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# ML Home

*Sticks and stones  
make this Malvern  
home an idyllic  
woodland retreat.*



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## ESTATE OF THE ART

An architect helps a Malvern couple create a haven for the arts and a retreat into nature

By Samantha Melamed

Photos by John Armich

Lis Kalogris has long been an ardent collector and patron of the arts, so it's characteristic that she views her Malvern home with a curator's eye. She and her husband Mike first commissioned architect Helena Van Vliet to create this serene woodland retreat some 18 years ago. "Now," Lis laughs, after many years of additions and alterations, "it's sort of a retrospective of Helena's work."

The estate is also the result of a rare meeting of the minds between forward-thinking homeowners and an environmentally minded architect. Set in a natural clearing on three acres of deciduous forest, it's a creative collaboration between art and nature, resulting in a one-of-a-kind house that's part Prairie-style lodge, part Zen garden and part avant-garde art space, on grounds that host one of the region's premier private collections of contemporary sculpture.

"My husband and I feel that if you don't take a risk and do something different, you won't reap the reward of something special and fabulous," says Lis — a trustee at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and a supporter of many other arts organizations — of herself and of Mike, who is the chairman and CEO of Berwyn-based

SunCom Wireless. "We like to let artists, architects and everyone we come in contact with create something that is unique and special; that's important to us."

In working with Van Vliet, a Kimberton-based architect known for her green sensibility, that meant creating a home that worked with, not against, the environment. So they began with a plan to preserve every trunk of the property's old-growth oak forest, allowing a long, rectangular clearing to dictate the footprint of the house.

"We really tucked this project into the woods without creating a scar in the landscape," Van Vliet says.

The house itself is simple in concept: a 5,500-square-foot open plan that maximizes efficiency while creating plenty of unusual spaces for displaying art. "At the time, we had a very clear budget, and our priority was quality of design, materials and workmanship," says Kalogris, who selected Bensalem's Northeastern Construction for the job. "We felt that, as time went on, we would be able to add or make changes accordingly based on our financial situation, but the bones were there already."



**OPPOSITE: SPACES FOR ART, LIKE A CARVED MAHOGANY DOOR BY BOB HARRISON, ARE BUILT RIGHT INTO THE KALOGRIS HOUSE.**



**ABOVE: THEY HAVE ADDED TO THEIR HOME WITH A GUEST HOUSE CONNECTED VIA AN ARBOR WALK (BOTTOM LEFT), AND A JUTTING SAIL OF AN ADDITION THAT BECAME A MOST UNUSUAL BATHROOM (TOP AND BOTTOM RIGHT).**

The core and heart of the house is the single fireplace, open on two sides and connecting the curved living room and its sloping cathedral ceiling with the rest of the two-story home. There are no hallways on the first floor, just a natural progression from living room to dining room to kitchen. An industrial, eight-foot-diameter spiral staircase serves as a central axis, leading down to the finished basement and wine cellar and up to the four bedrooms.

Later on, however, adding to this distinctive house proved challenging. The results were surprises like the odd little teahouse of a master bathroom, perched at the end of the house in a space that once comprised a second-floor terrace. "Lis needed another closet," Van Vliet explains. "And we couldn't make the house longer or just stick a box on the end of it — so we made a sculpture out of it." But then there arose yet another problem: Kalogris found the bent-steel sail of a room, with its copper and bronze roof, too beautiful to consign to mere closet space. So, instead, they turned the existing bathroom into a closet and paved the inside of the sculptural addition with shimmering pebbles, adding a pair of mirrors and

sleek vessel sinks on freestanding vanities in the center of the space.

Inside and out, each element of this house has been considered for its aesthetic values. And according to Van Vliet, the property is evidence that green architecture is about far more than just a few rows of solar panels and a coat of eco-friendly paint.

"Green architecture often results in buildings that in my opinion are not very beautiful," she explains. "They're boxy and they have solar panels; they're not soulful. To me, the soulfulness of a building is part of green architecture: How does it relate to the site? How do you feel when you're sitting here? Do you actually feel the woods? Are you a part of them?" It's apparent that the forest is claiming this house as its own, casting its patina of moss and weather over the all-natural building materials. The sturdy stone base seems to grow up organically from the site. "You lose the distinction between where the ground ends and the building starts," Van Vliet notes.

Even the drainage system here — a series of copper rainspouts that contribute to the serene Japanese garden feel of the place — brings the residents closer to nature. "The client can experience the weath-



**ABOVE: STRIKING FURNITURE AND ONE-OF-A-KIND ARTWORK ADORN THE AIRY SITTING ROOM, DESIGNED TO HAVE A TREE HOUSE-LIKE FEEL.**

**LEFT: AN UPSTAIRS STUDY IS PACKED WITH ARTWORK, BUT THE FOCUS REMAINS ON THE STRIKING CUSTOM DESK.**



er this way; they're not just hermetically sealed in," she says. "When it's raining, you can see that it's raining, and when it's not raining, it's dry. It's a way of becoming aware of weather patterns."

Still, from the moment visitors arrive, it's apparent that this is a place as much about art as it is about nature. The sculptures, each meticulously labeled, begin at the roadside: a kinetic stainless steel work by Jeff Kahn guards the drive, and a pair of Greg Leavitt's massive, medieval copper-and-steel trees mark the main entryway. "In our family, we all feel that art is something you should live with, and it's part of everything you do," Kalogris says. She collaborated with friend and curator Eileen Tognini to create the wandering sculpture grounds dubbed the End of the Beginning Garden, frequently hosting tours and art events. Even in the climate-controlled cedar garage, a few paintings and an abstract art installation adorn the walls.

Throughout the house, there's a constant interplay between form and function, the artistic and the practical. It's a veritable gallery of lighting sculptures by Philadelphia artist Warren Muller, whose works provide focal points of extravagant, post-modern rococo throughout the house. A bathroom becomes downright magical thanks to Muller's surreally rotating, illuminated glass disks, while zany



**ABOVE: THE WEIGHTLESS LOOK OF THE COMMERCIAL SPIRAL STAIR IS OFFSET BY THE STURDY STONE WALLS AND FLAGSTONE FLOOR.**

**RIGHT: EVEN BEDROOMS ARE PACKED WITH UNUSUAL ART, LIKE THIS PORTRAIT COMPRISED OF PINS AND BLACK THREAD.**

curlicues of metal, glass and found objects cascade from the second floor down over the kitchen island, lending warmth and drama to an already dynamic room.

Muller and RJ Thornburg, his partner at the Old City studio *bahdeebahdu*, worked with the Kalogrises over the course of some seven years on a series of interior renovations — a partnership sparked by the Kalogrises' first commission of Muller's work for their kitchen. "The interior had to respect both the architecture and the natural surroundings," Thornburg says. "And then they began collecting a lot of art, so the interior had to work in harmony with that. That meant keeping things natural but at the same time interesting — they really have unique and interesting things at every turn of the house." That perfectly suited Thornburg, who added his own visual tricks into the mix. Playing on the two-tone wooden kitchen floor — which was already striking in contrasting stripes of American and Brazilian cherry laid on a bias — he created built-in cabinets that make it seem as if the flooring continues up the wall. He also helped select or design the unique modern and custom furniture pieces that dot the house, like a modular glass-top dining table he created in four interchangeable parts, which can be reconfigured to accom-





**OPPOSITE, TOP: WORKS LIKE GREG LEAVITT'S COPPER AND STEEL TREES COMPOSE THE FAMILY'S EXTENSIVE SCULPTURE GARDEN.**

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: THE CHIMNEY ON THE NEWLY CONSTRUCTED GUESTHOUSE RESEMBLES A STONE TREE, ROOTED TO THE GROUND.**

**TOP: LIGHTING ARTIST WARREN MULLER HAS CREATED MULTIPLE WORKS FOR THE HOUSE.**

date more or fewer guests. And throughout, he employed unusual finishes, like an undulating gypsum plaster wall by Modular Arts in the finished basement.

Artistic responses to logistical challenges mark the grounds as well. For example, the idea for those Greg Leavitt trees was born after visitors kept missing the front door — instead tramping through the vegetable garden to knock on the kitchen sliders. And to lead tour groups throughout the sculpture and water gardens, no ordinary railings seemed to fit in. Instead, Van Vliet designed custom-founded bronze railings, cast with a crinkled texture and treated to add an instant patina. And Glen Mills-based Outerspaces Landscape Design, (which created an elaborate water feature, flagstone paths and hardscaping throughout the property), helped implement a daring solution to an erosion problem on one hillside: simply lift up the ground with wooden and stone supports, creating a shady overhang. And as more buildings — a guest house and a garage — sprang up on the premises, Van Vliet screened them from view with low pergolas in a repeating motif of strong horizontal lines that hint at the home's Prairie-style inspiration and that will eventually support curtains of green vines.

Whether tree house or zen garden or art gallery, this home was built to last and evolve, to weather and mature gracefully. Its growth has been considered and organic — much like the forest that engulfs it. If Van Vliet's quest was to build a soulful home, the Kalogrises feel she succeeded; they say this ongoing retrospective should make her proud. But more than that, the home is a collaboration of artists and a welcoming place for art. "When you go to that house, it's like a family coming together, with all the people that were involved in making and providing the various elements," says Thornburg. "It's the only place I know like that, where everyone I know, all these artists, had a hand in making it what it is." ■

