

# The Ever-Evolving

On a steep slope in the Blue Ridge Mountains, an architect delivers a family retreat for every stage of life

BY DUNCAN McPHERSON



There's no question that vacation homes are a luxury. As an architect in Asheville, N.C., I often work on such homes. Our firm believes in building small, sustainable houses, so we strive for sustainability regardless of function. But the clients for this project offered us a refreshing take on the second-home concept. Their dream was to create a central gathering place where both sides of their family would eventually live full-time.

First, the couple wanted a small family retreat that could serve as a vacation rental. Later, they planned to move from California to North Carolina to build their retirement home. The family retreat then would serve

as their primary residence during construction of the house. This home will be modest in size, with minimal need for guest rooms, because the retreat will serve as a guest house. The house that we designed needed to fulfill all these needs and to be sustainable.

## Carving out a hillside lot

In the initial design stages, we often look to the land and surrounding region to guide us. This was particularly important for this project because the owners wanted their home to have a minimal visual presence on the land and to maintain the environmental values and restrictions of an organic farm that sits nearby.

The highest portion of the 17-acre lot has stunning views overlooking the adjacent South Toe River; however, for the sake of their neighbors in this very tight-knit community, it was critical to the owners that we minimize the house's visual impact on the surrounding hillsides. To this end, we located the house downslope from the ridge-line and at the forest edge. This location offered greater privacy as well as protection from strong northern winds. We also oriented the house to take advantage of winter views along the river valley and to allow for a walkout basement.

Respecting the environmental goals of the organic farm and the neighbors was another



# House



## PRIVACY AND VIEWS, IN AND OUT

The home now serves as a family retreat and vacation rental, but that will change. When the owners retire and relocate, they'll live here as they build their main house on the same site. Ultimately, this home will serve as a guest house. Besides serving these present and future functions, the house needed to embrace the landscape, to provide privacy for those using it, and to minimize its visual impact on nearby homes. After locating the home downhill from the ridge, the architects broke the house into three sections: entry foyer and work area, living area, and sleeping area. Canting the sleeping wing away from the slope embraced the southern exposure and allowed for a walkout basement and a carport/covered patio. An entry foyer provides a visual and sound buffer between the two wings. A screened porch on the southeast end of the house catches gorgeous evening light. Photos taken at A and B.

## SPECS

**Bedrooms:** 2

**Bathrooms:** 3

**Size:** 1538 sq. ft., main level;  
450 sq. ft., unfinished  
walkout basement

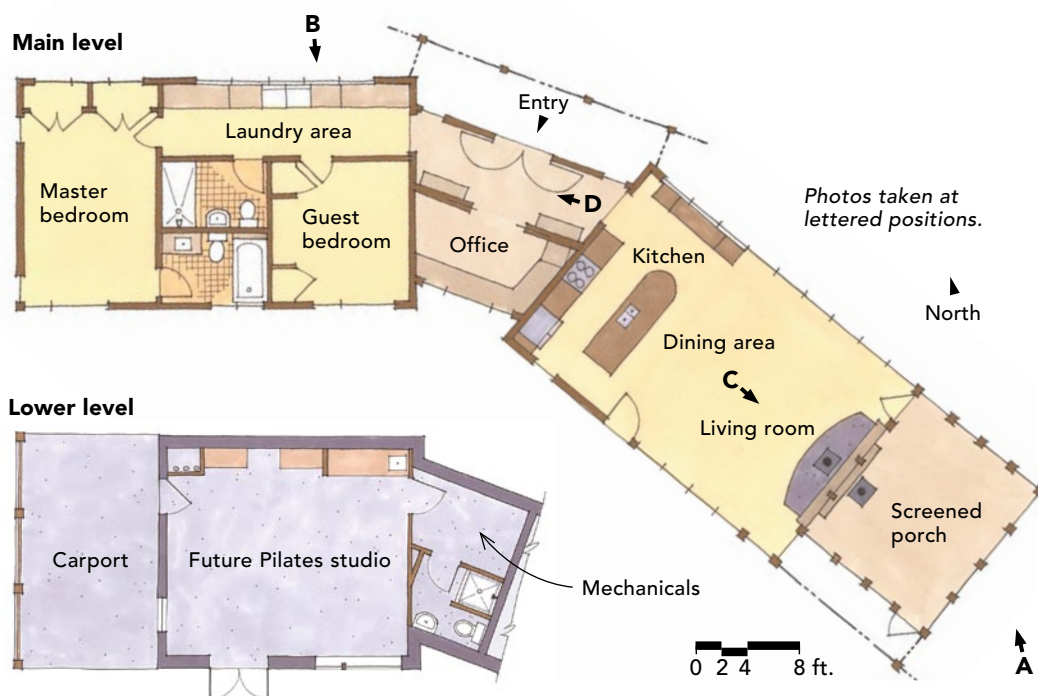
**Cost:** N/A

**Completed:** 2008

**Location:** Celo, N.C.

**Architect:** Samsel Architects

**Builder:** Richard Kennedy,  
Sunspace Homes



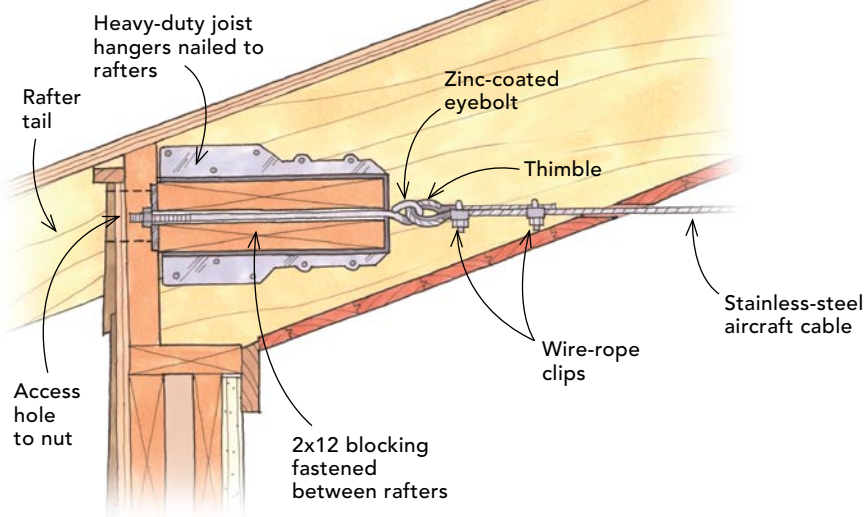


## LOCALLY GROWN

River rock from the site anchors the woodstove. Locally harvested cypress and maple add warmth. Photo taken at C on floor plan.



## COLLAR-TIED IN STYLE



To simplify construction and to minimize costs, the architects decided to forgo a structural-steel ridge and use collar ties. Because wooden collar ties would disrupt the clean look of the paneled ceiling, the architects and engineer developed an approach using aircraft cable.

driving force in our design process. We needed to minimize the physical impact and instill a sense of respect for the land during construction and after. This required extra attention to soil quality and erosion control as well as the exterior materials and finishes we selected. The builder was diligent in using silt fencing and monitoring auto and foot traffic to minimize erosion.

### Fun, income, and the future

Designing for multiple functions in one house is challenging. We started with the home's initial goal and primary use: a family retreat. Accommodations and storage for travel paraphernalia such as suitcases



and coolers was important. The hallway to the bedrooms contains the laundry area, the storage cabinets, and a large countertop surface for all the things that often end up on the floor.

Sleeping and living areas needed to be separate for privacy and sound control, so we configured the house with bedrooms at the north end and living spaces at the south. The living spaces, which connect to outdoor spaces, are filled with daylight from windows on three sides and provide a strong visual connection to the outdoors. The home office and entry separate the living and sleeping areas.

Simple features within this framework ensured the house could function well as a vacation rental. We added locking doors to one master-bedroom closet inaccessible to renters. A lockable home office was important for both husband and wife so that they could work from home during extended stays and safely leave their computer equipment in the room while they were away.

The materials and details inside and out needed to be durable. Muddy shoes, towels, bathing suits, fishing poles, and gardening tools are all common castoffs from activities at the house, so designing enough utility space was essential to maintaining the property well and accommodating a family on vacation. Because the owners lived across the country, the house needed to be fairly self-sufficient from a maintenance and utility standpoint, including the landscaping.

To maximize the house's flexibility as it evolved, there needed to be room to expand without the expense of adding on. The house was configured on a slope to allow for a walkout basement that later could serve as a utility storage area or a future Pilates studio, as well as additional living and sleeping space.

### Smarter often means smaller

The homeowners were savvy to the economic and environmental benefits of energy efficiency and, being from California, were also highly sensitive to water conservation. We based many of our design and budget decisions on those two factors.

The first step was to optimize the efficiency of space. The open living area and double-duty hallway in the sleeping wing made possible a smaller, more energy-efficient building. Having the interior connect directly to two outdoor living spaces expands the usable area most of the year.



### AN ENTRY AND A BUFFER

The entry foyer provides ample room for removing shoes, coats, and gear when coming in from outdoor activities. It also keeps the living and sleeping areas visually and aurally separate. A home office tucks away behind sliding doors. Photo taken at D on floor plan.

Creating an airtight building envelope was our next priority. We achieved this primarily by using spray-foam insulation throughout the house. Built to perform 25% better than code minimums, the building envelope minimizes demands on the heating and cooling equipment. We included a controlled fresh-air intake to the return duct of the air handler that runs on a simple timer and a motorized damper to ensure good air quality.

Rainwater from the roof is captured in three underground cisterns (totaling 3750 gal.) that provide irrigation for the landscaping and garden. These cisterns, along with a pervious driveway, patio, and walkways, minimize any storm-water runoff from the

home as well. High-efficiency faucets and showerheads as well as dual-flush toilets minimize water use; the piping is set up to accommodate a future gray-water system.

A year after the house's completion, its multiple functions have performed well for the homeowners. They have been using the house so often that there is rarely time to rent it out, and the family's recent addition of a grandson has rendered the lower level a good decision. □

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