon."

Rather, the design took its cues from the formal vocabulary of the suburban home, in particular the pitched roof. Beginning with her 2014 *Domestic Hats* exhibition, Bonner has cataloged all the bumptious elements developers deploy

Top: The interiors feature a wealth of faux finishes, including tiles that simulate terrazzo and marble and ceramic tiles that are a dead ringer for plywood.

Right: The roofline's peaks and valleys are a looming presence throughout the house, attuned to the movement within it.

Opposite: Applied like stickers, the remarkably thin tiles move up the walls at wainscoting level.



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to ennoble that requisite grand foyer or compulsory home theater, and these same gables subsequently made their way into the "dollhaus" model and into Haus Gables.

If bulk home builders are the originators, then Bonner is the codifier, indexer, and interpreter, all in one: For her lectures on the topic, she has diagrammed "chamfered triple hips with asymmetrical

triple gables" and "front-facing gables with a camelbacked hip, plus a rotated gable." Seen through this lens, her work is akin to that of Kate Wagner, creator of the viral McMansion Hell blog. Both recast seemingly innocent elements of the built environment within the context of popular, internet-based culture, but where Wagner annotates real estate photography with pithy asides, Bonner

presses this ungainly source material into the service of a progressive, yet approachable architecture.

An Alabama native who attended the GSD, Bonner is interested in exploring the plastic Americana and floral wallpaper she grew up with, as well as "super-normal American furniture, like water beds," she says. "We had water beds." (Her practice is tellingly called MALL, an





acronym for the irreverent “Mass Architectural Loopty Loops.”) Although Bonner’s work might strike a populist pitch, Haus Gables isn’t particularly attuned to its place, a quality it inadvertently shares with its new neighbors in the gentrifying Old Fourth Ward. Bonner instead embraces a distinctly Southern sensibility to fake it till you make it, deploying aspirational flourishes and

reliefs to her heart’s content. Colleagues whom she takes to visit the house push back on not letting the CLT shine by itself, but that would be a bit too Scandinavian, she says, too piously Lutheran. And her insistence on the surface hasn’t come at the expense of thoughtful construction; look closely at the CLT panels, and a pattern emerges—stick framing coalesced into a solid

mass. It’s “just two-by-sixes glued together in a fancy factory in Austria,” Bonner says, “but it’s still the same material.” This isn’t to suggest that building a house out of CLT is an easy thing to do. Indeed, the project required four engineers, including specialists in CLT. Bonner had to preplan where electrical outlets and utilities would be placed so that a CNC router could dig out the channels.

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The heaviest panels weigh 3,500 pounds, yet all of them were craned into place in just 14 days. The remaining construction took about a year, hampered by exceptionally long commutes for Bonner, who continued to teach at the GSD. (She bought the property and began the project five years ago, when she was teaching at Georgia Tech. Having financed the construction herself, she plans on renting the house out.) Haus Gables is her attempt at a pure architecture unmolested by the grubby negotiations of construction, thus closing the looping between screen, model, and building site. This hasn’t happened exactly as she would have liked. Inspecting the nicks and scratches the CLT endured during installation, Bonner frets, “I have to find a woodworker that treats it like a piece of furniture.” In that slippage between referent and building, she’s still figuring things out. In fall 2018 Bonner taught a class at the GSD on architectural representation, pulling in practices from the art world and popular culture—very broadly defined. (Think historical French cake-frosting techniques and the light-and-form art installations of Barbara Kasten.) There again, Bonner is searching for new points of departure. Her interest in interrogating representation is shared by many of her peers, prompted by the latest of architecture’s self-perceived crises brought on by the rapid evolution of digital media and protocols. Her Haus Gables is a powerful signal that this entire subgenre of academic inquiry can nonetheless be harnessed toward a physical architecture, even an inspired one. ■



Opposite: The house’s gable medley is best appreciated in the top-floor living room.

Above, left: One gable shelters a loggia on the long side of the house.

Right: Bonner hand-drew the placement of all the finishes, including the marble-impersonating ceramic tiles in the bathroom, for the contractor.

Below: A gable rises above a bedroom.

