

# MARGARET AUSTIN CENTER



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An Experimental House Built in 1969 by a Collective  
of Architecture School Dropouts Called Gulfcoast  
Survives Against All Expectations as a Center for  
Healing and Devotion Sustained by the Sweat and  
Generosity of Ecumenical Buddhists and Many Others

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AS night falls on Margaret's farm an hour west of Houston, the heat lifts just a bit, and the four or five college-age kids who have been out there for months banging away on bare planks and beams are finally calling it quits for the day. It's 1969, late summer, and most of their construction is complete on what they are calling the "Chappell Hill House."

They share a simple meal, maybe a pot of beans and some store-bought sliced bread under the light of a couple of bare bulbs strung from a wire. Margaret Austin has come down from her house at the north end of the property to survey their progress and deliver a bowl of tomatoes picked that day from her garden. Though she is about 50 years old, and the mother of their school friends Linda and Martha, Margaret has never seemed all that parental. She is with it, interested in new ideas, comfortable with freaks, and happy to hang.

Flanked by her two German Shepherds, she takes a seat and a toke from the joint going 'round, and suggests that in a year from now, when all the work is over and done, they all come back for a party. She can't take her eyes off the building, which casts broad

shadows under the moonlight.

When the kids finally break for the night, they lay out bedrolls and cots wherever it suits them. One tramps out into the pasture for some time alone. Others crash out on the wood floor of the freaky new building. John Gilbert climbs to the top of it, up two flights of one-foot-by-one-foot stairs to a rooftop deck without a railing, where he can watch the shooting stars.

The building is designed to be Margaret's retreat, and it is so far-out in its conception that it makes people laugh out loud when they see it for the first time. It is made of three cubical volumes, lined up and set on one edge, so the exterior walls stretch out over the ground before making a right angle and meeting again at the apex directly above. The cube on the west has an entrance into one sloping wall without a door and contains a primitive kitchen and a bathroom without any sort of barrier or screen between them. Kelly Gloger, who had learned to shape Fiberglas while building surfboards, has surfaced one corner of the kitchen-cum-bathroom into a large open shower.

The center volume is the largest, with enormous, heavy sash windows on the undersides that have been salvaged from a de-

**Opposite:** The "Chappell Hill House" as built by Southcoast in 1969. Photo courtesy Pepper Mouser and David Cerruti.

**BY  
HANK  
HANCOCK**

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molished farmhouse nearby. You can see out to the horizon, but the windows face the ground below. The stairway, pitched at 45 degrees—not a problem for the kids, but already a bit of a chore for Margaret—leads to a large landing and a northeast-facing balcony. Huge benches built into the east and west edges upstairs and down make plenty of room for improvised seating or crashing out.

Forty years later, one of the builders, Pepper Mouser, can identify elements of Texas frontier tradition in this central space, with the open windows suggesting a sort of dogtrot or breeze-way. Another of the team, John Gilbert, is doubtful that they had any such awareness. “We were just kids.”

In 1969, the eastern box is entirely open on the first floor, a stables or a carport, while the second floor, which leads from the center landing, is a closed and quiet space with a built-in bed and room for a stove. This would soon be Margaret's bedroom.

The angled north and south walls, the steep stairwells, and the unguarded landings make for an uncanny experience. You must always be mindful while making your way through this house. Watch your step and watch your head. Take a moment to orient yourself in every corner of every room. Such mindfulness is likely part of Margaret's developing meditative practice.

Immediately surrounding the building, Margaret has planted five pecan trees for shade and is already making plans to add a couple of stands of bamboo, a couple of oaks. The building and the new trees stand alone in the middle of Margaret's 40 acres of pasture.

The entire project is a sort of improvisation, what Mouser calls “a building that happened.” The kids call themselves “gue-

rilla builders.” They go to a building site, live there, work in charrette, with or without plans, and stay until it's done. In this case, they have a chipboard model to work from, and they draw their designs on the very planks that go into the building, leaving behind precious little other documentation. They pay just \$30 a week to anyone who pitches in, plus “room and board,” such as it is.

The kids had all met one another, and met Linda and Martha just a few years earlier, at the University of Houston (UH), amid the network of students protesting the Vietnam War. Kenneth Carbajal, only recently graduated from the College of Architecture, became a colleague and motivator. “He was our professor, but we were friends, did things together. It was the sixties, things were getting kind of crazy and interesting,” says Pepper Mouser. In January 1967 Mouser and three other students moved into an apartment with Carbajal on Oakdale Street a block south of Southmore Boulevard. Right away, they set to work cutting holes in walls and rebuilding the interior. Soon, the space was featured in a photo spread in *Progressive Architecture*.

Ten to twelve others, including Steve and Susan Jackson, David Cerruti, Galen Hope, and Ben Holmes, lived together in “Alabama House,” across the corner from San Jacinto High School. Margaret lived in River Oaks on Wickersham, but had kept her family's previous home on Kipling Street, which she allowed the students to use as a crash pad, darkroom, and staging ground. None of these residents was stable or continuous. Mouser, for one, describes himself in those days as semi-nomadic, staying for periods in various houses.

Opposite (Clockwise from Top Left): First floor interior of the Chappell Hill House; construction in 1969; the “Pumphouse Gang”; and Margaret Austin. Photos courtesy of David Cerruti.



In Carbajal's sophomore design class, he handed out an assignment to come up with a completely new way to design a 50,000-square-foot space. Student Pete Voorhees imagined a box set on its edge, the interior made into a sort of multilevel treehouse.

In May 1968, Carbajal, cognizant of the radical architectural movements erupting all at once in California and the Northeast, and soon to take its momentous stand here in Texas, proposed that their group identify as Southcoast. It didn't take much to incorporate: just a name and a stack of fliers made it real. They took full advantage of the university's offset press and later its Xerox machines.

In the meantime, the architecture school was barely functioning, losing its dean twice in one year, its students up in arms, its accreditation under threat. The one bright spot was the arrival in spring 1969 of Ant Farm provocateurs Chip Lord and Doug Michels. Members of Southcoast went to greet them at the airport in a hearse. As ostensible lecturers, Lord and Michels would grant students credit for attending happenings over the spring and summer at Padre and Freeport where space and time were deliberately set loose by means of parachutes, inflatables, and lysergic acid.

Students went looking outside the university for a meaningful education. John Gilbert went on taking new building projects across the country, regularly interrupting his studies at UH until he was five years late graduating. Mouser and several others just never went back, figuring that an education was something else entirely from a degree.

The members of Southcoast are not found in the UH yearbooks of their day. The Anderson Library at UH has nearly no record of their activity. In fact, Southcoast is archived nearly nowhere. Today, its surviving members retain only their own photos and film and video, and memories. They gave little thought to posterity in those days, so determined were they to Be Here Now.

In summer 1968, Southcoast has moved to Vermont at the invitation of Yale University's David Sellers to work on one of several domestic buildings around Goddard College that will go on to become architectural touchstones for the emerging design/build movement. They bring Voorhees's tilted cube design with them and share it freely.

It is a loose coalition, borrowing and sharing and pitching in. Membership is an informal matter. Their nomadic sensibility means you just have to show up. The key members identified in this article by no means comprise a complete listing.

Martha Austin drives up to New England too, transferring to a college in Boston to study art history. She

soon finds out that owning a car in Boston is just a huge hassle, so she begs her mother to come get the car and bring it back to Texas. Margaret brings Southcoast's Tom Morey with her, and on that road trip they begin to sketch out ideas for a new home for her in Chappell Hill, a place where Margaret can retreat from the city, enjoy the quiet and solitude, and meditate. It will take the shape of a series of cubic volumes set on their edges.

The occult relationship between Chappell Hill House and the design/build landmarks around Plainfield, Vermont, and Maine is unmistakable today, though the Chappell Hill House has not so far earned much academic notice. It will follow a rather different trajectory.

The 1968 Vermont project and the 1969 Chappell Hill project both provide on-the-job training, opportunities to experiment and fail and try again. The guerilla builders draw on each other's disparate skills. Tom Morey and his brother Mike know how to build a foundation, Voorhees knows plumbing and electrical systems, Gilbert knows a thing or two about how a frame bears its load. Project runner Mouser, who will go on to work in video sales and installation, brings cameras that everyone takes turns operating. They film one another riding dirt bikes, shirtless, across Margaret's pastures.

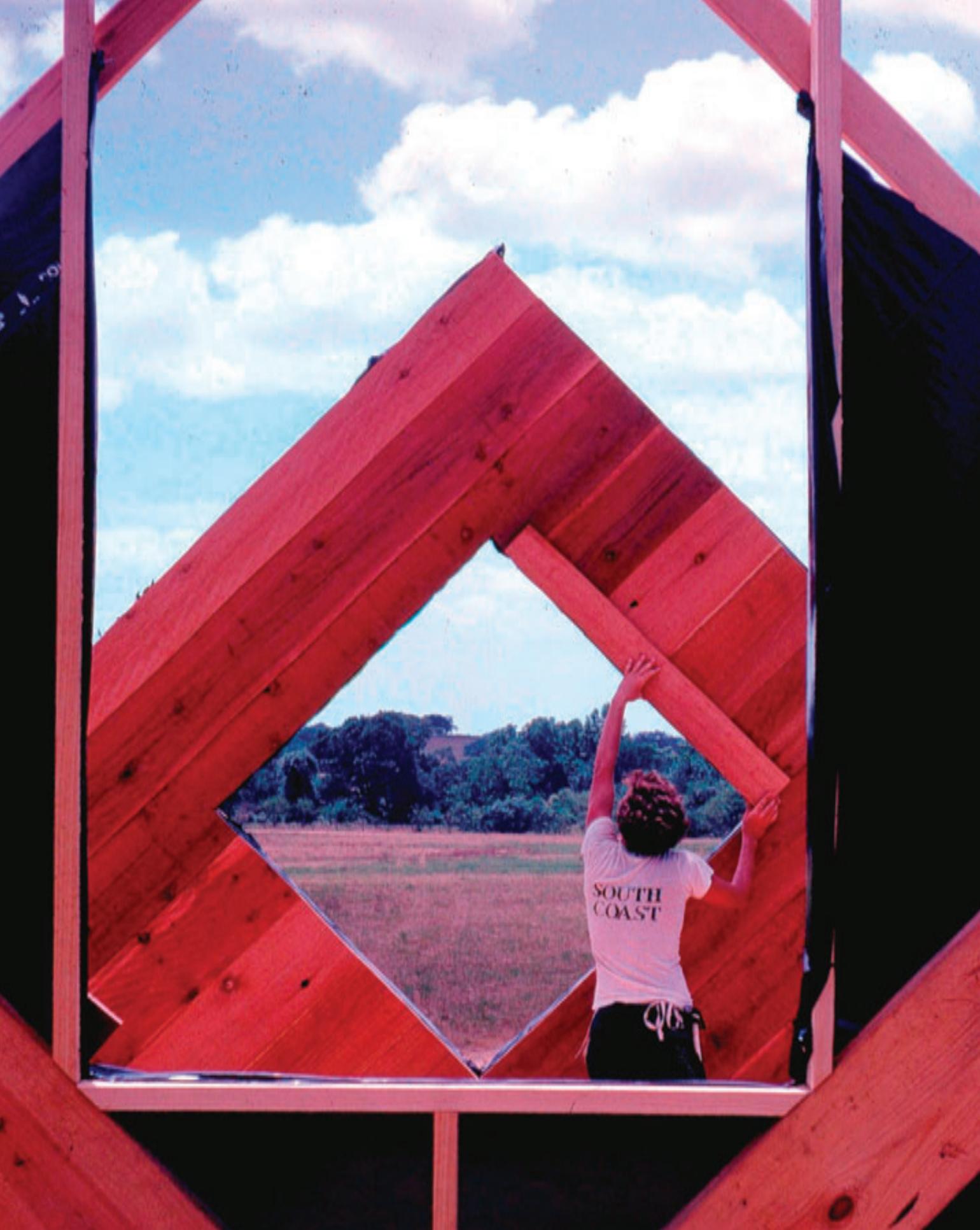
As Ant Farm will demonstrate in the following few years, architecture, building, and media comprise an emerging, single enterprise. Southcoast will go on to build a media van to join Ant Farm's fleet the following year.

At some point in Chappell Hill, they dig a septic tank for the flush toilet so they can take down that latrine out in the woods. By the end of summer, the hardest work is done. They come back on weekends through the fall and into winter to attend to details, and to try to fix their mistakes. The ground-facing windows are too complicated, their interlocking sashes too heavy, their Rube Goldberg mechanisms faulty. The sky-facing windows shed water.

Because they are guerilla builders, Southcoast will soon leave the site without a trace. It is a building that happened one summer. A year later, many of them accept Margaret's invitation to a blowsy, sun-drenched party, camping and cooking out, also documented on film belonging to Mouser.

After that they do not come back. They never expect the building to stand for 40 more years.

Opposite: A Southcoast member frames the prairie of Chappell Hill. Photo courtesy David Cerruti.



Thus begins the unending process of modifying and adding to and fixing up the iconic house at Chappell Hill.

It is 2012 when Susan Jackson attends a yoga retreat in out-of-the-way Chappell Hill, at a place called the Margaret Austin Center. Over a weekend of contemplation and held poses, Susan recognizes the cantilevered walls and ceilings of the bunkhouse attached to the main kitchen. She lives with her husband Steve just minutes away from there, so she soon brings him back with her to see what has become of Chappell Hill House.

Margaret Austin started to call her building the “Funny House” once the Southcoast kids had departed. Others would call it “Crazy House” or “Hippie House.”

In the early 1970s, Margaret had the open stables/carport beneath her bedroom enclosed to make a primitive kitchen shed, thus unburdening the bathroom on the other, west end of the building of its dual program. She installed a deck on the south side of the building and set out a big metal tub where she could bathe under the open sky.

She drove out from Houston each spring and fall to enjoy the quiet and calm, to meditate, to paint and play guitar, and to care for her horses. She would stay in Funny House, struggling with the drafts and the leaks. The building was constructed out of 1-by-12-foot cedar planks nailed to hand-built frames, without any sheathing, without much consideration at all for heating or cooling. She went to some effort to winterize the building, and moved an ornate Swedish woodstove into her room to keep warm.

She began to share her space with friends, inviting small groups up for weekends of quiet contemplation. Having developed deep friendships within Houston’s meditation community, Margaret hosted the first of an ongoing series of informal meditation retreats in 1980, led by teacher Steve Levine and organized by Lex Gillan of the Yoga Institute of Houston, with an invitation open to all.

Margaret moved out to Chappell Hill permanently in 1981 with plans to build a new house for herself, one more suitable for all seasons. She’d had enough of the leaks during every rainfall, the

awful heat for five months of the year, and the occasional freezing damp of winter.

But first she collaborated with Steve Bartha, one of her meditation fellows, to design and build a meditation hall for the large groups she was starting to host. It was a simple but inspiring shelter, facing east across the open pasture like a shadow box in reverse, initially open to the air on three sides, out of the sun except in the early mornings. The north and south walls and the roof converged from the open east end to a small western wall comprising a hand-crafted colored-glass panel. The meditation leader would sit on a low wooden platform at this focus-point and guide the visitors through a practice of insight and healing, aided by a setting both expansive and intimate, just right for a meditative practice committed to the natural environment, the sun and the wind and the rain. And the rain came in, leaking during heavy storms on the heads of the silent sitters.

In 1983, Margaret’s friend Doug Sprunt designed a small house for Margaret based on a sketch by architect Edward Rogers. It was built next to Funny House with a space for a small modern kitchen and bathroom. It had the pitched roof and sheltered porches of a traditional Texas farmhouse, and except for its clustered utilities, it was just a single large room with windows on all sides. Funny House became a commons for Margaret’s guests, and a home for a couple of years to her daughter Martha and her family. Retreat leaders sometimes boarded there. Most often, though, especially during the tough summer and winter months, it went unused.

In a couple more years Artie Kahn designed a second house to go next to Margaret’s, almost a mirror image of the first, with a doorway connecting the two. Local builder Willie Hayes handled much of the construction for these projects.

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The meditation retreats continued somewhat regularly, typically once in fall and once in spring. Occasionally, they held mid-winter retreats for the hardiest among them. The amenities were spare. Invitations, signed by Margaret, routinely advised guests to bring their own bedrolls and cots, and to bring their own food. No cooking was allowed at most retreats. Margaret would rent portable toilets for the weekend. Visitors mostly camped in tents. For the silent retreats, visitors were discouraged from bringing small children.

Noted spiritual teacher Ram Dass led a number of retreats over the years, which Margaret enjoyed immensely, preferring his light touch to the rather somber atmosphere of the silent retreats. He once drew around 400 visitors to the farm, teaching under a tent under the pecan trees before the meditation hall was built.

Margaret often arranged to cover the costs of the visiting teacher's travel expenses. At first visitors were freely admitted. Then they were encouraged to contribute funds to defray costs. In a few years, Insight Meditation Houston, a sangha founded in 1985 by Rodney Smith, took up the effort of organizing and operating the retreats. Margaret signed the invitation letters until 1988. But by then Insight Meditation Houston needed logistical and clerical facilities in Houston to manage a growing and active membership. They committed to keeping costs low, charging a very nominal fee for their retreats thereafter.

The meditation communities that had grown together at Margaret's farm organized occasional work retreats to tackle ongoing repairs and maintenance to the facilities. Volunteers cleared vines and overgrowth from the meditation hall, since named "the Zendo." The bamboo stands had to be cut back regu-

larly. Brick pathways were laid between buildings. Their emotional investment in Margaret's farm was matched by considerable sweat equity.

Margaret's last building project on the farm was a dining hall and kitchen, attached to the southeast end of Funny House. Architects John Sieber and Edward Rogers, both now longtime guests at Margaret's farm, designed a dining hall in 1983 to seat up to 40 people, with glass doors on three exposed faces for continuous views of the pastures south of Funny House. Topped by two parallel and steeply peaked rooftops, the attachment honored the eccentric lines of the original structure, now more than 20 years old. Margaret sold her antique green Rolls Royce to pay for the project, her last gift to the community that she had nurtured and accommodated for so long.

Margaret's farm had been a site of giving and sharing and exploration for 23 years by the time she died on September 9, 1992, at 74 years of age. With the permission of Martha and Linda, now far from Texas, Insight Meditation Houston forged ahead with their regular retreats while figuring out how they might hold onto a space that had become sacred to them. In a compilation of written memorials to Margaret that is kept at the center today, several committed members describe a perceptible difference in the atmosphere around Margaret's farm, a sense of holiness and peace, something wrought by years of intense spiritual practice. You can feel it when you come through the gate.

In less than a year, Insight Meditation Houston, joined by a group called Houston Zen Community, led the effort to raise funds, incorporate a board of directors, and founded the Margaret Austin Center as a non-profit organization. Their mission would be to open Margaret's farm to other small groups in need of a rural retreat center specially suited for spiritual

reflection and healing. Many sources credit Jane El-ioseph for steadfast leadership and vision. Brad Morris played a key role in the process of incorporating the organization.

It was a daunting prospect, somewhat perilous in its implications. All the informal and voluntary networks and efforts that had gone into sustaining their retreats would have to be formalized. They would have to hire staff. They would have to invite many, many more guests into their cherished space, one weekend after another, if they hoped to generate sufficient revenue to stay afloat. They would have to charge substantially larger fees than they ever had before, while insisting at the same time a central tenet of their mission was to be accessible and affordable. (Today their fees are still quite low.) And they knew that soon they would have to improve and enlarge the physical plant to accommodate more guests at a time. Newer retreat groups would not likely accept primitive camping conditions as a salubrious part of their weekend retreats.

But first they had to raise money. They could not secure foundation grant funding because the charitable purpose of Margaret Austin Center did not much apply to the needs of the poor or disadvantaged. A retreat center for middle-class folks needs middle-class folks to support it on their own. They sought funding from Margaret's old friends in Houston and mostly from among the membership of Insight Meditation Houston and the Zen Community.

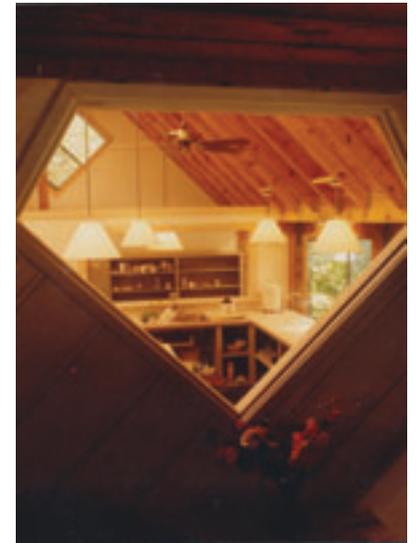
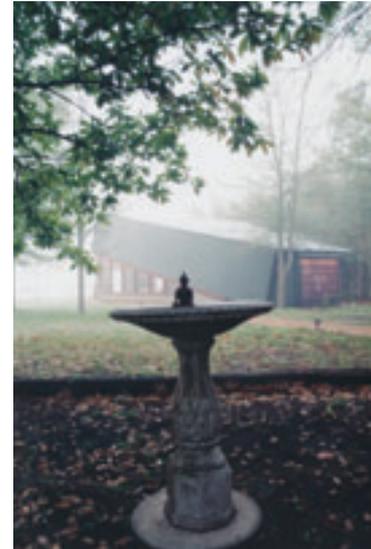
A sequence of gifts made the Margaret Austin Center possible, beginning with a single anonymous cash donation that inspired the community to finish what had quickly begun to seem unlikely. Then Martha and Linda, though they had a competitive offer from another buyer, delayed a sale until the Margaret



May 26, 1969  
prim. cost breakdown

STRUCTURE "A"		
Siding	5000 sq. ft. @ 25¢	1250.00
Roofing	1300 sq. ft. @ 16¢	208.00
Styrofoam	70 pos. @ \$2/e	140.00
Insulation	3000 sq. ft. @ 5¢	150.00
Floor		300.00
2x4's	4000 lin. ft. @ 12¢	480.00
		2928.00
Concrete		
Plumbing		492.00
Elec.		
Hardware		
Doors and Glass		
		-----
	Total Material cost	3000.00
Labour		1000.00
		-----
	Total, Struct. "A"	4000.00

Structure "B" breakdown not available at this time.



Opposite: A Southcoast member nails down flashing on the "Chappell Hill House." Photo courtesy David Cerruti.

Clockwise from Top Left: Budget proposal from Southcoast to Margaret Austin; Zendo at dawn; Pepper Mouser at 2012 reunion; window cut into "Chappell Hill House" to dining hall; and dining hall interior.

Austin Center could get on its feet. Finally, they agreed to sell the property to the center at a greatly reduced cost and on very generous terms. In less than two years, the Margaret Austin Center was taking reservations. In about five more years they were able to match costs with revenue.

All along, the center continued to address physical improvements, often led by John Sieber and Edward Rogers. Sieber, who passed away in 2011, left behind a trove of papers for each repair and addition, all with recorded notes of conversations with board members and others committed to the center. It is obvious from these records how seriously he took a collaborative and consensual approach to new building at the Margaret Austin Center. The center's Board of Directors also lent a stable, guiding vision over the years. A number of changes have taken place: as Margaret's house became a caretaker's quarters, bunk beds were installed in the Funny House renamed Edgar House, the horse stables were converted to a bunkhouse, a masterplan was developed, leaky windows replaced, decks removed and added, staircases replaced, bathrooms split, wheelchair access partially addressed, and land regraded.

Though Edgar House has retained its iconic stature at Margaret's Farm, its character and purpose have undergone many changes, and will continue to. Despite its remarkable architectural significance (so far undocumented in the academic literature), its survival was in doubt for years. More than one contractor came to evaluate Edgar House and judged the building a shambles, impossible to sustain into the new century. Giselle Ostman, the Margaret Austin Center's retreat manager, credits Steve Jackson, one of the original Southcoast members, with turning that dour assessment around.

In the six short months since Jackson had returned to Margaret's farm to see what had become of it, he offered to repair the Zendo at cost, in effect another gift to the center. In a very brief period in the summer of 2012 between scheduled retreats, using a sort of expedited project delivery at a small scale, he built an entirely new structure, in appearance identical to the original Zendo. With adequate planning this time around, it is completely sealed with new, properly functioning air-conditioning.

For the commemoration and the presentation of a plaque honoring his generous efforts, the Margaret Austin Center reached out to the surviving members of Southcoast—now in their sixties—to invite them to return to the site of their improbable achievement. Along with Martha Edgar—after whom they renamed Funny House—they converged at the center to share their stories and their memories of Margaret with their succes-

sors, the ecumenical Buddhists. Just a year earlier, such a gathering would have been impossible. Southcoast had been largely lost from the collective memory of the center. Today, that lineage is being restored.

By means of an oddball improvisation more than 40 years ago, an idea took shape in a wooden building made of strange angles, with more space inside than one might expect from its narrow footprint, yet offering cozy comfort in its corners and shared spaces. That building became an icon for a devoted community, an emblem of generosity of spirit, of selfless contribution, and of sharing one's bounty with others. Decades of custodial care have kept this idea and its emblem intact.

Today, the Margaret Austin Center is raising funds to address the challenging prospect of making over the Edgar House, starting with replacing its skirting and its roof. More needs may present themselves when the contractors explore the hidden spaces within. Construction begins this summer.

The center looks forward with new hope to continuing its mission, buoyed by the return of Steve Jackson and his obvious compassion for the center's needs and commitments, born from their common origin in Margaret Austin's open-heartedness.

As they plan for the upcoming improvements, carrying on a decades-long tradition of fixing and trying it again, they also will be looking to introduce future generations to their mission. They will be searching for young people committed to spiritual reflection and peace, searching for a sacred space to do their contemplative work, and willing to pour their own energy into a rewarding enterprise. We shall see who takes up the challenge. **C**

VISIT OFFCITE.ORG FOR  
ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS,  
MASTERPLANS, AND VIDEO  
TAKEN IN 1970.

Below: Exterior of dining  
hall designed in 1983 by  
Edward Rogers and John  
Sieber, and paid for by  
the sale of Margaret  
Austin's antique green  
Rolls Royce.



# MARGARET AUSTIN CENTER MASTERPLAN

