

The War Widow: Read our series on a story of love and war, heartbreak and healing**Simplicity from complexity**PUBLISHED SAT, OCT 24, 2009 02:00 AM
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CARY -- *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 highlight the benefits of good home design and represent the diversity of homes and home renovations designed by North Carolina architects. Our goal is to offer inspiration and knowledge that can be applied to your living space.

Jodie and Todd Lanning had lived in the Lochmere neighborhood for several years and had come to consider the area their home. Their ranch-style house was near work, good schools and church, and they enjoyed the walking trails and wooded landscape. So when they decided to build a new home for their growing family, they knew they wanted to stay in the neighborhood.

Todd Lanning, a graphic designer, had visited a house by the design/build firm Tonic Design while it was under construction and decided on the spot that he wanted a home with a similar Modern style, open plan and natural light.

The Lannings first looked at existing houses in the neighborhood, thinking they might find something to renovate. However, nothing that was available at the time seemed as if it would accommodate the transformation they envisioned. Then they discovered a plot of land that was vacant and began talking with Vincent Petrarca, a family member and one of the partners of Tonic Design, about designing a new home for them.

Jodie Lanning, a copy editor with degrees in public relations and journalism, says it was important to have a house that would accommodate their lifestyle. They wanted privacy, comfort and room for a growing family, and they had to stay within a budget.

A difficult site

The new house was to be built on a "leftover" developer site. The lot's relatively small size and its steep grade change made it more difficult to build on, so the Lannings were able to get a good price. Neighboring houses are close to the property line on all sides, but there wasn't room to leave a buffer around the new home. Petrarca points out that the house is "pretty much built right up to the required setbacks on all sides except the front."

One challenge was to maintain privacy and still provide natural light and views to the outside. In the open living and dining area, the large window at the center of the room is located high in the two-story space to avoid direct views of the side of the neighbor's house. Windows at the ends of the open space are at eye-level where only trees and a small courtyard are visible. Rather than seem haphazard, though, the windows form an elegant composition.

Only at the street is the house set back farther than required by building code. Between the house and the street, a 100-year-old oak tree provides shade in summer and acts as a visual screen. The other houses on the street are more traditional in style, and both designer and owner wanted to be respectful of that. But they also wanted the house to have its own identity.

Petrarca says it was important that the house "wasn't too overpowering from the street. By setting it back and organizing the house into two main volumes, the scale of the house doesn't seem as large as it really is."

Inspired solutions

Although the site would not be the first choice for a developer, the designer used a developer strategy to keep the project within budget. Petrarca explains that most houses built by developers are square in plan. This is because a square gives you the most area and space within a house, with the least amount of building perimeter (which is the most expensive part of a building). "The idea is to keep the perimeter of the building simple wherever possible."

The house is built with typical residential construction systems: wood framing with plywood, and drywall interior. Spray foam insulation and a well-planned mechanical system reduce monthly utility costs per square foot to half of what the Lannings were paying in their previous home.

The children's rooms

What makes the home atypical is where it breaks from the conventions of developer-driven design. Storefront windows, which are more typical of commercial construction, provide large expanses of glass for natural light and views. In addition to standard eye-level windows, one of the children's bedrooms has clerestory windows high up at the 12 foot ceiling. With the play of light and views to the sky, it's a much more inspiring space for a child's bedroom than one typically sees in residential construction.

The other children's bedroom has a window seat that extends out from the back of the house looking into the trees. It is ideally suited for reading.

With architectural details like the entry canopy, which is both welcoming and sleekly industrial, and refined articulations of space and light, the home is at once practical and engaging.

With a second child on the way, Todd and Jodie Lanning needed a home that would accommodate the demands of their family and professional lives. Both designer and client maintained a