

# LIFE

## *In the Woods*

A custom home in Potomac, Maryland,  
pays homage to Mother Nature

BY SHARON JAFFE DAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES RAY SPAHN

*O*ur life is frittered away by detail... *simplify, simplify,*" wrote Henry David Thoreau. These words rang true to a college student who in 1966 adopted Thoreau's ideals and spent an entire winter in an Upstate New York farmhouse with no heat or indoor plumbing. Now a software entrepreneur, this self-described "tree hugger" and his wife recently settled into their own Walden in the woods—a custom retreat designed to

respect nature—albeit with such comforts as running water, geothermal heat and a six-burner Viking range.

"This is better," the owner admits, recalling his youthful experiment from his new home crafted of wood, stone and glass.

His wife, a journalist and artist, also loves nature; their first joint possession was a canoe. In previous homes, they nurtured a pond full of koi and a flock of cockatiels. So when he sold his company and they decided to leave their home on a busy suburban thoroughfare, it is no wonder that they fell in love with a pristine, wooded one-acre lot in Merry-Go-Round Farm, where a grove of mountain laurels sloped down through protected forest to the Potomac River. The couple bought the property and decided to design a home that would minimize its environmental

**ARCHITECTURE:** JIM RILL, AIA, lead architect, and JAMES MURRAY, project manager, Rill Architects, Bethesda, Maryland. **LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE:** CYNTHIA FERRANTO, Cynthia Ferranto Landscape Design, Washington, DC. **CONTRACTOR:** Potomac Valley Builders, Bethesda, Maryland. **INTERIOR DESIGN:** JODI MACKLIN, Jodi Macklin Interior Design, Chevy Chase, Maryland.








A pair of garages flanks the home (opposite), creating an entry courtyard. The exterior is built of cedar and stone, with a zinc roof. From the rear, a towering glass room (pictured here) overlooks the natural scenery.







A photograph of a Craftsman-style interior. The room features a floor made of large, irregular grey stone tiles. The ceiling is made of horizontal wood planks. On the right, a large, rectangular aquarium is built into a wall of hand-laid stone. The aquarium is filled with water, rocks, and some greenery. Below the aquarium is a wooden cabinet with two doors. To the left of the aquarium, a stone pillar supports the ceiling. In the center, there are large wooden-framed glass doors that are open, leading to a screened porch. To the left of the doors, there is a small white shelf with books and a small sculpture. Two pendant lights with cylindrical shades hang from the ceiling. The overall atmosphere is warm and rustic.

The house is full of Craftsman detail, from custom millwork to hand-laid stone. Clockwise from opposite, bottom left: Guests arrive via a bridge over a stream. Inside, a family room with an open staircase is the center of casual living. This main space opens to a library with a tropical aquarium and a screened porch with forest views.





The family room encompasses an open dining area and kitchen (pictured here) with custom-made fir cabinets, granite countertops, a six-burner Viking stove and dual dishwashers. The kitchen leads to the rear glass room (opposite).





*"The whole idea came about from the owners' desire to experience nature from within the house." —JIM RILL*

impact but maximize its vantage point on the rim of the C&O Canal National Park.

"Our last house helped shape our values," says the husband. "We couldn't have told you how important it was to hear nature and not hear the Beltway without having given that a try. And we wanted a view with no houses."

The couple assembled a team of professionals to design their home, including lead architect Jim Rill and project manager James Murray of Rill Architects, landscape architect Cynthia Ferranto and interior designer Jodi Macklin. The architects took a novel approach in response to their clients' vision. "They weren't afraid of innovation and new ideas. They didn't have any rules other than simple forms and nat-

ural materials. The whole idea came about from the owners' desire to experience nature from within the house," explains Rill. "We wanted this house to call attention to nature more than itself."

Rill devised a simple plan based on the couple's desire for "one-room" living. His contextual design created a modern form based on traditional massing. A bridge over a stream brings guests to the entry situated under a welcoming overhang. From here, they enter the main living space: an open family room/dining room/kitchen. Furnishings are spare and windows are unadorned so that no view is compromised. From this open space, porches, galleries and a glass aerie invariably invite indoor guests outside.





The roof of the two-story glass overlook (this page) slants up toward the forest to capture the best views. On the basement level it contains an exercise pool while on the main floor (opposite) it houses a comfortable seating area.









The second level houses the master bedroom and an art studio, while a third-story attic serves as a shared office for the couple and a home to their nine cockatiels, which often perch on their owners' shoulders as they work. The lower level boasts a guest suite, workout area and indoor exercise pool overlooking a koi pond and the woods. An al fresco fourth story came about when the architects realized they needed to lower the roof to accommodate height restrictions imposed by the National Park Service. A roof deck, accessible from the office, now welcomes the owners and their guests for stargazing at night.

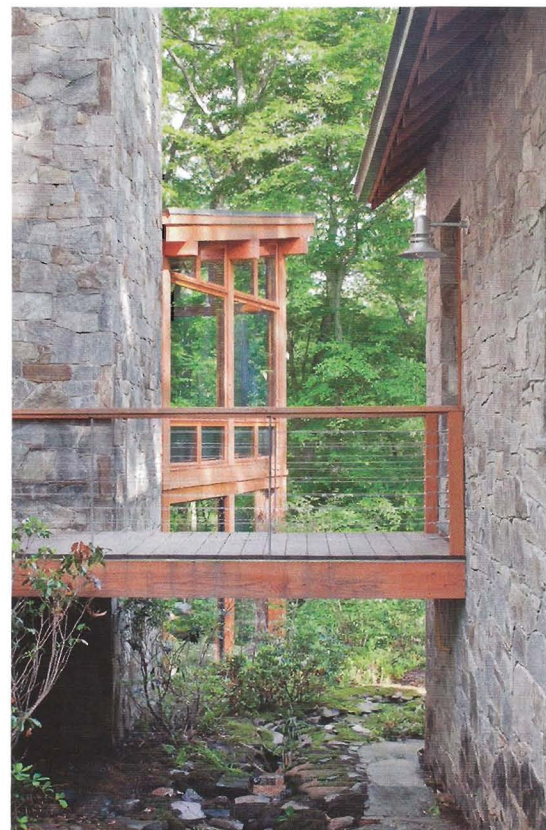
Sparingly detailed, the house reflects the beauty of its surroundings from every room. "The clients were not so interested in style," says James Murray of Rill Architects. "They were interested in a certain kind of experience."

Jim Rill agrees, "You're as close to being

outdoors in this house as you can get without being cold or rained on."

Designer Jodi Macklin created an interior plan in keeping with the minimalist aesthetic. "There's not a lot of furniture because the architecture really speaks to you in this house," she says. "And furniture had to be laid out in such a way as not to block any views." Macklin incorporated seating in durable, indoor-outdoor fabrics that can withstand visits from the birds. She also honed in on natural motifs, including granite kitchen countertops with patterns reminiscent of tree branches.

The owners expected the design team to devote as much thought to the well-being of native plants and animals on their land as they did to the requirements of the new humans on the block. After arborist Tim Zastrow of Bartlett Tree Experts carefully mapped out the property, Jim Rill sited the home to preserve as many trees as possible.








Outside of the exercise pool room (opposite, top), battered columns of Western Maryland fieldstone flank a patio by the koi pond (pictured here). Below, left to right, a bridge leads from the main house to one of the stone garages; a series of pools and waterfalls harbors frogs and plant life; the owner nurtures plants, tadpoles and fish in the garage's "biology lab."





A photograph of a dense forest. In the foreground, a large, textured tree trunk stands vertically. The background is filled with lush green foliage and other trees. On the right side, a portion of a stone house with a wooden railing is visible, partially obscured by the trees. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

From a solid base of Western Maryland fieldstone, the house is clad in cedar and glass on the upper levels. Surrounded by natural landscaping, it appears to have been inserted into dense vegetation.









"We wound up changing the shape of the house, twisting it a few degrees to save a large beech tree," says the husband. He marked the limits of disturbance with paint on the ground and transplanted more than 200 mountain laurels, tiny shrubs and moss to spare as many plants as possible from the bulldozer. "If it had a leaf on it, it got moved," he recalls.

Landscape architect Cynthia Ferranto and her clients wanted the grounds to suggest that the house was simply inserted into nature's canopy. The owners quickly ruled out a lawn—which the husband terms a "desert" for animal life. Instead of grass, native species including ferns, mountain laurels, evergreens, hollies and dogwoods were introduced. Natural pathways and stepping-stones weave in and out of the woods. Ferranto designed a stream that travels from the summit of the property through small pools and waterfalls and into a pond below—creating safe havens for frogs, fish and aquatic plants along the way.

"The owners were trying to create a space that would attract wildlife—not repel it," says Ferranto. "I like to refer to it

as a habitat rather than a landscape. If anything, they created more habitat."

The husband spends two hours a day "on the maintenance of varmints." Indoors, he nurtures the cockatiels and dozens of salt-water fish and invertebrates—which inhabit one large display tank in the library and eight tanks in the basement. He feeds the koi and goldfish in the ponds, fills wild bird and hummingbird feeders and tends to tanks of tadpoles, baby fish, aquatic plants and algae in his "biology lab" in one of the two garages on the property.

The house was designed and built to be energy-efficient. Argon-filled windows and icynene insulation provide a tight building envelope. A geothermal system with four wells provides heating and cooling; a fifth well dug on the property is a source for the outdoor ponds, water features and irrigation. In addition, two 25,000-gallon cisterns collect rainwater runoff from the driveway and roofs to augment the outdoor supply.

Throughout the seasons, everyday experiences in their new home have not ceased to amaze the couple, who have spied newborn foxes, listened the cries of baby deer

and ogled owls and hawks. On summer evenings, they often sit with their feet in the koi pond, where the lights come on at night. "In the dead of winter, I go to the glass room and watch the sun set," says the wife. "During the blizzards, there was a hawk who sat on a limb in the big beech tree. I watched his feathers ruffling in the wind. Watching the river in the winter was also fabulous. When it got really cold, it got bright blue. When things began to melt, it was just racing. We couldn't believe it was the Potomac."

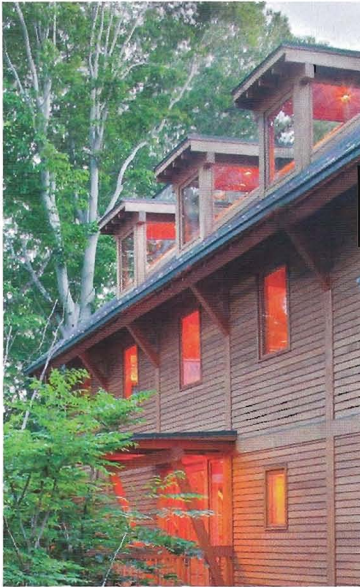
The home's setting and the lifestyle it inspires can't help but give visitors a fresh perspective on man's interplay with nature. "You can become closer to nature but you can't become part of it," says the husband. "There is an edge. About all you can do with a tree is hug it. But we've gotten up close to nature with this house."

Without a doubt, Henry David Thoreau would approve. ♦

*Photographer James Ray Spahn is based in Crested Butte, Colorado.*

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Designer Jodi Macklin selected a low-profile Holly Hunt bench and Donghia slipper chairs in the master bedroom (opposite). Floors here and in the third-floor office (right) are made from 12 chestnut oaks—the only trees to be felled on the property during construction. Jim Rill designed the office dormers (above) with glass sides to keep the vistas open. From the office, stairs (below) lead to a rooftop observation deck.

