

THE MAIN EVENT

Designing custom homes that make a strong visual statement befitting their location is important,



PHOTOS: MICHAEL BIONDO PHOTOGRAPHY

but ensuring smooth sailing with clients, municipalities, and community groups is absolutely critical.

By Susan Bady, Contributing Editor

The builders of these primary residences in Arizona, Connecticut, and Texas faced a similar challenge: develop and maintain strong relationships with their clients. That's true of any custom job, but Chris Shea of Domus Constructors, Norwalk, Conn., can't emphasize that mission enough.

"I think it was difficult, as it is for every client, to go from [a] design on paper to making this big leap of faith," said Shea. "And to have it come off as well as it did is a testament to both the capabilities of [the builder and architect] as well as the relationship we were able to maintain with the clients."

Scott Frankel of Frankel Building Group, Houston, already knew his clients because they were once his neighbors. Frankel assessed that a new house would serve their needs much better than remodeling the old one. He also needed to maintain the goodwill of the homeowners living adjacent to the site, as they would be affected by construction noise and dirt.

Often builders have to deal with community design guidelines, fussy building departments, and conservation agencies. For example, builder Dave Reese and architect Scott Giesen navigated through such requirements as limited landscape lighting, low roof pitches, and darker exterior paint colors. Shea and architect Howard Lathrop had to develop a site with wetlands sitting on the border between two Connecticut towns without disturbing the existing border marker. They also had to stay on top of filtration, erosion, and sedimentation control.

Style that defies description

Shea and Lathrop's 8,000-square-foot custom home hugs a hilly site on a former estate. The three-acre lot straddles the borderline between Norwalk and Westport, Conn., and has a 20-foot slope, wooded areas, and a meadow, plus the aforementioned wetlands.

"It took a lot of going back and forth with conservation, primarily conservation in Westport," says Lathrop. "We had to accommodate runoff in water gardens, most of which were already on the site."

The entrance and main living areas (living room, kitchen,



The home steps up a 20-foot slope at the rear of the site. Stone and wood were reclaimed from the property for such diverse uses as the exterior walls and the 14-foot-long table in the dining room.



The metal roof features an array of 10-kilowatt solar panels. Excess hot water generated by solar energy is dumped into the geothermal system, pool, and spa. A propane system was added for backup.

sunroom and library) are on what is essentially the second floor, says Lathrop: "You're on a mid-level that's 10 feet above the lowest part of the site." The clients can drive into their garage at this level and walk directly into the mudroom and kitchen. Bedrooms are on the upper level. There's also a basement that will eventually be finished as office and entertainment space.

By using the existing grade, Lathrop was able to position the main living areas facing south. "We developed a passive-solar scheme with full-height glass that runs around the south

primary residences

Top left: The sunroom was originally going to be a screened porch. The five-sided room has a stunning view and a high-pitched wood ceiling with exposed beams; Bottom left: The staircase in the entry hall makes a grand statement with its curved handrail. "It creates a certain false perspective," says architect Howard Lathrop. "The walls tilt in, and as the stair meanders up through the space, the ceiling slopes. That's something the clients wanted."



Jon Pompea of Creative Metal Fab, Stamford, Conn., created the superstructure for the library catwalk. The walkway surface is an aluminum grating that filters sunlight, creating shadows on the walls.

façade and to the west," he says. Deep roof overhangs shield the home from direct summer sun and take advantage of solar gain in the winter.

The client told Lathrop that he wanted "as close to net zero as he could get short of actually providing batteries. He realized that the payback [would be] very fast."

The HERS 25 rating is no accident. Solar thermal and PV panels; triple-pane windows, open- and closed-cell foam insulation; structural insulated roof panels; and a geothermal heating and cooling system make the home extraordinarily green for its size.

Materials found on the site were reclaimed and recycled wherever possible. The dining-room table is made from the wood of a cherry tree felled on the property. Old stone walls were dismantled and reused on the exterior and retaining walls.

Creature comforts abound. The master bathroom has a sauna and a yoga studio with a kitchenette. The wine room has a

"secret" passageway to the cigar room, which in turn accesses the master bedroom via a circular staircase.

The two-story library, which shares space with the dining room, was inspired by the reading room in New York City's Morgan Library, Lathrop said. While not quite in the classical style of the Morgan, it's impressive with a stone fireplace and catwalk. "We projected some steel angles off the floor joists, put [an industrial aluminum] grating on top and did a metal handrail," he says.

The home was named Best Contemporary Custom Home in the 2012 Home Building Industry (HOBBI) Awards, a statewide design competition. But Lathrop prefers to avoid stylistic labels. Early in the design process, he and the clients envisioned an Italian hill town. Now he says it resembles "something you'd see in the Colorado Rockies, partly because the shape, the form, and to some extent, the materials were all used to provide as energy-efficient a house as we could."