

# (habitat)



## Lay of the Land

A Kennett Square beauty turns the farmhouse motif on its head. *By Tara Behan*

When architect Matthew Moger first had a look at his client's 5-acre home site in Kennett Square, it was the poplar trees that made an immediate impression. Upon driving up to the clearing, he was greeted by their bold presence surrounding the property like sentinels.

"I instantly regarded this open space in the middle of the property as sacred ground," says Moger. "I envisioned the new house to be a fourth wall to stand along with the trees protecting this sacred ground."

Moger's firm, Lyman Perry Architects in Berwyn, strives to design "homes of the land," not simply on the land. For him, the question is always: How do you create something out of an environment? In keeping with the Chester County landscape, Moger conceptualized "a modern interpretation of a barn."

His first draft consisted of two simple, iconic gables (one in traditional barn red, the other in black) joined by a glass front entrance. The *continued on page 66*

## (resources)

**architect** Lyman Perry Architects, Ltd., Matthew Moger, 42 Cassatt Ave., Berwyn; (610) 889-9966, lparchitects.com

**builder** Hugh Lofting Timber Framing, Inc., Amy Cornelius, 339 Lamborntown Road, West Grove; (610) 444-5382, hughloftingt看rframe.com

**landscape architect** Jonathan Alderson Landscape Architects, Jonathan Alderson, Wayne, (610) 341-9925, jonathanalderson.com

**stonemason** Stonescapes, Inc., Gary Odle, Landenberg, (610) 255-3309, stonescapesweb.com

**sustainable engineer** Sustainable Solutions Corp., Tad Radzinski, 64 William Penn Drive, Schwenksville; sustainable-solutions.com, (610) 287-4152



**TRADITION MEETS INNOVATION:** (Clockwise from far left) the lodge-like great room has 20-foot ceilings and massive picture windows; in keeping with their home's eco-friendly theme, the Topels opted for natural soapstone on the kitchen countertops and island; in the powder room, reclaimed wood is used on the ceiling and wainscoting; outside, sliding doors made of barn wood cover the great room's windows.





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clients, Ave and Vicki Topel, were "blown away" from the start.

The Topels wanted something that was totally unique, not just a shrunken version of their previous farmhouse. And though he never designs the same house twice, Moger uses a similar approach on every project. "I'm the client's representative," he says. "It's my responsibility to pay attention to the site and the land, along with the client's wishes and dreams, and create architecture out of those things."

Essentially, the Topels wanted the exact

opposite of the sprawling farmhouse they'd lived in. Ave Topel had recently retired, so they were looking for a casual, low-maintenance home. "We knew we wanted something rustic," Ave says.

They also wanted at least part of the house to be timber-frame construction, something they fell in love with after building a three-car carriage barn on their last property. While researching builders for the carriage barn, they discovered that the world's most sought-after timber framer, Hugh Lofting of Hugh Lofting Timber Frame, was based in nearby West Grove.

"We formed a wonderful relationship with Hugh when he built our barn," says Ave.

So they were thrilled when he offered to manage their latest project. When Lofting and project manager Amy Cornelius first met with the couple, they asked the Topels what they knew about green and sustainable homes. "Ave and Vicki replied, 'Does that mean putting solar panels on the roof?'" recalls Cornelius. "We explained that building green means making a lifestyle change. What we try to tell people is that green is a lifestyle, and you're choosing timber frame because it's beautiful. There are a lot of elements within the timber frame that are conducive to making the house green."

After Lofting and Cornelius educated the Topels on the benefits—especially the lower energy bills—they were on-board. The builders wanted to go for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. The requirements set forth by the U.S. Green Building Council are stringent—and if the Topels' house met them all, it would be only one of 10 in Pennsylvania to do so. Sustainable engineer Tad Radzinsky, president of Sustainable Solutions Corp. in Schwenksville, would oversee everything, from site planning to designing the HVAC systems.

The LEED certification didn't faze Moger. "I do green design implicitly," he says. "I spend a lot of time out on the site just getting to know it. I pay attention to things like the prevailing winds and the passage of the sun. These are things that sustainable design is based upon: dealing with the wind; thermal mass; allowing sun to come in when you want it to and stay out when you don't want it to; how you're going to control the temperature in the rooms."

For Moger, sustainable design isn't a new concept. "It's essentially going back to the basics of architecture and fundamentally reconnecting people back to nature," he says.

The Topel house has three distinct parts: public space, private space and a transition area joining the two. "Once we were introduced to timber-frame construction, we always knew, if we were ever to build a house, we wanted to include a timber-frame great room," says Ave.

They got what they wished for in the form of a spacious, lodge-like area with ceilings that soar more than 20 feet—brought down to scale by Douglas fir timber frames. Since the owners didn't have the need for formal dining or living rooms,

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they were content with a combination space and a kitchen/dining area in the great room. A massive fireplace by master stonemason Gary Odle of Landenberg separates the two spaces. "We interviewed five different stonemasons for the job," says Ave. "When we visited Gary at his showroom—actually his house, an all-stone reproduction Cotswold cottage with eight fireplaces—we knew we wanted him for the job. Gary is a true artist, so the only instruction I gave him was to do his thing and create something beautiful for us."

The fireplace is 36 feet high from the basement to the roof. All the stone used was harvested from Avondale Quarry, just a few miles from the property, and the end product is stunning. "We love fires, so in the winter we'll always have a fire going in both rooms," Ave says.

As in most households, the kitchen is where the Topels spend most of their time. They called upon renowned craftsman David T. Smith, known nationwide for his authentic reproduction woodwork, to custom design their kitchen's pine cabinetry. (Smith also did the library's built-ins, the bathroom cabinetry and a large-scale armoire in the entrance hall.) Instead of synthetic material, the Topels chose natural soapstone for the countertops and island. Painted black with a subtle distress, the island's base complements the cabinetry.

Smith brought additional color to the room with a red hutch and a computer workspace in a natural tan color. The most striking elements in the great room are the five massive picture windows lining the room's perimeter, offering uninterrupted, panoramic views of the fields outside.

In keeping with LEED mandates, the landscape is indigenous to the area. Jonathan Alderson Landscape Architects in Wayne filled the meadow with native grasses, sedges and wildflowers for maintenance-free beauty. "It re-seeds itself," says Topel. "And you only have to mow it once a year."

Moger designed the house to have a slight elevation so it will appear—once the meadow is fully matured—as if it's floating atop the fields. To control the amount of light coming into the house and ensure privacy, Moger used salvaged barn wood from Lancaster County to make exterior sliding doors to cover the windows.

"I often use barn doors in the interior spaces of my projects," says Moger. "This

is the first house where I've incorporated them on the exterior on rollers."

The Topels appreciate the privacy and security of the rolling doors, as they spend almost half the year at their second home in Rehoboth Beach, Del. "We're able to lock up, roll the doors over the windows and not worry about a thing," says Topel. "And when the doors are all rolled shut, this section of the house really looks like a barn."

The opposite side of the house includes the master bedroom suite, a library/office, and a studio space for Ave Topel's art and music. The second floor is dedicated to the

Topels' college-age daughter and son. Each has a bedroom with an en-suite bath; a common area between the two rooms has a wall-mounted, flat-screen television. The second floor has zoned climate control, so energy isn't wasted heating and air-conditioning the space when no one is there.

The home's axis is a glass-walled area connecting the private and the public spaces—a transition area to facilitate the move between the two very different buildings. "This is the center part of the entire house, where all the other spaces spill off of," says Moger.

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It's also the front entrance of the house, so it was designed to make a lasting impression on visitors. A massive floor-to-ceiling picture window affords a clear view of the gorgeous landscape. Moger brought the home's black siding inside to cover the exterior of the powder room, which was made to look like an outhouse, with wood siding and a small moon cutout on the door. "It was a purposeful blurring of the interior and exterior, and the public and private spaces," he says.

No ordinary front door would do for this eclectic space, so Moger found a copersmith in Exton skilled in a technique called "firescaling," in which copper is heated to 1,800 degrees and splattered with wax; then the surface is hit with brooms and rags while it's still hot to give it a distressed, weathered look.

All the walls in the home are structural insulated panels with no thermal breaks, ensuring an airtight seal. Every piece of lumber used for the project is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council—that is, if it didn't come from an old barn. A majority of the materials were sourced locally, and VOC-free solvents and paints were used throughout the house. A tank-less hot water heater saves energy, and the Topels even invested in a maintenance-free vegetative roof above the transition space. Windows below the cupola on the second floor allow for natural ventilation.

Although Ave Topel was in the business of developing commercial properties, this process was entirely different. "It was a learning process," he says of his new home and its pending LEED certification. "We were able to incorporate such incredible artistry into this house."

The Topels were so inspired by their experience that they wrote a book about it. "I didn't want to write a technical manual," says Ave. "I hate those things. We wanted to write it in simple, plain English from a homeowner's perspective, with plenty of pictures to illustrate what we were writing about."

The book, *Green Beginnings: The Story of Building Our Green & Sustainable Home*, will be available this fall on Amazon.com.

"It's been a life-changing experience for us," says Ave. "Although we didn't set out to be stewards of the Earth—and we're not completely fanatical about going green—we do feel a new sense of responsibility to do the right thing for the environment." **MLT**