In the compact floorplan, corridors were omitted to economize on space. The front door—visible in the center of the frame—leads to a foyer and the dining room, where a wall of dry-stacked stone wraps around to the family room (opposite). Unobstructed site lines offer views to the outdoors on both sides of the house.

SUN CATCHER

A new, eco-friendly home perched above the Potomac forges a strong connection to nature

BY SHARON JAFFE DAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAXWELL MACKENZIE

Volumes clad in stucco, Douglas fir and stone offer a modern interpretation of Prairie-style architecture. The third-story tower houses Rachel Weller's office (this page). A LaCantina Door in the living room (opposite) opens seamlessly to a front porch that overlooks the river and also boasts a fireplace.

Located on a bluff high above a mighty river, a multi-tiered stone, wood and stucco home would look right at home in Aspen or Big Sur. Which is exactly what makes its presence along the Potomac River in the Palisades neighborhood of DC, mere minutes from Georgetown, even more surprising.

Harry and Rachel Weller bought the land in 2011 after outgrowing their 100-year-old Victorian a few blocks away. They envisioned a new home that would be everything their old one was not: modern, full of light, open for entertaining and energy efficient. As sports and nature enthusiasts, they also wanted to maximize river views that reminded Rachel of her native Colorado.

The Wellers hired architect Ankie Barnes to design the home, which would replace a small, 1940s-era house on the property. When he asked them to articulate their aesthetic likes and dislikes, they filled a leather portfolio with photos and copious notes. Weaving the images together was what Barnes dubbed a "consistency of spirit"—clean, modern lines; a propensity for natural materials; and multiple references to the work of Frank Lloyd Wright.

"What I like about Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings is that they're ship-shape, like Japanese structures tend to feel," explains Harry Weller, a general partner in the venture capital firm New Enterprise Associates. "They feel well-made while still being modern. I appreciate the clean lines, but also the warmth that Wright and the Japanese are able to create by using materials like wood, stone and brick."

The album also included a shot of one of the Wellers' two young sons and a hand-written dare to "build something this kid can't destroy." This was just one of many challenges facing Barnes and project architect Matthew Fiehn. Though its views across the Potomac are vast, the property itself is only 50 feet wide, leaving a mere 34 feet of buildable width. To counteract its narrow footprint, they would make the house as tall and long as possible, but filtering light into its depths would be tricky.

On the now-completed house, the front façade features a nod to Wright, with large corner columns that straddle an open porch, a central volume and a hip roof. "Like in Wright's Prairie houses," explains Barnes, "long bands of windows, big roof overhangs and a corner window imply there's a view worth looking at."

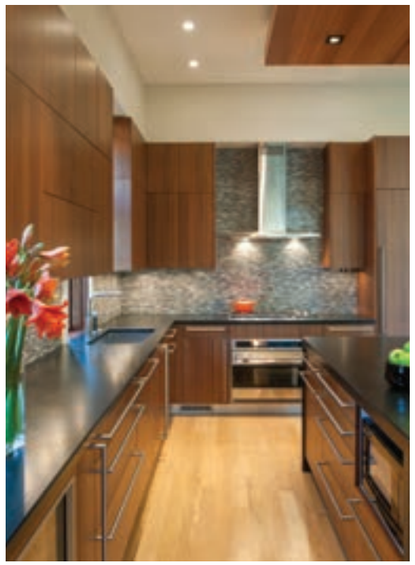
ARCHITECTURE: ANKIE BARNES, FAIA, LEED AP, principal; MATTHEW FIEHN, AIA, LEED AP, project architect, Barnes Vanze Architects, Washington, DC. INTERIOR DESIGN: MIRIAM DILLON, ASID, Associate AIA, Barnes Vanze Architects. BUILDER: Horizon Builders, Crofton, Maryland. LANDSCAPE DESIGN: MARY MAY, San Diego, California.

In organizing the interiors of the four-level home, the architects achieved a sense of both openness and embrace. On the ground level, sight lines extend from the front door to the rear garden to avoid a feeling of confinement. In the front living room and the rear family room, LaCantina Doors open seamlessly to the outdoors. To economize on space, the plan omits corridors and rooms overlap. And instead of walls, wooden "clouds" suspended from the ceiling delineate the kitchen and dining areas.

The second floor houses the master suite, the boys' bedrooms and shared bath and a comfy lounge lined with bookshelves where the family winds down at night. A guest room occupies the top floor, along with a glassed-in office overlooking the river for Rachel, a medical writer. "I grew up next to the Colorado National Monument where you can see for miles, so I almost feel claustrophobic [in DC]," she relates. "Having this visibility means I can breathe." The lower level features a gym, Harry's home office/man cave with a full suite of deejay equipment and a wine cellar.

The home's east-west orientation assured that the breakfast area at the back of the house would be bathed in morning light while the front porch would make a prime spot for cocktails at sunset. "The challenge," says Barnes, "was the middle of the day. We still needed to bring sun into the house so it's happy at all times." The solution was to turn the four-story stair in the heart of the home into a giant "sun catcher" surrounded by glass.

"Designing the stair carriage was a three-dimensional puzzle," recalls Matthew Fiehn. "One of the biggest challenges in this project was figuring out all the modern detailing so that it looked like it took no effort whatsoever."



An up-lit wooden "cloud" delineates the kitchen (top), where granite countertops and a glass-tile backsplash (above) create a natural palette. Another LaCantina Door (right) blurs the line between the family room and the outdoors. A detached garage stores the family's mountain bikes and fly-fishing gear.

From the dry-stacked stone walls to the granite countertops and white-oak floors, the interiors convey a warm, organic vibe. Interior designer Miriam Dillon took inspiration for the home's material and furnishings palette from its lush surroundings. "I gravitated toward bringing the outdoors in," she says.

Keeping an eye on the environment, the Wellers and their design team implemented a number of measures—from geothermal heating to solar panels—to minimize the home's carbon footprint. Barnes credits the contractor, Horizon Builders, for taking a "science-savvy" approach and implementing a range of high-performance materials. "It could easily qualify as a LEED house, but the Wellers were not interested in a badge," says Barnes. "They were interested in a well-built house that lasts a long time, that's kind to the planet and that's healthy to live in. And the energy bills are low."

When the architects unveiled their initial plan, recalls Harry, "We teared up. We said, 'That's it. Done.' I give them a lot of credit because usually it's an iterative process. Putting together what we asked for in the way they did was a remarkable accomplishment."

With mountain bikes and fly-fishing equipment ready to go in their new detached garage, the Wellers make the most of their home on the rim of the C&O Canal National Park. "It's our little bit of Colorado," marvels Harry. "If we were to take a picture out the front window and ask people what city we were in, no one would ever guess it was DC."

Maxwell MacKenzie is a photographer in Washington, DC.

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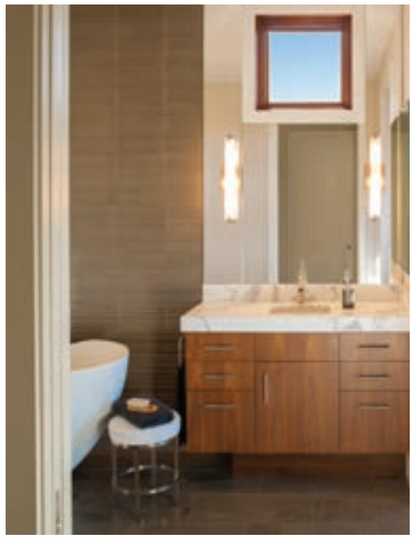

On the second floor, designer Miriam Dillon outfitted a window seat in the master bedroom with cushions in a striped fabric by JAB. The homeowners and their sons, now seven and nine, gather here to read and enjoy the river vistas. The master bath (above) boasts a sculptural tub by Kohler and a marble-topped vanity. Churchill, their golden retriever, lounges on the adjoining deck (right).

"ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES IN THIS PROJECT WAS FIGURING OUT ALL THE MODERN DETAILING SO THAT IT LOOKED LIKE IT TOOK NO EFFORT WHATSOEVER."

—MATTHEW FIEHN