

# Tuscany Comes to West Virginia

Inspired by antique woodwork, this vacation/retirement home transforms modest materials into a tower of light with classical proportions

BY JULIA CASWELL DAITCH



As I read *Under the Tuscan Sun*, I was captivated by Frances Mayes's account of her idyllic life in the Italian countryside. She made it clear that somehow, just by looking over the valley from her renovated Italian villa, all of her senses were heightened. I could see it, smell it, and taste it, and I, too, wanted to live that life with a passion.

Unfortunately, with two kids in grade school, a husband with a career that's not very mobile, and a homebody's need to stay close to family, Italy was out of the question. And there was also the issue of money: We don't have the Medici family's purse to fund the building of a villa. But my husband, Bill, and I do have a vision of how we want to spend our lives together, both now and farther down the road. We wanted to build a vacation house that eventually would become our retirement home.

## Not too close, and not too far

Both Bill and I have careers and family in and around Washington, D.C. We couldn't stray too far from this gravitational center—about a two-hour drive at most—but we wanted surroundings that felt a world apart. Distant views kept rising to the top of the wish list for our house. We drew a two-hour-drive radius on our map and looked for ridge tops. Soon we were winding up a steep, narrow road overlooking the Shenandoah Valley in West Virginia.

It was a rainy, misty day, and when we finally found the real-estate agent's sign, visibility was down to a couple hundred yards. But we could see the forest and the beautiful lichen-covered boulders that were scattered

around the site. We remained quiet for a long time, breathing it in, amazed that it existed at all, no less than it might be ours one day. The land was covered with oak trees instead of olive trees, but that didn't matter.

## Form follows doors

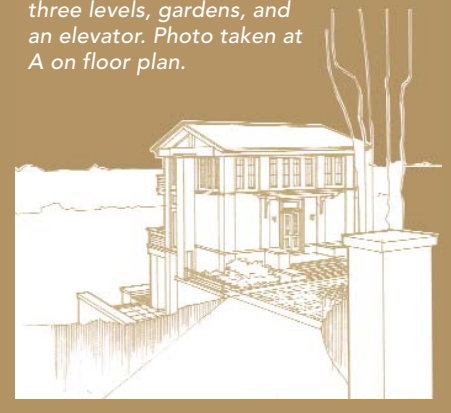
We bought this little piece of ridge top clueless about what to build. As an architect, I translate the desires of my clients into spaces that complement their lives and their neighborhoods; there are always plenty of starting places. But for our own house, the possibilities were endless, so much so that at first, I





**Stage one, accomplished.**

Atop a west-facing ridge, the author's 2500-sq.-ft. house is a work in progress. Future plans include outdoor living spaces off all three levels, gardens, and an elevator. Photo taken at A on floor plan.



wasn't sure what to build. And then a stunning coincidence occurred. I was in an antique store, looking for a stained-glass window for a client, when I came across a pair of 10-ft.-tall doors from an old French apartment building. They sent shivers down my spine. Were these my front doors?

I went straight to Mom's house, anxious to get a reality check about my sudden ardor. Back at the antique store, she looked at the doors for all of two seconds and said, "Julie, these are identical to the doors on our house in France when you were 5 years old." The subconscious had taken hold. Once I'd

bought the doors, our house just poured onto the drawing board.

**Classical proportions are never out of date**

The house's scheme is a simple one. I wanted it to embody both the solidity of the mountain and the expansive quality of the view. To that end, the uphill, entrance side is massive and solid, like the mountain. But inside, the walls are rows of tall windows that reveal the view of the distant horizon.

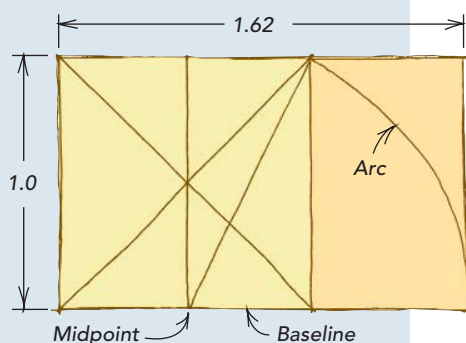
Like a belvedere, the top floor is dedicated to the view. It has tall windows on all four

# Pleasing proportions

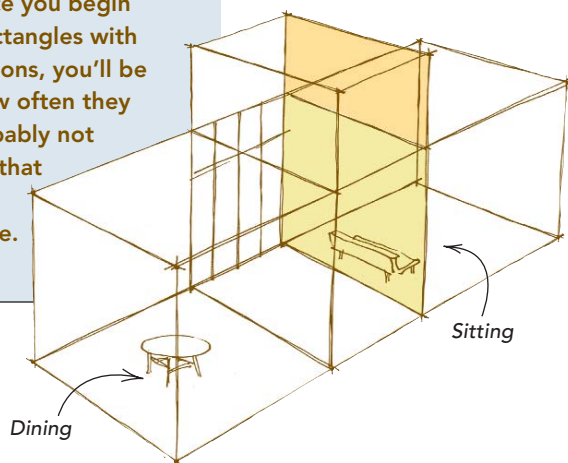
## THE GOLDEN RECTANGLE SETS THE STANDARD

Artists and architects have known for thousands of years that some shapes exert a magnetic attraction on us. One of those shapes is the golden rectangle, which is one of the organizational tools in classical architecture. The Parthenon, for example, has layers of golden rectangles at work in its design.

To draw a golden rectangle, begin by bisecting a square. From the midpoint of the square's baseline, swing an arc



that starts at the far corner of the square, as shown in the drawing above. Extend the square's baseline to intersect the arc. This is the corner of a rectangle with the golden proportion, which has the ratio of 1 to 1.62. Once you begin looking for rectangles with these proportions, you'll be amazed at how often they occur. It's probably not a coincidence that credit cards have this shape.



The dining and sitting areas each occupy cubes of space, 14 ft. on a side. Connecting them is another geometric piece of space: a golden rectangle turned on its end. The underlying order creates a sense of composure and calm.

sides, and even the gable ends are glazed. The bedrooms are on the lower level, where one day they will open onto a paved terrace.

Between the bedrooms and the belvedere, the main floor is entered through the French doors. The foyer, which has a low ceiling, is flanked on both sides by solid walls (drawings, p. 109). As you enter the house, the floor steps down, and the ceiling goes up, way up (photo facing page). The center of the house is open to the ridge beam, 28 ft. above the main floor.

This room is a partnership between modern spaces that flow together and the orderly proportions devised 25 centuries ago by the Greeks. I used squares, cubes, and rectangles shaped by the *golden rectangle* wherever I could in the house. Based on a consistent ratio between the length of the short side of a rectangle to the length of its long side, a golden rectangle is thought to be one of the most pleasing shapes in architecture (sidebar left). I agree. The front of our house has this proportion, and our living area and dining area (drawing below) are cubes of space, joined in the middle by a golden rectangle turned on its end.

### Stone-masonry dreams on a concrete-block budget

As the plans took shape, it became pretty clear that we were building a little temple on



**Smooth block meets rough block.** Sandblasted-block piers at the corners frame fields of split-faced block. Narrow ribbons of concrete coping form subtle bands that delineate railing heights, thresholds, and sills.

a West Virginia mountaintop. Even the simple gable roof, with its 3½-in-12 slope, said ancient Athens. Buildings with such timeless shapes cry out to be made of stone. Ours cried out, however, to stay within a \$200,000 budget.


Stone was out of the question, but I recently had seen some handsome split-faced concrete blocks at a new shopping center. I asked around and discovered that they were made by the E. P. Henry Company ([www.ephenry.com](http://www.ephenry.com)). I think split-faced blocks are fine for most of the wall, but I don't like the ragged edges they create when they're used at outside corners. At the suggestion of my masonry supplier, I chose sandblasted block, which has smooth faces and straight edges, for the corners of the house. Laid up a block and a half wide, they create piers at the outside corners that act as crisp borders for the split-faced block (photo above).

### Affordable details that straddle the line between new and old

Starting off the design with a pair of 10-ft.-tall antique doors was inspirational. It also was entangling. To be in the correct scale with the front doors, all the other doors needed to have similar proportions. I got a swift reality check when my first-choice doormaker came in with a bid that exceeded the budget for the entire house.

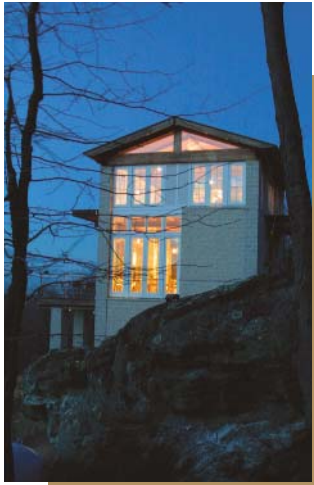
Eventually, I found Weather Shield ([www.weathershield.com](http://www.weathershield.com)), a company that carries tall doors with energy-saving low-e glass and the accompanying transom win-

This room is a partnership between modern spaces that flow together

A large, multi-story living room with a cathedral ceiling. The room features a prominent stone fireplace with a warm fire burning inside. A woman is sitting on a white sofa in front of the fireplace, reading a book. To the left, a large dog is lying on the floor. The room is filled with natural light from large windows and glass doors. A wooden dining table with chairs is in the foreground. A balcony with a railing is visible on the upper level. The overall atmosphere is cozy and inviting.

**The living end.** A fireplace centered on the living-room wall begins an axis that runs through the public part of the house. On the right, steps from the foyer lead down as the space simultaneously opens to the cathedral ceiling a floor above. Photo taken at B on floor plan.

and the orderly proportions devised 25 centuries ago by the Greeks.



**The dining end.** As the distant view disappears at dusk, the darkness has the effect of cinching up the walls around the house, making the spaces more intimate. Arranged like this, even joist hangers and 2x8s look elegant. Photo right taken at C on floor plan.



## A FORMAL PLAN FOR INFORMAL LIVING, EVENTUALLY

Based on a rigorous relationship between squares and rectangles, the author's vacation home is meant to grow into its own over time. Phase one has brought the house to livability. Subsequent projects will add decks, gardens, and an elevator. Tinted areas indicate outdoor spaces.

**Repurposed parts in the kitchen.** Ikea base cabinets with towel-bar pulls are topped with a counter made of leftover floorboards. Photo taken at D on floor plan.



dows as stock items. Called the Legacy Series, these doors have true divided lites, and they cost one-fourth of the first bid for the doors.

I selected interior finishes that are as natural as possible yet still compatible with one another. The main floors are 12-in. by 12-in. Mexican Saltillo paver tiles, colored golden brown with the same Minwax Golden Pecan stain that we used on the woodwork. At less than \$1.75 per sq. ft., no wonder this tile turns up in so many farmhouses: It's cheap! But—and this is an important caveat—it is hard to install correctly. Because Saltillo pavers are unglazed, their tops have to be sealed before grouting. And because they are so thick, the tiles can dry out the mortar too quickly if they aren't dipped in water before installation.



**Slates and shojis.** Slate tiles cover the shower walls and floor, while two rocks in the corner make handy footrests for soaping a leg. The translucent ceiling is a shoji partition laid flat. Photo taken at E on floor plan.

The other tile is African slate. We used it in the foyer and in both bathrooms. At \$11 per sq. ft., the slate cost a lot more than the pavers, but these tiles are among the most beautiful I've ever seen. I picked out some of the most stunning ones for the walls of the main-floor bathroom (photo below).

By the time we got to the kitchen, we had \$2,000 left for cabinets and appliances, and zero funds for labor.

We started at Lowe's, where we bought the least-expensive black stove and refrigerator that we could find. At Ikea, we bought lower cabinets (we couldn't afford uppers). Instead of traditional knobs, we used Ikea's towel rods as drawer and cabinet pulls (photo above). Bill and I made the countertops out of leftover 2x6 tongue-and-groove boards from the upstairs floor, and we used some of the leftover slivers of slate from the bathrooms for the backsplash.

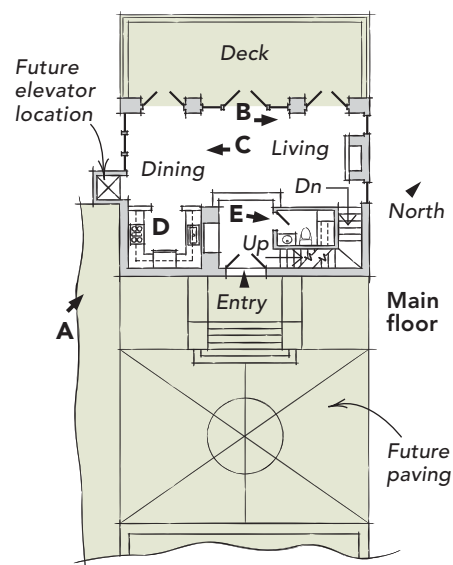
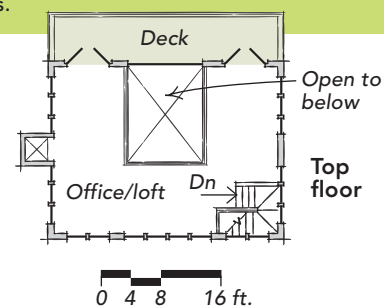
We used another Ikea product for counter-top storage: three bookend shelves turned upside down and stacked atop each other. A wall shelf with coat hooks from Pottery Barn provides another layer of wall storage.

### It's not over yet

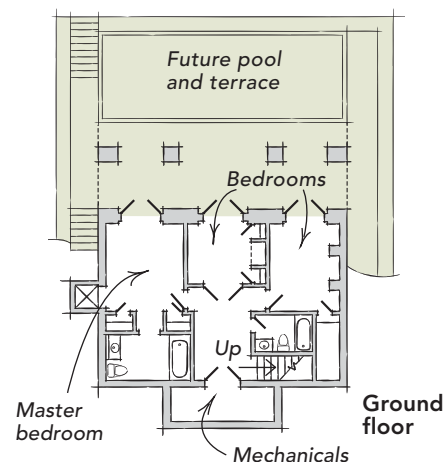
We knew going in that we'd be at this project for a long time—and that it probably would cost more than we had hoped. Both are true. We're up to about \$250,000. There are doors in place that, if unbolted, now would open onto thin air. The decks they will lead to are yet to be built. Boxes of Saltillo and African-slate tiles are stowed away, awaiting installation in the master bath that we roughed in.

The plan even includes provisions for an elevator so that when I'm an old lady and can't negotiate steps anymore, I'll still be able to live out my days in the house. Because if I have anything to say about it, I'm going to be buried in the backyard. □

Julia Caswell Daitch is an architect in Silver Spring, Md., and couldn't have done this project without builder Michael Pollacco. Photos by Charles Miller.



Photos taken at lettered positions.



### SPECS

**Bedrooms:** 3

**Bathrooms:** 3

**Size:** 2500 sq. ft.

**Cost:** \$100 per sq. ft. (so far)

**Completed:** 2000 (main work)

**Location:** Harpers Ferry, W. Va.

**Architect:** Julia Caswell Daitch

**Builder:** Michael Pollacco