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“We want to live in a work of art.”



In the Chester County home of Lynne and John Neefe, a fireplace divides the dining area from the great room. Below at left, ample glass makes the space appear to open to the outdoors. BOB WILLIAMS / Inquirer Suburban Staff



LIGHT FANTASTIC

The couple asked for a house like no other. The result was a dramatic structure with a spine of stone and walls of glass.



The Neefe house at sunset. The couple chose to build it on a wooded hill in Malvern. It was designed by Bill Lecky, the architect who worked with Maya Lin on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He used stone and glass throughout the 7,000-square-foot structure.



BOB WILLIAMS / Inquirer Suburban Staff

The kitchen features maple cabinets and, like the rest of the house, plenty of natural light.

By Eils Lotozo
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Early on in discussions about the new home they planned to build on a steep, wooded site in Malvern, Lynne and John Neefe floored architect Bill Lecky with a line most architects dream of hearing, but rarely do.

"We want to live in a work of art," the Neefes announced.

What's more, they meant it.

Which is how they ended up building a boldly modern 7,000-square-foot house whose dramatic features include floor-to-ceiling walls of windows and a 30-foot-high dry-stack, cultured-stone wall that runs the length of the structure like a spine.

The angular stone-and-stucco dwelling is fronted by a slate-surfaced courtyard and ringed by multiple-level decks and terraces. It's a rare vision in the Neefes' suburban locale, where McMansions sprout everywhere and the preferred architectural style is blandly traditional.

"When you look at most houses, they are just bigger or smaller versions of the same thing," says Lynne Neefe. "I didn't want a Chester County farmhouse. I wanted something different. I wanted something contemporary and open."

A place that was flooded with light at all hours of the day, and that felt like a vacation home.

"We thought, 'Why have a second home if you could have that feeling every day?'"

Choosing Lecky as their architect was easy for the Neefes, who met as medical students at the University of Pennsylvania. Twenty years earlier, Lecky had designed a master-bedroom addition to their home in McLean, Va.

"It was just a brick rancher, but with that addition Bill taught us about light and space," Lynne Neefe says.

After years of living in Lexington, Ky., the couple, both 62, decided to relocate here after they were recruited for research positions at an area biotech firm. (She's a local girl, raised in Drexel Hill.)

Lecky, based in Vienna, Va., is best known for helping to realize Maya Lin's concept for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, serving as the architect of record for the project. His current firm, the Lessard Group, designed and built the Korean War Memorial.

It was the sheer slope of the Neefes' secluded 2.6-acre property that suggested to Lecky the massive stone wall that became the home's focal point.

"It was, in my mind, like a retaining wall," he says.

Though it didn't end up serving that function — "It was cheaper to dig out the uphill side of the house," Lecky says — "the Great Wall," as he dubbed it, led to the creation of an enormous hallway he calls an "internal street."

The slate-floored hall runs along the Great Wall on the home's top story, and opens onto the master bedroom, the Neefes' offices, the kitchen, and the living/dining areas, which share a two-sided fireplace.

Also off the hall is a glasswalled sunroom Lynne Neefe calls her "cloister." It has a stone fountain from Santa Fe and, cutting through the slate, a "path" filled with smooth black Mexican river rocks.

On either end of the "street," walls of glass make the space appear to open to the outdoors. A line of skylights keep it brightly lit.

"I really wanted that sense of bringing the outdoors in," Lynne Neefe says.

That even goes for the master bathroom. There, a glass door leads to a deck and a hot tub, and a frameless glass shower offers nonstop views of the woods. "The way it was designed, it's really private and wonderful," she says.

Finding the land was one of the most difficult parts of the project. "Most of the plots in the area were tied up by developers who wanted you to build a house they knew how to build," Neefe says.

But the couple, who have a daughter in graduate school and another who works in advertising in New York, got lucky when they found the Malvern site, owned by a local company, Welcome Home Builders. Partners Bob Birney and Alan Greaves were instantly enthusiastic about taking on the construction of the Neefes' unusual dream house.

"We build very nice homes, but we never built anything as unique as this," Birney says. "It was really rewarding."

But it wasn't easy.

Among the major challenges: getting heavy equipment onto the sheer slope; explaining some of the project's unorthodox requirements to subcontractors; and building the massive Great Wall, which runs through the home's two levels and projects outside the structure. Not only did all the stone have to be hand-carried into the house, the dry-stack building method, which uses no mortar,



Lynne and John Neefe, in the long slate-floored hallway that runs along a 30-foot-high stone wall. Skylights and windows keep the hallway bright.

required a learning curve for the masons.

Also difficult was getting a 2,000-pound piece of solid granite to the upper deck. The huge block forms the base of a fountain and waterfall that cascades down to a terrace on the home's lower level (storage areas, two guest rooms and baths, and a media den are located there). "We don't have a subcontractor who makes waterfalls or who is experienced with something that precarious," Birney says. "And it would be thousands of dollars if something went wrong." So he and his partner hoisted the stone themselves, with a special lifting device they had fabricated.

The house was completed in October. For Lynne Neefe, who was often on site during 18 months of construction, the house is everything she hoped for, and more.

"We weren't really thinking of this big a house for just the two of us," she says. "But once we started on our wish list ..."

That included specially designed alcoves for the couple's eclectic art collection; a small morning room off the kitchen, where they share coffee; and a downstairs billiards room, where they retire nearly every night after dinner.

The sparsely furnished living room has 14-foot ceilings and electronically controlled clerestory windows to let in air. "We will not fill it with furniture. We don't need to," John Neefe says. "It's really pleasant this way."

The couple agree: Despite its size, the house doesn't feel imposing.

"It's so tranquil," says Lynne, who most of all loves what Lecky's design does with light.

"Look at that," she says, directing a visitor's attention to a lacy grid of shadows cast by wooden beams that run across the hallway's ceiling. "Isn't that beautiful?"

"I think people forget that architects are artists."

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