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home of

the month

February's profile of a well-designed living space

Take a slide show tour of the home and hear homeowner/architect Philip Szostak talk about it at www.newsobserver.com, search 'home.'

indoors, outdoors



the setting

The Szostak residence is designed to take advantage of its natural environment. A large porch on the south side provides a great view of the meadow that slopes to Bolin Creek. 'We live outside in the summertime,' says homeowner and architect Philip Szostak. 'The doors and windows are all open.'

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CASEY LABORDE

Starkly modern design lets family preserve a connection to the landscape

the project

private residence

architect | Szostak Design Inc.

project location | Orange County

beds/baths | 4/3 full, 2 half

completion | summer 2004

heated square footage | 4,000

key design concept | modern, elegant and comfortably fitted into its pastoral environment

Today's Home of the Month is reviewed by Wendy Redfield, associate director at N.C. State University's School of Architecture. Home of the Month, a collaboration with NCSU, shows possibilities in constructing a living space that is well thought-out and built with the homeowner's living patterns and preferences in mind. The goal: to offer inspiration and knowledge that can be applied to any living space.

BY WENDY REDFIELD

GUEST COLUMNIST

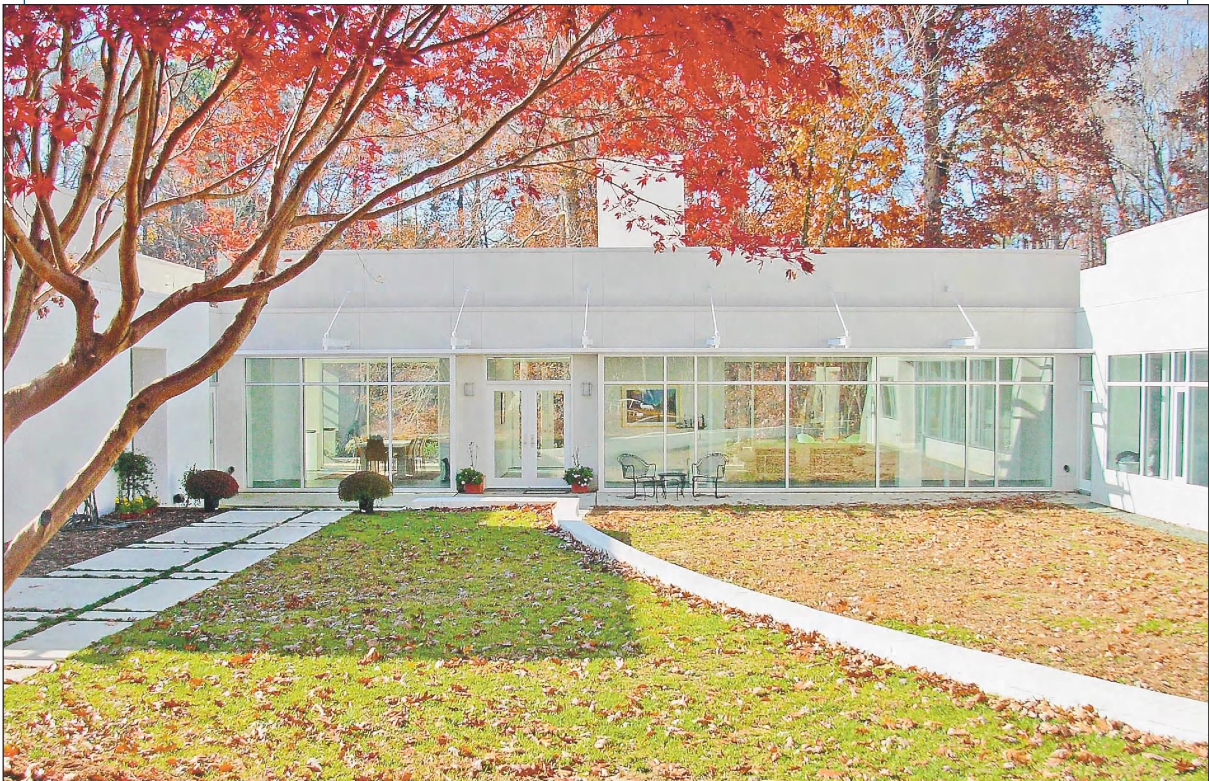
It was difficult for Philip and Rhonda Szostak to leave the 1845 farmhouse with 20 acres and a stable that they occupied until 2000. Raising horses had been part of Philip's life since childhood, and Rhonda appreciated the warmth and charm of an older home. But their family — which includes three children — was outgrowing the farmhouse and one child was allergic to horses. So, in the summer of 2004, they moved into the starkly modern four-bedroom home on 3½ acres in Orange County that Philip, who is an architect, designed. The new house is one story,

with white-painted masonry and a flat roof. Though it looks nothing like the two-story farmhouse they left, the architecture of their new home actually strengthened many aspects of the life they enjoyed on the farm. The farmhouse, as is typical, was a concisely enclosed "box" sitting on the land. But this house is permeable, perforated by bounded outdoor rooms and highly responsive to the surrounding landscape. It is organized around a central courtyard. In discussing what was important to his family in conceiving the 4,000-square-foot house, Szostak stressed the importance

the living quarters

Rooms throughout the house offer spectacular outdoor views. The detailing is clean, with no baseboards and no trim around doors and windows.

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the courtyard The inner sanctum of the home surrounds a grassy courtyard that has a small fountain and reflecting pool near the doors. Eventually, ornamental trees will be planted in the courtyard.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CASEY LABORDE

HOME

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of making strong connections with its environment.

The house does so in several ways.

The site is bordered on the west and south by Bolin Creek, whose thickly vegetated banks are visible from all the major interior rooms (kitchen, living room and all four bedrooms). A large south-facing exterior terrace serves as a sort of staging ground for the outdoor life so important to the Szostak clan.

"I grew up in a creek with crawdads and frogs, terrorizing my mother," Philip Szostak says. "When my kids' friends come over, they bring their boots. We live outside in the summertime. The doors and windows are all open."



Philip Szostak recommends simplicity.

The continuous wall of glass facing south, the large central court, the numerous outdoor terraces and the multiple points of entry make this clear.

Like a farm, their land is becoming increasingly productive, too: They have a chicken coop, as well as a beehive from which they harvested 60 pounds of honey this year. They are planning a fruit orchard.

The approach to the house is framed and modulated by sycamores planted on the same grid as key house elements, strengthening the relationship between indoor and outdoor.

A white-painted steel sculpture by North Carolina artist Edwin White, installed in the south yard near the creek, pulls the crisp, white and abstract quality of the architecture out into the landscape.

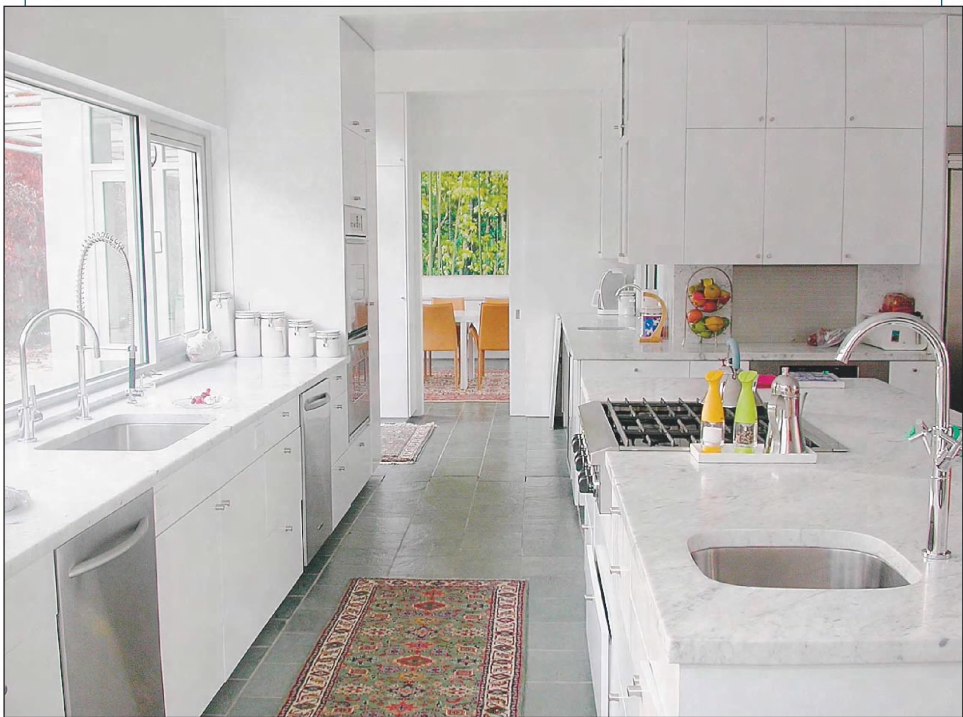
In a similar gesture, a low wall steps down from a higher wall enclosing the kitchen to frame a mimosa tree. The low wall creates a clear distinction between the "front lawn" through which one approaches the house, and the south-facing meadow that slopes to the creek.

While the house is elegant and graciously sized, Szostak says keeping costs down was an important consideration.

By serving as general contractor, he was able to keep close tabs on the budget by selecting materials from overstock items and shopping on eBay.

For example, Szostak got a great deal on extra-thick Carrera marble (all countertops in the kitchen and baths were cut from the same stone). He also saved significantly by selecting the green slate tile flooring from what US Quarried Slate in Vermont had on hand.

"We're always scrimping and



the kitchen All countertops in the kitchen and bathrooms were cut from the same stone of extra-thick Carrera marble. 'Pick one countertop material and use it throughout,' Szostak says. 'And get the best material you can afford.'



the fixtures The Szostaks saved some money by buying items such as faucet sets, sinks and an on-demand water heater on eBay.

scrounging for a better deal, trying to make something beautiful out of something cheap," he says.

But the Szostaks did splurge on certain high-quality materials and elements, such as a Dornbracht faucet set in the kitchen.

Being the homeowner, architect and contractor all rolled into one presented interesting opportunities and challenges. Both the design and construction processes were long.

"This was the second house I designed for this site," Szostak said. "The first house was critiqued by my friends who are architects, and my family and I ultimately abandoned it. It would've been striking architecturally but could have been impractical for the people who actually have to live with me."

Construction of the house took two years from start to finish — progressing, Szostak says, when he had time and money.

Jesse Green and Jeremy Hauch, who were at the time students of NCSU's School of Architecture, worked as paid architectural interns on framing the house and welding some of the steel sunshades.

"That was the framing crew," Szostak says, "five guys from

school one summer.

"We bought tools and welders. It wasn't the cheapest way. In the end, it would've cost less to hire professionals. But we wouldn't have enjoyed it and learned as much."

Asked what attributes of this house could be applied to other homes on smaller lots, Szostak mentioned several:

- the openness and accessibility of a one-story house.

- multiple points of access to the outdoors.

- clean detailing (there are no baseboards and no trim around doors and windows).

- an owner's willingness to select from fine materials that are readily available (marble counters, stone floors).

"Pick a simple palette," Szostak adds. "Pick one flooring material and use it throughout. Pick one countertop material and use it throughout. And get the best material you can afford."

Szostak also thinks more architects should design their own homes.

"It really puts you out there and makes you stand up for what you believe in," he says. "I'd like to do another one.... My wife says, 'Just don't tell me.'"