

WESTCHESTER MAGAZINE'S

HOME & GARDEN

www.wmhomeandgarden.com

Great Estate

Restoring One of the County's Prized Homes in Bedford Corners

FALL/WINTER 2004

02 >



0 74470 07393 2

SPOTLIGHT PUBLICATIONS \$3.95

Plants: Indoors & In Vogue • **Finding the (Right) Someone To Tend Your Garden** • Pound Ridge Designer Jhane Barnes Lives in a Glass House • **Gorgeous Fabrics: The Well-Dressed House**

Modern Lovers



A Westchester architect creates an ultra-modern, award-winning home to display his clients' art collection and preserve the natural surroundings. Political correctness never looked so good **By Nancy Angiello**

A REAR VIEW: Most of the windows in this prize-winning West Harrison home are in the back to take advantage of woodland views.



Drive into one new suburban development in West Harrison and you'll find yet another sea of vast, soulless colonials, where every home is like the next, surrounded by an expansive characterless lawn that leaves no trace of the hilly woods and distinct natural rock formations that once stood in its place. Another architectural wasteland of multi-million dollar homes without artistic or natural appeal.

But then... Coming over the crest of a hill, you see...The House. It melds in and out of the landscape like something organ-

ic that seems to grow out of the sculptural stone outcroppings. The house itself is like a piece of modern art, custom-built in redwood, cedar, mahogany, stucco and glass. The home's natural earth toned exterior blends with the trees that coexist with this unobtrusive 4,000 square-foot, three-bedroom home, on an acre that overlooks a lily-pool pond and a swath of woods saved from the bulldozer.

With its unusual shape, innovative use of materials and a small footprint that respects nature, this environmentally friendly home



The house itself is a piece of modern art, custom-built in redwood, cedar, mahogany, stucco and glass.



(Clockwise from opposite left): A spiral staircase snakes through the living room; in the screened porch, an outdoor GE monogram grill; the hallway that connects the bedrooms becomes de-facto gallery space.

could help put an end to the revival-style housing that has defined the American suburbs for almost a century.

"The couple was looking for a contemporary-style house that would be harmonious with nature, exploit views and natural light, and be a showplace for their collection of contemporary and decorative art," says architect Philip Fruchter, who completed the house in 2000. The house won Fruchter, a managing partner of the White Plains-based Papp Architects, a design award for architectural excellence from the American Institute of Architects, in 2001.

"We only do one house a year, so it had to be something special," says Fruchter, whose firm specializes in commercial and institutional architecture. Past projects include the all-glass Cor-

porate Center in Rye (in 1988) and the wood-and-glass Schulman Family Chapel at the Jewish Community Center in White Plains (in 1985). "Themes we usually explore in our corporate work are in this house on a small scale," Fruchter explains. One of those themes includes large atria that flood interiors with light.

The homeowners, devoted students of modernism and collectors of contemporary art, found a kindred spirit in Fruchter. Their ideas about the interplay of art, architecture and nature matched comfortably with his.

"Modern art and architecture are shown to their best advantage in bucolic settings that contrast the geometric, abstract, and



“**W**e do only one house a year,
so it had to be something special.”

man-made against the natural environment," explains one of the homeowners, who wished to remain anonymous to ensure privacy. "This echoes the principles of the great architects and artists of the modern movement, such as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe."

Art played such a major part in the overall design of the house that some spaces were designed specifically for certain pieces from the homeowners' collection—and certain pieces were designed specifically for certain spaces. For example, in the living room, the focal point is a life-size concrete sculpture of a nude couple embracing, called "Cathexis" by Emil Alzamora, that rests on the floor. A resident of the new art colony in Beacon, NY, Alzamora was introduced to these art-loving homeowners at one of his shows. A year later, the owners invited the artist to the house and asked him to create a piece specifically for the room's sharp, triangular point.

Even the dining room table is a specially designed work of art. Made of bleached teak plywood, the table was created for the space by Fruchter to match the owners' original Eames plywood chairs.

"We wanted to surround ourselves with stimulating visual and intellectual works set off against the architecture," one of the owners says.

Also in the living area, a large, abstract triptych by Richard Carlson was also created specifically for the space, in yellows, oranges and blues that complement a vibrant palette of the first floor.

A search for the perfect property took one year. Ultimately, the West Harrison site was chosen for its pond, stream, rock outcroppings and a stretch of woodland that offers privacy from neighbors. The homeowners requested that as many natural features as possible remain, and Fruchter complied. To build the house, only four trees were removed. In addition, hundreds of trees, shrubs and woodland plants were brought in to give the property an even more woody look.

Nature not only inspired but necessitated the home's ultimate shape—a wedge. "The site was a challenge—the buildable area was between rock outcroppings and a pond," says Fruchter. He had to keep the house narrow enough on a long and narrow property to satisfy zoning rules that protect the pond (the house had to be 50 feet back from the pond), yet make the land still feel roomy, open and woody.

The result is a house that seems rectangular from the front, but once inside surprises with sharp angles veering off to opposite ends of the house. Designing the structure this way made it more spacious: Though the footprint stayed small, the wedge-shaped cantilevers created more space for the second floor, opening up possibilities for outdoor terraces and elevated walkways in back. "Yes, we could have designed a rectilinear house in the area we

Continued on page 110

(Left): The dining area boasts a table custom-designed by the architect to match the owners Eames chairs. (Right): The house sports a spectacular bright blue front door.



Modern Lovers (Continued from page 61)

had to work with," concedes Fruchter, "but the triangle shape takes full advantage of the site."

Fruchter repeated the idea of the wedge as a motif throughout the interiors. Triangles and wedges are everywhere—in kitchen light fixtures, an island countertop, windows set into a sharp point on one side of the house, even bathroom cabinet drawers.

When he built the house, Fruchter did not have a boat in mind, but the home's streamlined, wedge shape and wood paneling calls to mind one of those classic mahogany powerboats everyone seems to have on places like Deer Island in Maine. To get to the front door, there is even a "gangplank," as Fruchter calls it, a slate slab that extends over a "river" of myrtle and ferns in a deep crevice in the landscape. The gangplank, along with another that's off the living room, has redwood

"You don't need a big expanse for a bedroom. You have the rest of the house to live in."

and steel cabled railings like those you'd see on a boat. And the front door has a huge peephole that's more like a porthole.

The front of the house has few windows and some are frosted. "That not only gives privacy but," Fruchter says, "helps control the views of the outside." At the center of the house is what Fruchter calls its "central spine"—a soaring atrium that divides the building from front to back. The back of the atrium is a spectacular, 35-foot-tall glass wall that reveals the yard's gorgeous woodland views and a spiral staircase that looks very much like a sculpture itself.

The staircase is the first thing you see upon entering, and it is visible from almost every part of the house. The staircase's uplifting finish is a large, round skylight that lights the house naturally throughout

the day. The combination of openness and light makes the house look larger than it is. Still, size doesn't matter, Fruchter insists. What is important, he says, is visual interest. "If the lighting and use of materials and different ceiling planes and textures are meaningful, then you don't need a lot of space."

For example, Fruchter did not feel the house needed a great room—another staple of the suburban home. Instead he created a relatively small, 12-by-20-foot kitchen with an adjoining 12-by-25-foot dining area. Wood covers the dining-room floor; while stone is used on the floor in the kitchen.

And this minimalist home contains no de rigueur massive master bedroom suite. Instead, the 18-by-22-by-22-foot bedroom is even smaller than the guestroom, and its triangular shape ends in a sharp corner with a built-in triangular window on its far side.

Tiny as it is, the master bedroom emits a cozy, intimate vibe, even though nothing "decorates" the room except for one great visual work—a print of an embracing couple, also by Alzamora.

"You don't need a big expanse for a bedroom," asserts Fruchter, in keeping with his small-is-beautiful design philosophy. "You have the rest of the house to live in."

The dramatic architecture makes the interiors feel more like a SoHo gallery than a typical home, as does the use of strong color. In the kitchen, for example, red accents come from the American cherry cabinets, ceiling fixtures and collectible objects like blown glass and copper that are showcased in well-lit display cases.

In the living and dining areas, which are adjacent to each other, collectible furniture and accessories representing various periods, styles and materials, such as a Noguchi floor lamp and Lune d'Agent chrome metal chairs by Pascal Morgue, mix together.

The spiral staircase draws you upstairs into a more subdued color scheme for the bedrooms. There's taupe sisal-like flooring and a lighter taupe on the walls. The huge glass wall, all three stories of it, and many floor-to-ceiling windows in the bedrooms admit light and the sight of trees. **H&G**

Nancy Angiello is a Hastings-on-Hudson freelance writer.