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Back to the Future

BY KATE O'CONNOR



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL LEVIN

There are many good reasons why a home in the mountains of Western North Carolina is often referred to as a “retreat.” But for Stephen Herbits, a Florida-based executive, it was not so much a case of moving away from something (in this case, the sweltering summers of the Sunshine State), but a moving toward — a remembering of the landscape of his childhood home in the Berkshires...and a desire to strike a very subtle balance.

The setting is a 26-acre parcel in Leicester, outside of Asheville, graced with long-range vistas that take in the meadows and sunsets. The “retreat” is a 3,450-square-foot contemporary gem — mounted just beyond a wooded knoll — designed by SPG Architects of New York to not only respond to the land but also be responsible to it.

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“There was a certain nostalgia about the landscape, but there wasn’t a sentimental feeling about creating a typical, regional mountain house,” says Eric Gartner, a partner in the firm. “The premise of this house was to be modern and forward-looking.”

The philosophy went beyond aesthetics. Early on, the decision was made to ensure that the home’s environmental impact would be minimal. “One of the goals was to demonstrate that in making a house ‘green,’ you’re not sacrificing quality and style,” explains Gartner. “The builder, S.B. Coleman, and the team of local subcontractors were very aggressive in pursuing the strategies to make that happen.”

Certainly function was the ultimate priority. “Over time, I’ve learned what is best and most appealing to me, as well as being efficient and comfortable,” observes Herbits. Since the home was intended primarily for his personal use, the main-floor living area is laid out as an open loft space. The single-room width offers two orientations, so natural ventilation is integrated into the structure. To capture the sumptuous views, the south and west sides are lined with UV-filtered windows, shielded by 5-foot overhangs and retractable solar-veil shades to reduce heat gain and provide privacy.

The personal areas of the master suite and study are sequestered and sheltered against the solid, well-insulated north wall, with

separate temperature controls to ensure complete comfort. The interiors, also designed by SPG, focus on reclaimed materials and locally produced furnishings. Cabinetry throughout was crafted by Michael C. Keleher and Creative Woodcrafters, using regionally harvested wood finished with water-based, no-VOC products.

Taking advantage of the sloping terrain, the guest suite and media room are tucked below grade. Heating and cooling are independently zoned, allowing the lower level to be disengaged when Herbits is not entertaining, with the surrounding earth providing a thermal barrier and maintaining a fairly constant ambient temperature.

Since the planning and construction of the house coincided with a three-year drought in the area, a water-reclamation system was designed to funnel rainwater from the house and garage roofs into two 1,700-gallon holding tanks, to be used for irrigation and wastewater. Among the beneficiaries of the system is the roof of the lower unit — an “infinity garden” surrounded by a glass railing. Created by Living Roofs, Inc. to simulate an idealized meadow, the rooftop plot diminishes heat-island effect, controls runoff (and erosion) and visually integrates the house with the surrounding landscape.

The geothermal field beyond the house provides the internal climate control — “perhaps the single greatest gesture we made towards environmental responsibility,” says Gartner. “There’s no direct use of fossil fuel. It’s three-to-six times more efficient than standard systems and uses about one sixth of the electricity.”

But the form of the house also gestures toward the surroundings. “Despite its modernity, there are several things that ground this house into the setting,” says Gartner. “It nestles into the landscape. The colors are reminiscent of earth. The front facade is Corten steel panels that rusted over the first few months and took on the tonal quality of the clay soil.”

“The house was beautifully and carefully designed for three goals: appearance, environmental friendliness and, most important to me, function,” observes Herbits.

In melding an evocative sense of the past with living in the present and providing stewardship for the future, it strikes the perfect pose.