

Architecture

In this spacious house, you're always at one with nature

Even inside, it seems as if you're outside

By Robert Campbell
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A house can dominate the landscape, standing tall and proud against the sky, a manmade object that seems to defy the weather and the world around it. Many New England houses gain their eloquence from just that sense of independence.

Then there are houses that seem to grow naturally out of the land they rest on, almost as if they were fragments of landscape. A new house in Belmont is of the latter kind.

The architect is Maryann Thompson of Cambridge. The owners are a couple, now in middle age, who'd rather not be named. We'll call them Spence and Kate.

I ask Spence what they were looking for in this new house. He answers by telling me why the couple chose Thompson, after talking to a number of other architects. "It's how she reads the site and sets the architecture into it. We wanted the house to heighten the site."

Thompson talks the same language. "I gave it a strong horizontal line to lower the house into the site. I wanted it to nestle into the land. The house is almost not present." On her office website, she writes: "Our designs attempt to heighten the awareness of the presence of nature in whatever context we find ourselves working."

The site is a beguiling 3 acres of steeply rolling land ringed with trees. An old pond, now dredged and restored, lies below the house's front. Finished in cedar stained a warm gray, the home looks as natural as a stack of weathered timber. Stone-paved walks approach it from a parking court behind. A landscape architect, Julie Messervy, was part of the design team.

The owners previously lived in a house designed by a follower of famed Modernist architect Marcel Breuer, a



Maryann Thompson of Cambridge says she designed this Belmont home "to nestle into the land."

product of the Bauhaus school in Germany who later came to Harvard. They liked Breuer's kind of Modernism: flat roofs, big windows, horizontal lines, varied materials, and a sense of open connection between indoors and out.

This is a house as closely fitted to this particular family as a tailored suit. Space sweeps without interruption from the kitchen to the dining room to the living room. That's because Kate didn't want to feel cut off from social life when she was in the kitchen. It's also because, says architect Thompson, "Both owners wanted their two boys, still teens as the house was being designed, to be a presence in their lives. They wanted the landscape to be a constant presence, too." There are, however, separate studies for Kate and Spence, both of whom work mostly at home.

In many ways, the house makes you feel as if you were outdoors. A corridor paved in gray slate runs in a straight

line from the back door to the front, with everything opening off it. It feels like a street. Light tends to come from above, just as it does in nature.

Thompson talks, too, of spatial ideas that sound more like a village than a single house. "I wanted to create space that unfolds, that's more mysterious because it's playing a game of 'hide and reveal,'" she says. "There's a kind of dialogue between the user and the house. A person walking through has an importance in that dialogue." And it's true that a walk through the house is a voyage of discovery, as spaces hidden by a bend or a fireplace open to view as you move. So do views out to the landscape.

The house responds to nature in other ways. It follows the sun as it moves across the sky. Or more accurately, life inside the house follows the sun. In the morning the sun shines from the east into the kitchen and breakfast area. By

afternoon, it has moved on to a position from which it illuminates the living room. It changes with the seasons, of course, too. In winter, as now, it enters the house unimpeded. But in summer when it's higher in the sky, the trees — especially an old locust in front of the house — provide shade. A screened porch off the kitchen is an indoor-outdoor room that's walled off in winter.

The house is what's called a geothermal building. A pair of pipes penetrates 1,200 feet into the ground at a constant temperature. A heat pump extracts chill from water when it's cooler than the air, and heat when it's warmer. It's an efficient system costwise, especially the air conditioning. When it provides heat, it does so by warming the floors from below.

The future is as carefully planned as the present. Spence and Kate hope to grow old here. So they asked for a ground-floor guest room that can become the master bedroom, should either spouse later have trouble with stairs. And the ground-floor bathroom is equipped with grab bars.

Thompson is still best known for architecture she created with her former husband and partner Charles Rose. These include two award-winning and quite wonderful works: the Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach, Fla. (1996), and the Veterans Memorial in Columbus, Ind. (1997). Now on her own, Thompson recently completed an outdoor classroom hung with vine tre-



The layout of the spacious interior brings sunlight to rooms when they're most active.

lises at the Arnold Arboretum in Boston.

Other architects have found ways to make houses feel a little like abstract chunks of landscape, as this one does. Most notable was Frank Lloyd Wright, whose famous Fallingwater in Pennsylvania seems to heave itself up out of the rock at its base. A prominent architect of the present, Antoine Predock of Albuquerque, puts the case succinctly.

"Architecture," he says, "is landscape in drag."

It's a pleasure to discover a house like this. It reminds you how much a good architect can add to the quality of life.

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