

Builder/Architect

A photograph of two men in a modern outdoor setting. One man is sitting on a concrete ledge, wearing a light-colored sweater and light pants. The other man is sitting on a wooden bench in the foreground, wearing a dark sweater and blue jeans. They are in front of a white building with a sloped roof and a stone fireplace. The background shows trees with autumn foliage.

Building a Reputation for Visionary Projects

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Welcome Home Builders: Creative Collaboration in Chester County

By Ann Langtry

Converting a homeowner's dream into reality is no small feat, but the possibilities are endless when the architect and builder share the same vision and use the same vernacular. Such is the case with Welcome Home Builders, a small but successful builder based in Malvern, PA, and headed by Alan Greaves, who studied at Drexel University's school of architecture. A former building supply sales rep, Greaves took it upon himself to hone his craft by learning as much as he could about architecture and design. Armed with that knowledge, he set out 12 years ago to work with area architects to design and build homes for Chester County

residents. Greaves was so successful, he eventually expanded his business and reached out to childhood friend Bob Birney to join him. As a business partner, Birney completes the team as the detail man who brings it all together on site. His background? Birney spent nearly 20 years in sales and marketing management for Unilever before shifting gears in search of a fresh challenge to merge his skills and friendship with Greaves in the building business.

The two partners sat recently before the breathtaking 130-foot-long, 30-foot-high, dry-stack Cultured Stone wall that is the centerpiece of

The illusion of a lower ceiling was achieved with 8-foot-high tie-back beams, despite the voluminous space of the great room in the Neefe residence. Stainless steel covers were fabricated for the 16-foot chimney flues extending above the custom two-way fireplace. The architect also designed the wooden dining room chandelier (upper left).



PHOTO BY JAY GREENE PHOTOGRAPHY

their latest project, a "true custom" home designed by Washington, DC architect Bill Lecky for Drs. John and Lynne Neeff in Charlestown Township. Greaves reflected on their effective teamwork: "I'm the idea guy," he claimed, "while Bob is the more organized, get-it-done type." He went on to explain how his architectural savvy coalesces well with his clients' own architects to form the perfect union. The range of homes in the Welcome Home Builders' repertoire includes highly customized, one-of-a-kind designs, along with traditional center hall colonials, historic Chester County farmhouses, and even homes built in the old English Tudor style. According to Birney, one of the team's greatest assets is its ability to deal with budgetary issues. "We know how to work within a budget, and as a result, we do well in overcoming significant challenges as they arise. We are extremely proud of our team of subcontractors," who, Birney said, "embrace challenges and go above and beyond" to work toward a common goal.

Welcome Home Builders specializes in an array of homes, ranging in price from \$700,000 to \$2 million, along with select custom additions. Their "scattered site building" plan includes a recently approved small subdivision in East Nantmeal, along with "spec-home projects" on other parcels in Chester and Montgomery counties. The latest trend in the mostly built-out Main Line area, according to Greaves, is the "knock-down," which involves a buyer purchasing what might be a 40- to 50-year-old home with the intent to demolish the structure and build a new custom home on the lot. "It's happening now more than ever," said Greaves, and "that fits right in with our niche."

The Neeff residence, which was completed in early November 2004, is a fine example of upscale, high-concept design brought to fruition by a team of hands-on builders who rose to every challenge along the 18-month road to completion. Homeowner Lynne Neeff described the process that began with "a dream, then firmed into a concept, then assumed concrete form." She recognized the importance of the alchemy that blends the architect and builder in a shared vision. "Flexibility is key," she said. "They need to work well together. I really depended on the builder to speak up" whenever the need arose. The Neeffs' vision included such European-influenced concepts as a sun-drenched "cloister" area, complete with an indoor fountain and slate platform that "floats" in hundreds of black pebbles, an outdoor "loggia" (passageway), in addition to a contemporary outdoor fountain and waterfall, a frameless glass and slate master shower, his-and-hers dressing rooms, a home theater, built-in art alcoves, a wood-sculpted chandelier, 16-foot twin stainless steel chimney flues, hand-crafted double front doors from Santa Fe, NM, and the majestic, 130-foot-long, dry-stack Cultured Stone wall that extends the full length of the house. The wall, which serves as the central support and focus for the entire home, is topped by a row of electronic clearstory windows that allow for visual interplay between light and shadow on the rugged stonework and smooth wood tie-back beams. The all-natural materials — wood and slate flooring, granite countertops, stone walls,



The conceptual design for the striking Neeff residence began with the 130-foot wall of stonework that serves as both the center support and the main focal point of the home. The wall (seen at left) extends the full length of the structure.

and wood inserts — lend serenity and peace to the entire home.

Executing a design that is so unique and visionary is truly a challenge for all involved. Architect Bill Lecky could not have been more qualified for the job; his credentials include work at the White House, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (architect of record), and the Korean War Memorial (architect and designer), all in Washington, DC, to name just a few. He had worked previously with the Neeffs in their former hometown of McLean, VA.

The homeowners purchased the 2.6-acre property from Welcome Home Builders in 2001 and signed a contract to work with them. "The sequence of construction in this case was not the normal process," said Lecky, referring to the newest Neeff residence. For example, before the "great wall" of Cultured Stone was constructed, all of the built-in archways, custom wood shelving, art alcoves, wiring and mechanicals were in place so that the stonework could be built around it all. This was also the case with the granite countertops and wood cabinetry in the kitchen, which had to be installed initially before the stonework went in to achieve the desired finished look.

Was everyone up to the task? The team at Welcome Home Builders "seemed very excited about trying something new," said Lecky, who commended Greaves and Birney for their willingness to deal with the unusual. He added that whenever a situation arose that involved the need for change or adaptation, "we were always able to tweak the design to come up with a solution to support the basic concept."

The idea for the home's layout is drawn from an imaginative vision developed over time and many discussions among the Neeffs and Lecky. "The backbone of the design is the wall," and the floor plan is intended to echo a "pedestrian outdoor street — just like a walk along a village in Europe," said the architect. "The stone flooring offers a sense of the outside, along with the skylights above. The punctures in the wall allow you to enter each living space. At either end of the long [indoor] walkway



Slate flooring and a sunlit ceiling in the bedroom hallway offer the outdoor feel of a walk through a European village. Openings in the vast Cultured Stone wall allow for built-in shelving and entryways to separate living spaces.



All-natural materials were used to accessorize the kitchen, including granite, slate, tile and wood. The large window, complete with bench, overlooks a two-story drop to a terrace below.

are glass windows so that the outdoors can be observed in either direction." At first, Lecky had to determine how the bi-level home would be situated on the sloped lot in order to accommodate a single story on the entry level and two stories to the rear. After that, he said, "I worked with where the sun was coming from and how to direct and treat it" as part of the design. The final effect is breathtaking, with constant changes in light and shadow all day long. "To give the illusion of a lower ceiling in this voluminous space, we placed tie-back beams at an eight-foot height. This allowed us to bring the big scale down to a more human dimension. The tie-backs serve a structural value as well." By night, the effect is just as striking. The builders placed more than 70 spotlights atop the main wall, and these provide "a wash of light between every tie-back beam," said Lecky. Indoors and out, the home presents a spectacular image when the various light fixtures are put to use.

The "cloister" area, as Mrs. Neefe refers to it, is one of the most extraordinary features in the home. "It was modeled conceptually after a cloister in Western Europe," she said. A brightly lit, warm space year-round, the room was intended as a sunroom or a place to play cards with friends. Yet the architect took the concept well beyond the typical sunroom: a collection of smooth, black pebbles creates a wide border on the floor, surrounding a 10 x 14-foot "floating" slab of slate. A large water fountain

brought in from tranquil Santa Fe, NM, lends a special peace and serenity to the room with the constant sound of running water. Sunlight streams in through a full wall of glass facing the front of the home.

The color scheme throughout the house is a soothing array of muted earth tones, using grays and tans set against two dramatic, stainless-steel-covered fireplace flue towers. In making selections for the home, "we would go out together with a bag of samples," said Lecky, "in order to match all of the [interior building] materials." The end result is a spectacular finished look with space left over for bright paintings and splashes of color in the art alcoves.

All of the Welcome Home Builders subcontractors had to contend with the "great wall in one way or another, but each rose to the challenge," according to Birney. "The mechanical trades pulled off quite a feat running electric, heating and ventilation — even plumbing — in its core. Then the trimmers had to conceal the functional penetrations to allow for invisible operation."

Using jam boards before the stone wall was laid enabled the flooring contractor to install a massive amount of slate tiles after the wall was completed, so that in its finished state the floor appears to be embedded in the wall. Perhaps what best demonstrates the team's collaborative efforts is the 14-foot waterfall built into the rear patios and deck. The water



The dry-stack stonework accents a tub alcove in the master bath, which also features an oversized, frameless glass shower with slate tile flooring.

flows out of a solid one-ton piece of sculpted granite and streams through the upper patio, cascading to a pool in the one below. "We don't know any waterfall contractors out there, but together with virtually all of our trades, it was built to become quite a unique centerpiece of the house. And we had fun doing it," added Birney.

"We're only as good as our contractors," said Greaves. "They toughed it out. They're the guys who swing the hammers." Currently, the team is building a classic, estate-styled home in Main Line Devon. Both Greaves and Birney agree "we'll continue to keep them challenged there as well."

This characterization of Welcome Home Builders is testament to the firm's claim that from site to settlement, it is truly a "full-service, custom design/build company."

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The bi-level Heefe residence in Charlestown Township, PA, incorporates dramatic living space and unique architectural treatments to maximize the use of natural light by day and artificial light at night. An outdoor fountain and waterfall highlight the rear deck and terrace spaces.



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