

THE HOUSE NOT only defies the limitations of the steep site, but leverages them for dramatic effect. Charcoal-stained shingles blend the structure with its woodsy surroundings, leaving the emphasis on the spectacular view of Lake Champlain. On the top level (FACING PAGE), a deck offering lofty views is shaded by cantilevered steel overhangs.

CLIFF HANGER

SITE DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE MEET THE CHALLENGE OF A STEEP LAKESIDE LOT



WRITTEN BY NANCY HUMPHREY CASE • PHOTOGRAPHED BY JIM WESTPHALEN



CONSIDERING THE COMPLEXITY of the clients' program — build an angular house on a half-acre, steeply pitched lakeside lot with runoff issues — architects Rolf Kielman and Josh Chafe of Truex-Cullins in Burlington, Vermont, knew they would need to work in close collaboration with a site designer at the very start. They quickly solicited the help of landscape architect Keith Wagner of Wagner Hodgson Landscape Architecture, also in Burlington. "It was a challenging project," Wagner says, "but that's what made it fun. We had a great team and worked together to turn the constraints into something positive."

Kielman's vision for a new house to replace one built in the 1970s and expanded in the 1980s drew inspiration from the minimalist Casa Malaparte, the legendary house designed and built in 1942 by Italian writer Curzio Malaparte on a towering promontory of Capri high above the Mediterranean Sea. "Like the Malaparte house, we wanted the house to feel like it had magically emerged from the natural landforms," Kielman says. To accomplish this, he and his team sheltered the house from the road with a berm that climbs up onto the "green" roof of the garage, then peels back to open the three levels of this 4,700-square-foot house to Lake Champlain. "Closer to the lake, the house becomes glossy, transparent," Kielman says. "There's the notion of coming from enclosed and opaque to open and light."

The landscape design follows the grade of the lot and connects the house with outdoor living spaces all the way down to the water's edge. Beginning with the auto court, front entry, and breakfast terrace at street level, it descends along a flight of bluestone steps onto the pool terrace, then drops another 25 feet by a generous stairway to a lakeside



OVERHEAD DOORS MADE of painted glass let light into the garage (**TOP PHOTO**). An artist's studio on the second floor overhangs and shelters the entry patio. In the foreground, a retaining wall of board-formed concrete borders a berm that hides the house from the road. The grassy slope rises to meet the green roof of the garage (**ABOVE**), which simulates a lawn from the balcony of the guest room and retains rainwater that would otherwise wash sediment into the lake.

THE BACK OF the house opens itself to the light and views on all three levels with outdoor built forms connecting interior and exterior living spaces. Because of the shape of the lot, every wall and roofline, including the sun-shading steel overhangs, are set at angles. Even the cantilevered deck in the distance is wedge-shaped.







THE ANGLED KITCHEN island (FACING PAGE, TOP) mimics the shape of the house. Cabinets are back-painted milk glass. The planes of the ceilings stop short of the walls (FACING PAGE, BOTTOM) giving a light, floating aesthetic to the living room. In the master bedroom (ABOVE), blackout shades and sheer curtains retract into the coved ceilings to yield an unobstructed view. All casework, including the master bed, was designed by the architects and built in Roundtree Construction's shop. A shallow bump-out (LEFT) floods the stair landing with sunshine. Horizontal tiles in the master bath shower (BELOW) echo the board-formed concrete retaining walls that anchor the steep site.





DESIGN DECISION

Wallzilla Gets a Makeover

Nicknamed Wallzilla by local boaters, the towering, concrete-block retaining wall stuck out like a blazing white-bandaged sore thumb. Constructed decades ago to prevent the shoreline from crumbling, it ran the length of the lot's water frontage, about 10 feet high at one end and 20 feet high at the other. An aesthetic solution took a lot of discussion by all members of the project team. Face it with wood? No, fitting the wood to the pillow-shaped concrete blocks 2 to 3 feet high and 4 to 6 feet long would have been prohibitively expensive. Cover the wall with wire mesh and plant vines to grow up it? No, the west sun would have baked the plants, and the owners didn't want to lose space at the waterfront. Tint the concrete blocks with a pigmented stain? Yes! Because concrete is more porous in some places than others, the wall took the stain unevenly, simulating the look of stone and blending in finally with its surroundings.



deck. The foundation and retaining walls of 6-inch concrete, formed with hemlock boards that leave the impression of rough-sawn wood on the surfaces, anchor the house to its site and define the various zones, each offering a different vantage point for enjoying the view of the lake and the Adirondack Mountains. One of the most dramatic is a narrow, asymmetrical deck built atop an existing concrete tower that juts out over the water much like a diving platform.

"The landscape and architecture are well-blended," says Chafe. "Neither would make sense without the other." But the landscape design is not just about aesthetics. To mitigate erosion and prevent storm water from running directly into the lake, Wagner incorporated features such as succulents planted on the garage roof, a sediment-trapping "rain garden," and channels for rainwater to feed into landscaped swales.

The narrow lot presented extreme challenges, but the design team decided to "work with it rather than fight it," says Wagner. The plantings and steps along the south side of the house funnel the view toward

the lake. Contractors from Roundtree Construction of New Haven, Vermont, found creative ways to attack the tricky lot configuration and grade changes. For example, they worked on the waterfront deck from a barge instead of on land. "They are superb contractors," Kielman says. "It would have been a different house without them."

Because of sun-shielding, cantilevered steel overhangs, large interior spaces, and expansive, wraparound glass, the house is framed with steel. And everything is wedge-shaped. "There's only one 90-degree angle in the whole house," Chafe says. Since the overhangs are both angled and tilted, every piece of steel in them is a different length and cut to a different angle. "[Roundtree project manager] Ric SantaMaria is a great problem solver," Chafe says. "If you could peel back the plaster, you'd see a lot of sketches on the plywood and studs. Simplicity is hidden complexity."

Interior spaces are serene — minimized to give center stage to art on the walls and the view outside. Intersecting planes appear to not touch each other. Walls seem to stop 4 inches from the ceiling, creating



A BLUESTONE TERRACE surrounds the lap pool at the walk-out basement level. Looking down from the deck outside the master bedroom (BELOW) creates a sensation akin to standing at cliff's edge. A deck of red meranti (FACING PAGE, LEFT) offers an intimate setting to experience the gentle lapping sounds of the lake.



coves where lights, heating grills, tracks for hanging art, and in some cases window shades are hidden. Plaster walls are separated from door and window trim by a slender reveal. The staircase has open risers and glass where the balustrades should be. "The intention was to convey a lightness of feel — a floating quality," Kielman says.

Every detail was deliberately planned by the architects and precisely executed by the builders, down to a steel door-stop matching the band of steel inlaid in a rift-sawn oak veneer door. Complementing their work, the owners, one of whom is an accomplished artist, thoughtfully selected fixtures, furnishings, and art that completed the refined composition. "Only once in a while do you get a client who wants to live in a piece of art," says Chafe.

"The power of the project," says Wagner, "is the complete integration of architecture and landscaping. You don't know where the architecture ends and the landscape begins. It's a marriage of site and built forms." ■

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