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WORCESTER

Quarterly

THE
HOME
AND
GARDEN
ISSUE

Luxury lofts
From factories to living spaces

Lakeside gem
Contemporary at its best

Water gardens
Build a backyard oasis

Down to business
Setting up your home office



On the Cover
A close-up of a water garden in Dana Bain's backyard in Sterling.
Photography by Tom Rettig

Home and Garden 2006



CONTENTS

Outdoors



10 For Work or Play
Homeowners lovingly restore old barns

16 On the Porch
Take a seat on wicker or wood

20 Vegetable Seeds
Heirloom varieties are tried and true

24 Water Gardens
Landscaped ponds making a splash

32 Granite and Wood
T.S. Mann salvages antique treasures



36 Gardener's Disneyland
Plants aplenty at White Flower Farm

41 Tweet, Tweet
Attracting birds to your backyard



16



20



60

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Architect Michael Samra designed a house for his parents, Maureen and Roy Samra, on Lake Quinsigamond.



NO DETAIL FORGOTTEN AT LAKEFRONT CONTEMPORARY

Simplicity and light

BY LAURA PORTER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM RETTIG

Three years ago, Roy and Maureen Samra called their son, Michael, and asked him to meet them for dinner in Framingham, halfway between their home in Worcester and his in Malden. Over their meal at Legal Sea Food, they asked him to design a house for them. Nearing retirement, they were ready to sell the home they had lived in for close to 40 years and build on the small parcel of land they owned on Lake Quinsigamond in Worcester. Michael, an architect whose Malden business, studio TROIKA, specializes in architectural, interior and graphic design, got to work with a pencil on the back of a place mat.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 62

Glass is an integral element of the design



In the Samra's living room, light boxes march up the wall. A television is also recessed into the space.

"We'll put a cube at the end of the lake," he told his parents, and proceeded to draw just that.

"They looked at me as if I had three heads," he remembers now, laughing. "But I said, 'No, you're going to like it.'"

They do.

The light-filled mahogany and cedar cube that rises up from the small lane off Lake Street is very different from the simple California ranch where the Samras spent most of their adult life. Constructed on three levels, the house is effectively a cube sheared to allow light; a vertical structure that uses every inch of the land on which it sits. A rectangular spiral works its way from the inside to the outside to break down the original massing of the cube, a mahogany wrapping that begins and ends at the south side of the house.

There is, as Michael Samra notes, a "very limited materials palette" used in the house: glass, mahogany and bleached cedar stained to match the concrete walkways outside and light-colored paint on the walls and cabinetry inside. Immense windows on three sides — close to 80 individual windows in all — make glass an integral element of the design, not only weaving light throughout the house but also incorporating a sense of immediacy to the outside world.

From inside, the effect is of being both protected from and very much part of the natural environment. Blown-in spray insulation and tight construction create a cocoon of silence. Even on a blustery day, there is no sound of the whipping wind off the lake or traffic from the street. An observer can watch as sunlight shifts across the water and the foliage, yet because of the northern orientation there is no glare, only the burnished glow of reds and golds and the calm expanse of water and sky. At no point is the actual land on which it sits visible from the house itself; one looks out on the lake as though from the deck of a ship. "You get the extended gaze of the water," says Michael Samra. "It's very relaxing."

"We had no idea what it was going to look like," says his mother, as she makes dinner in her new kitchen. "It was very hard to imagine." She moves in an easy pattern among the sink, the refrigerator and the European stove that fits the clean



angles of the room. After moving in last May, she and her husband are still getting used to how things work. "I feel as though I'm only here until the real owners show up," she says. She pulls open a drawer and marvels as it glides shut without a sound, operating on a delayed hinge installed to reduce noise. There isn't any slamming drawers or doors in this house when you're mad, she says with a chuckle.

Such minute detail was vital to her son, who was not only the architect but also the general contractor, involved in every aspect of design and construction.

It was, he says, "truly a labor of love" that combined "everything I've learned about architecture, form, detailing."

He also found it a considerable chal-

lenge. "You don't want to be the punch line of every Thanksgiving joke if you make a mistake or a poor design decision," he says. "I had to stand back and have confidence."

His experience stood him in good stead. After graduating from Syracuse University, he worked in Italy and New York City before entering Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. His prize-winning master's thesis examined different ways of incorporating glass in architecture. While still in school, he began to work as an architectural designer, designing apartments and doing renovations. After taking a full-time job with a hardware designing company, he continued to do architectural projects on his own on weekends.



After four years, word had spread and "I was so busy with projects that I had to decide if I wanted to be on my own or continue working for someone else." He started studio TROIKA in 2001 and since then has completed more than 50 projects.

For his parents' home, he began with a concept sketch, knowing that "it's either there, or it's not, at the beginning."

"It was an experiment," he says, "to create a cube at the end of the axis of the lake and then to allow light, orientation, design and the program — or the arrangement of the rooms — to have an impact on the cube." The nature of the property dictated the size of the house. With only 7,500 square feet to work with and a 10- to 12-foot level change between the lakefront and the road, Samra knew that "verticality" was the only option. The narrow peninsula gave him a certain freedom, making it unneces-

sary to conform to the neighborhood in terms of design or style. With a "soft spot" for the lake, where he himself used to row as a student at St. John's High School in the 1980s, he set about to "turn the cube into something other than a cube."

That process required the trust and faith of his new clients. From the very beginning, Michael says, his parents made it clear that they "didn't want to stifle my creativity. My father had been a hairdresser. He knew that the best situation was when the customer gave him free rein to do what he wanted to do." During the 15 months of construction, his father was at the site at least part of every single day, but both of his parents consistently deferred to his creative judgment. "The idea takes over," Michael notes, "and has a life of its own."

"Michael was very easy to work with as

In the kitchen, walls, counters and appliances blend together. Elsewhere, the eye is not drawn to specific objects, but rather to deliberate areas of interest.



long as he was doing what he envisioned," says Roy Samra, who, along with Robert LaPierre, founded the Rob-Roy Co., which runs numerous hair salons and hair design schools throughout Central Massachusetts. "Sometimes we didn't understand it. We had to go by his wisdom and his feeling of what he wanted to do. His big line was, 'This isn't Home Depot.'"

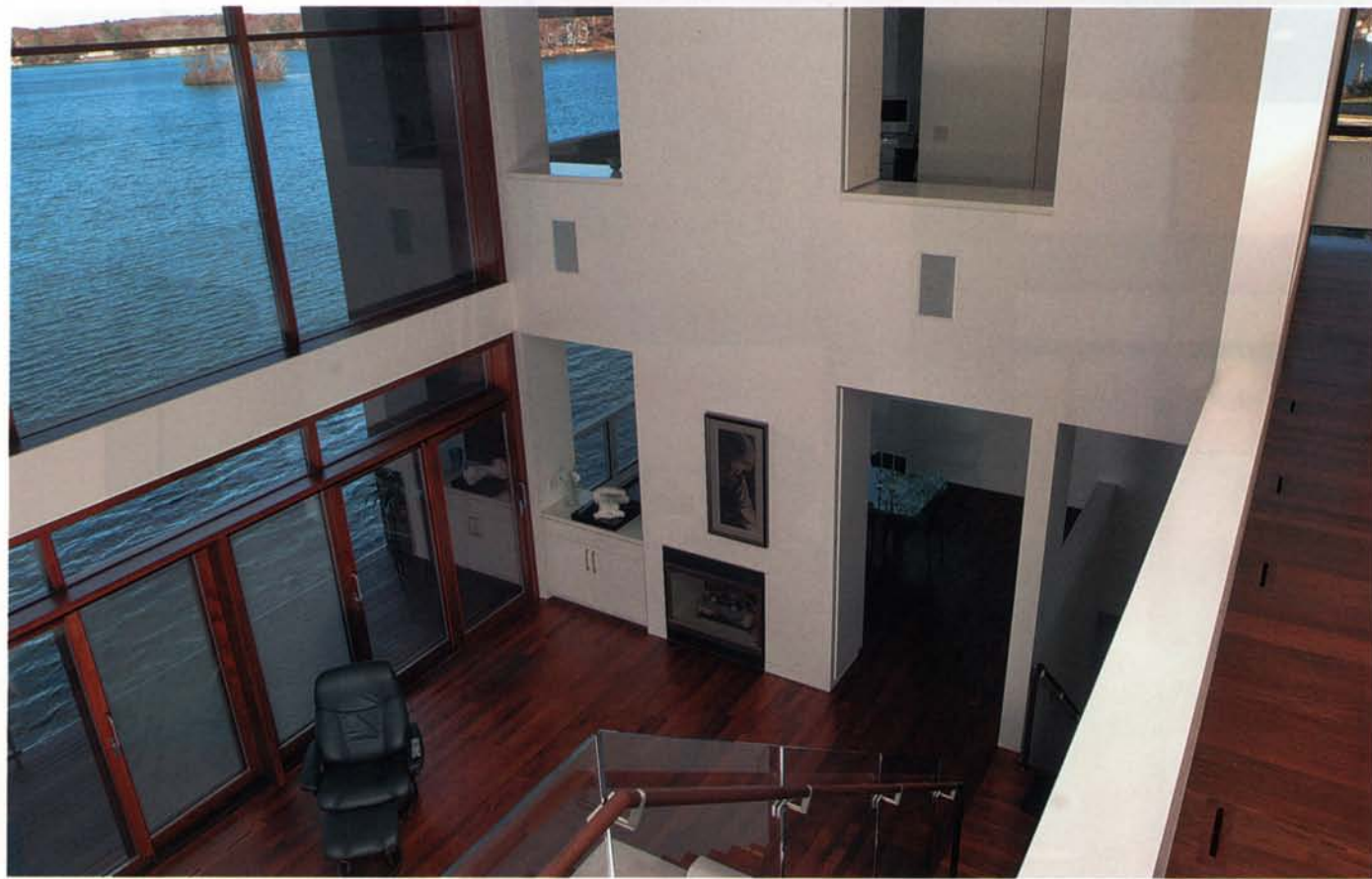
"We had to learn to trust his judgment," adds his wife. "I said to him, 'I definitely do not want cabinets.' Take a look." She gestures to the cabinet-lined kitchen. "But this was definitely the right way to go."

All three Samras confirm that the process was remarkably smooth.

"We gave him only one criterion," says Roy Samra. "We didn't want a dark house. The most important thing was a lot of light. And there are no dark spots in the house. You don't even have to put on a light because of the windows."

Creative license aside, Michael made many design decisions with his parents' lifestyle in mind. The primary living space is on the second floor, entered from the driveway into a foyer that leads to the living room, dining room and kitchen. Upstairs, the master bedroom and Mrs. Samra's study allow privacy from the rest of the house. On the first floor, at shore's edge, two small bedrooms and a large living area give the visiting grandchildren their own

CONTINUED ON PAGE 64



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 63

space and easy access to the lake in the summer.

The orientation of the house made it possible for Michael to suit his parents' early waking pattern. "The spaces on the east side — the kitchen, master bedroom, the bathroom — are all about waking up," he says. "My parents get up early and wanted to be up with the light." The north, or lake, side of the house emphasizes viewing. The south side, the only orientation with close neighbors, stresses privacy. This is the only side of the house without windows. Instead, light boxes march up the living room wall; the television set at the bottom represents yet another box. Glass from the light boxes cuts through the wall to the outside, creating external glass fins that light up at night, enhancing the spectacular view of the illuminated house from the water.

Originally, the master bedroom was designed to be enclosed, providing privacy from the open stairway that looks over the living room. However, when Roy Samra first saw the view from the unfinished bedroom, showcased in living room windows that run a full two stories high, he asked



that it, too, be opened up to the expanse of sky and water. The only wall is a modest divider that serves as a modified headboard for the bed.

From the outset, says Michael Samra, the project was "about creating a very clean object to live in. Every detail was about minimizing maintenance for my parents." Indeed, every aspect of the house is a custom detail, from the downspouts to the venting in the bathrooms, designed to go out through the roof so that one does not have to look at or maintain it. Baseboards are built in, flush against the walls; every light switch is laid out perfectly to match or line up with something else. Beams in the glossy wooden floors are set in either horizontally or vertically, depending on the design scheme of the specific area of the

house. The basement of the two-story garage holds all of the mechanical systems, removing all of the "noisy and dirty stuff" from the house itself.

The goal is not only simplicity of living but also minimalism. Throughout the house, the walls, cabinetry and trim are all painted in alabaster; none of the windows has casings to interrupt the view. The eye is not drawn to specific objects, or clutter, but rather to deliberate areas of interest. "The idea is that we don't notice it," says Michael. "There is no intentional focus." In the kitchen, for instance, the glass table is transparent, fitting "with the new vocabulary of the house instead of just being another object within space." The walls, counters and appliances blend together. As a result, one focuses immediately on the vista of trees and water captured in the mitered window that wraps the room on both sides.

Realizing such a vision required Michael not only to keep his eye on the forest as well as the trees, but also to work with people who were able to understand the concept. Six designers worked on the house, each adding something of his or her own to the project. "Architecture and design are about

teamwork. Great projects emerge," he says. It is a fitting statement for a man whose studio name, TROIKA, is an allusion to the word "team." As a prime example, Michael cites the mahogany staircase that leads up from the living room to the master bedroom, separated by a glass railing on the right. The stairs have no overhang, but instead look as though they fold their way up the steps. One of the finish carpenters stepped forward to take on this task. With the glass railing already in place, he had to custom fit each stair, cutting it to fit within $\frac{1}{16}$ of an inch of the glass. As he trimmed, he saved the balance of each separate piece of wood, matching it so that the grain of each stair continues through the glass. "The carpenter understood the idea and brought his own artistry to the table," says Michael. Adding yet another small but vital detail, the mahogany banister that tops the glass is hand-oiled, creating a pleasing surface. "That's why we do what we do as architects — to make the typical, ordinary things in your life more pleasurable."

To that end, he thought a great deal about the way his parents liked to live. "He knew we spent a lot of time in the kitchen," says Roy Samra. "We both grew up in three deckers." The layout of the kitchen not only makes it easy for family members and guests to gather around the table but also for Mrs. Samra to "mingle and not feel as though I'm away from everything while I cook."

"He even put a TV in the kitchen for his mother," adds her husband, pointing to the small flat-screen television that turns on a hinge so she can watch it from any angle. "She didn't think she wanted it, but she loves it."

He himself likes working on his car in the garage, a hobby that led his son to order a garage door modeled on technology used in airplane hangars; the frame alone weighs 1,800 pounds. With the press of a button, it slowly folds its massive bulk in two, cantilevering over the entry to create a canopy. Michael "didn't want it to look like a garage door," says Mrs. Samra. "And then he told us how it opens and doesn't block off light — it makes it easy for Roy to be out in the garage working on the car on a nice day."

"He almost killed me when it came," Michael comments and his father grins. The garage door, like many of the house's



Windows weave light throughout the house and incorporate a sense of immediacy to the outside world.

unique characteristics, produces a mixture of pride and awe in his parents. The windows, which took 14 weeks to have made, are another. The largest single window, which overlooks the lake from the children's playroom in the basement, measures 20 feet long by $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide. "It was the last one off the truck and the first one installed," Michael recalls.

"I was here when they unloaded the windows," says his mother. "That was the day I first realized what a big project it was. It took eight grown men to lift most of the things off the truck. That was the scariest part of the whole thing. After that it was easy."

Now that they have moved in and begun to make the house their own, "I love everything about my house," says Maureen Samra. "I have two favorite parts," she says, and goes on to list three: the powder room under the steps in the foyer, the view of the lake and the perspective of looking up at the house from the water. Then she mentions her own workspace upstairs, where she can sew and knit. "The best thing is I have my own room in the house. I like that."

For her husband, however, there is no contest. "The best thing," he says emphatically, "is when your son builds you your home. That's the utmost." **WQ**