

family *business*

Husband-and-wife duo **Elissa Morgante** and Fred Wilson work in tandem to run both an architecture firm and a family

By Matt Alderton

ARCHITECT ELISSA MORGANTE IS A PRO AT MAINTAINING A healthful work-life balance. The president of Morgante Wilson Architects—a high-end residential-design firm that she owns with her husband, Fred Wilson—is also a mother of three, and family has always been her number-one priority. That’s why she joined her husband’s architecture firm in 1994. “It’s been a luxury to have my husband as my business partner because his agenda is very similar to mine,” she explains. “He understands that family comes first.”

Although her family obligations take precedent, Morgante’s design career has always been a priority, too. “I come from a very artsy family,” she says. As a child, Morgante moved around a lot. She remembers decorating new spaces with her mother and loading up on art courses in high school. “When I went to college, I took a class in environment and design, which got me going [in the industry],” she says. In 1981, Morgante graduated with a bachelor’s degree in environmental design from Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts.

After graduation, Morgante went to work for a Boston-based developer called The Beacon Companies, where she tackled commercial build-outs and interior-office design projects. Her clients included lawyers, insurance companies, and banks. In 1984, she left the firm to enroll in graduate school at the University of Illinois—Chicago, where she met her husband, a fellow architecture student.

Morgante chose the University of Illinois at Chicago for its renowned architecture program. “At the time, the program was being taught by all



Partnering Up

By running a business with her husband, Fred Wilson, Morgante is able to better balance her personal and professional lives.

the leading architects in the city,” she says. “It was a nice way to get my foot in the door.”

In 1987, just three years after moving to Chicago, Morgante graduated with her master’s in architecture and went to work for Chicago-based Schroeder Murchie Laya Associates. Kenneth Schroeder, the firm’s principal, later became the director of UIC’s architecture school. He invited Morgante to teach, which she did for eight years while she started her family.

Meanwhile, Morgante’s husband launched an architecture firm—originally Johnson Rogatz Wilson—with two colleagues, though the other principals eventually left the firm. Morgante joined the firm in 1994.

By artfully pairing their design careers with their family life, Morgante and Wilson have found personal and professional fulfillment.



1

Learning Curve

Morgante Wilson designed this Grand Beach, MI, vacation home to take full advantage of its lakeside setting; the curve of the building provides a lake view from all interior rooms.

2

Blending In

Composed of many natural materials, the exterior of this home, located just outside Chicago, IL, seems like a natural extension of the landscape.



3

Staycation

This North Shore home, in Chicago, IL, is based on turn-of-the-century Rhode Island retreats. Timber-beam ceilings and the wide expanses of windows help this main residence feel like a vacation home.



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Stair Master

Morgante Wilson built this staircase in a residence just outside of Chicago, IL; the home was designed for a family of seven.

The firm launched an interior-design practice in 2006, and Morgante has since carved out a niche for herself as an interior designer. The practice has allowed the company to increase its revenues—even in a dismal economy. In addition, demand for renovations in Chicago and surrounding areas is stable.

The firm still tackles large design-build projects, and it is fielding more environmentally conscious requests. Current projects include an English cottage-style home in Glenview, Illinois, and an urban home in Chicago's Bucktown neighborhood—both of which will be LEED Gold certified. **17**