

The War Widow: Read our series on a story of love and war, heartbreak and healing

Bringing the outside in

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Home of the Month is a collaborative effort with the N.C. State University College of Design through its Home Environments Design Initiative. Featured homes, selected by an expert panel, highlight the benefits of good home design and represent the diversity of homes and home renovations designed by North Carolina architects. The articles, written by faculty, graduate students and alumni of the School of Architecture, bring to light the attributes of each home. Our goal is to offer inspiration and knowledge that can be applied to your living space.

For their retirement home, John and Roberta Wilson chose a lot on a lake in a traditional suburban neighborhood in Wilmington. It was long and narrow with large neighboring homes just 10 feet from the lot line.

The couple chose Michael Kersting to design their home, and the architect's biggest challenge was how to respond to the site. The question: How to create a house with lots of natural light, views of the lake and still maintain privacy? Kersting's response was not the traditional colonial box. Instead, he broke the box apart and directed the views of the house to the outside -- and the inside.

Kersting first worked on the design of the building's form. The Dragonfly is composed of two long, narrow parallel wings that buffer the Wilsons' primary living areas. By breaking the box apart, these wings "capture" exterior space and create a private, interior courtyard. The courtyard functions as an outdoor room with a pool and jacuzzi, but it's also the home's main entrance. The "wings" screen the views of neighboring homes, frame a view of the lake and create a grand outdoor entrance.

When the Wilsons retired to Wilmington from the Northeast in 2005, they wanted a house that would fit their lifestyle but did not have a particular style in mind. After interviewing several registered architects, they selected Kersting, who tries to avoid the term "style."

He thinks that if concepts and philosophies are put to work, then style will emerge. "Let's talk about how you live, how to respond to the site, and then figure out how the two will merge."

Roberta Wilson, a retired schoolteacher, "wanted something casual like a beach house." John Wilson, a retired mechanical engineer, wanted a place to work that had views of nature and opportunities to be outside. They also wanted a guest suite for their friends and family. The result was a plan that was quite rational but open, with free flowing spaces that blur the lines between inside and outside.

One wing contains their private master bedroom with a private office and their "reading" screened porch. The other wing contains the guest suite along with the kitchen, dining room and "outdoor dining" screened porch. At the heart of the Dragonfly, connecting the two wings, is the living room - a sunken room flanked by two glass curtain walls, allowing views to the outdoor courtyard and the lake. The room's distinct butterfly roof structure, which is raised above the wings, allows for a delicate connection to the wings with clerestory windows and articulates the importance of the room from the outside.

Plenty of light

The formal organization of the design is very clear. Each wing is made of three distinct components: a mahogany wall element, a corridor and a series of living spaces. The thick mahogany wall with lapstrake siding extends from the exterior to the interior, blurring the distinction between inside and outside. It conceals both the structure and equipment and in special moments within the house, such as in the main living room, the wall is "carved away," creating a space for the fireplace or for art. The wall rests on an exposed, polished concrete masonry foundation that is expressed both inside and outside. Inside, the polished concrete foundation is expressed as part of the finished floor and outside, the foundation element forms a raised planter at each end of the house.

The single corridor creates a straight spine on the mahogany wall, showcasing the beauty of the wall throughout the house.

The rooms are all on the exterior of the house allowing for maximum day lighting possibilities.

Using pocket doors, Kersting was able to create free-flowing spaces that can be made public or private.

The best views of the lake are reserved for the public spaces -- the living room, dining room and kitchen -- where the Wilsons spend most of their time throughout the day.

Energy savings

Kersting thinks that "by inverting the traditional home (bringing private outdoor space inward) and employing sustainable strategies, the home harmonizes the interior and exterior."

However, building a sustainable house was not the main objective. "Sustainable design is an inherent part of all good architectural design," Kersting says. "It is what architects should do as a part of the design process."

Sustainable design starts with a clear understanding of the site. The site plan for this project reveals the difference between the Dragonfly and the bigger surrounding residential buildings.

In contrast, the Dragonfly looks as though it was split in two and then trimmed to the bare minimum. The narrow wings maximize the length of the perimeter, and this in turn allows for more