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Strange Bedfellows

In BUCKS COUNTY, PA modernist architecture and collections of Americana make for an unexpected yet harmonious pairing

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The low-slung house's Freeport Ledge stone, a kind of quartzite, was locally quarried then laid by Amish craftsmen.

A glass box encloses the sunroom, which enjoys views of the pool and Spun chairs by English designer Thomas Heatherwick, produced by Magis.



In the entry, a kimono-inspired sculpture by Karen LaMonte and a Don Morris work made of folded comic books from his "Heroes" series.

One of modernism's fundamental principles is the oft-repeated Mies van der Rohe phrase "less is more." While the "warm modernism" of recent years has humanized Mies's more rigorous approach to this idea with the warmth of wood and other natural materials, the centrality of keeping spaces clean and visually unobstructed has never lost its importance.

So, when Stephen Cassell and Kim Yao, principals with Adam Yarinsky of the modernist New York-based Architecture Research Office (ARO), visited the existing home of new clients in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, they arrived with this sensibility. The original 1710 stone farmhouse had been added onto, probably in the mid-18th century. It was owned by a youthfully mature couple who had worked for Knoll – she in an executive capacity, he on the technical resources side. "The original house was so beautifully furnished," recalls Yao, noting that, not surprisingly, there was a preponderance of original Knoll furniture pieces throughout.

LC2 armchairs, which Le Corbusier, his cousin Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand debuted at 1929's Salon d'Automne, were originally produced by Thonet and, later, by Cassina.



In the corridor from great room to sunroom, architects at ARO recessed the wall to create niches for various collections.

But what they also discovered were the owners' many collections – weathervanes, souvenir “flash” glass, quilts, Roseville and Teco pottery, early American candlesticks, antler- and horn-handled presentation bowls and trophies. Speaking about the weathervanes, Cassell observes, “These things are amazing – beautiful and strange and rich.” But as the husband of the couple acknowledges, there were a whole lot of them and, he says, “Some were on walls, some on shelves or in the deep windowsills. With the new house, we wanted it designed to better show them.”

It was not the easiest project brief to be sure. “Some of their desires were contrary to the other house,” explains Yao. “They wanted a substantial change from thick stone walls and casement windows to something that felt like a pavilion with a connection to the outside.”



A Frank Gehry Cross Check chair for Knoll sits in front of a wall accommodating part of the homeowners' extensive weathervane collection.

The resulting structure carries over the stone – a locally quarried quartzite that connected it metaphorically to the original house and surrounding farmland – but applies it with a much lighter hand. It is interspersed with generous spans of glass that frame views of meadow and creek. The central axis or “spine” of the house, explains Cassell and Yao, became a gallery space. They began by editing down the weathervane collection, then taking photos of each piece and developing them to scale so that they and the owners could decipher the best arrangement along this axis.

The corridor represents the longest continuous wall space in the house. Additionally, offers Cassell, “We set the walls back in niches with hidden lighting that would wash the walls with light. And clerestory windows bring in natural light.” The candlestick and Roseville pottery collections were arrayed on shelves in a study, and the antler-handled pieces occupy a niche between the entry and main public space, as well as in a long narrow cubby cut into the kitchen cabinetry above the range.

“We tried grouping the collections, while never being dogmatic about it,” shares Cassell. “This makes each collection feel larger than its individual pieces, and more of an important part of the house. It allows each collection to tell a story.” It also addresses the visual clutter dilemma by bringing the collections' previous sprawl into a sense of order.



“We tried grouping the collections while never being dogmatic about it,” shares Cassell.

Horn-handled vessels the homeowners began collecting to outfit a lake cabin in Georgia reside in one of the niches.





In the master bath, a collection of Teco pottery arrayed on shelves, which the wife uses for flower arranging.



Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich's "Brno" chairs for Knoll surround a Carlo Scarpa Doge table. Above it, a David Weeks chandelier.

The main public space, essentially a great room, is the center of activity. "They love to cook together," declares Cassell. "It's their way of being in the world, socializing with friends and family." The organization of the kitchen also achieves a sense of order, this time by harnessing another modernist strategy – that of concealment. Everything is behind cabinet doors, including a full walk-in pantry accessed through a door between a stone column and the cooking area.

The kitchen is open to the living and dining areas. "Everything in the other house was separate rooms and too many steps," says Cassell. As this was to serve as a home where the clients could age in place,

the "loft-like space, for lack of a better word," Cassell continues, consolidated many functions without the walls and the elevation changes of the 1710 farmhouse.

These concerns, along with the accommodation of the collections, were the main factors that drove the design. While some collections, such as the souvenir glass, are also behind cabinets, there was never a desire to adopt Mies's austere minimalist position. Yao asserts, "Doing it well would make the house about them – about enjoying the beauty of their surroundings and their passions, which is their collections."



Bar stools by Harry Bertoia for Knoll at the kitchen island. Between the stone pillar and the cabinetry is a door leading to a walk-in pantry.



A B&B Italia sofa faces the LC2 chairs across a Mies van der Rohe Barcelona coffee table produced by Knoll. A balanced stone sculpture by Woods Davy in the background.

Jay Mark Johnson's "Storm at Sea" across from a bed dressed in one of the clients' many quilts. At left, a chair by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown designed in 1984 for Knoll.

