

A House Tailored for a Family of Four

The architect designed two different houses for this hillside lot; one was the clear winner

BY MICHAELA MAHADY

The first time that I saw Jim and Karen Nancekivells' land was a crisp day in the fall of 1997. It was midday, sunny and clear as we pulled up to their lot in North Oaks, a pleasant suburb north of St. Paul, Minnesota. Formerly a farm, the land consists of wooded hills thick with mature trees including (as you might imagine) many oaks. The narrow, curving street ends in a small cul-de-sac, which is the access to the 1½-acre site. We looked down on their land from the road, across a hill that sloped steadily and steeply away from us to the east. It was a classic "walk-out site," where the lower level of the potential house can be exposed on the downhill side.

The leaves already had fallen from the trees and crunched on the ground beneath our feet as we walked down the hill. Karen commented how much more you could see than just a few weeks before, when the dense foliage had inhibited both view and light. The sunlight fell on our right shoulders at a low autumn angle. We soon reached a more level spot, at the far eastern edge of the site, close to the stakes that defined the rear corners of the parcel. It was part of an old logging trail, cleared of trees. This pocket of open space was the predominant feature at the bottom of the hill; the absence of trees allowed our gaze to pause at the edge of the woods, then wander beyond. To the sides of the roughly pie-shaped piece of land were distant neighboring houses, somewhat obscured by the trees.



Ask some critical questions about the site

As we walked, we discussed the potential views, the proximity of neighboring houses and the all-important path of the sun. In Minnesota, the summer sun rises in the

Trellis defines the entry courtyard. *A canopy of heavy timbers supports the upstairs deck, which also shelters the entry from the weather and the summer sun. Photo taken at A on floor plan. Double doors in the bedroom open onto the deck. Photo right taken at B on floor plan.*

Two designs, one site



The Long Cottage

Called The Long Cottage, this proposal is arranged with a rectangular plan oriented perpendicular to slope of the hill. Although it takes good advantage of the views to the east, it doesn't have a strong connection to the landscape or much exposure to the winter sun.





northeast, proceeding on a long arc to its position at noon, high in the sky, and gradually descending along a similarly arced path to its setting point in the northwest. This big swing of the sun gives us our long summer days. In the winter, by contrast, it barely peers above the horizon, rising late in the morning in the southeast to a much lower height at its noonday position, curving quickly back down to set in the southwest. This sun path yields a much shorter day. The steep angle of the summer sun produces short shadows; the shallow angle in the winter produces longer shadows throughout the course of the day.

In our northern climate, with its short winter days, access to sunlight is crucial, both for levels of illumination and for a sense of psychological well-being. Access to the light can begin to shape a footprint of a building in one's imagination, based on how deeply the precious winter sun can penetrate into the form of the structure.

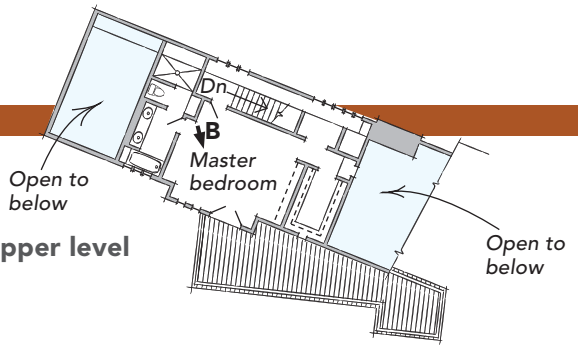
Our discussion continued: What kind of vegetation is present? How can we take advantage of it for privacy, wind protection and erosion prevention? What kind of shade do the trees produce, and at what time of year? Where will the cars be parked? And perhaps most important, a more intuitively based question: What is the site telling you about how to experience it, and where to be on the site? What path do you naturally take as you walk around and through it? Are there places conducive to sitting, resting or contempla-

The path forks at the entry. *Turn downhill, and you're in the two-bedroom wing for the kids. Heading uphill takes you into the public parts of the house. Photo taken at C on floor plan.*

Top photos: Scott Phillips. Photo left: Charles Miller.



The Path on the Hill



tion? Do other areas lend themselves more to motion, up or down or across the land?

Karen, Jim and I repeatedly walked up and down the slope, ending up at the old logging road. Because of the heavy woods, there were no obvious stopping or resting spots along the path, and not much of a place to sit in the sun. The prime view on the site was downhill, toward the open trail.

Some key ingredients aren't about the site at all

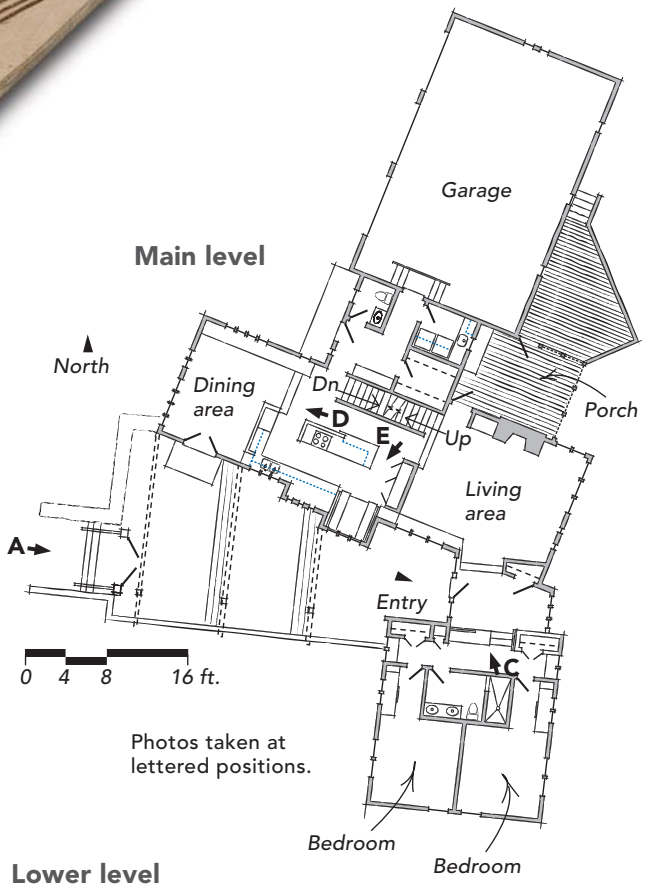
I often ask clients to show me images of places, rooms and houses that intrigue them. In fact, the more such information a client communicates to me, the better the resulting house can be. The Nancekivells had prepared remarkable collages of house images (I still have them). Included were pictures of wood-shingled houses with crisp trellises and trim, long low prairie-style houses with rooflines that hugged the ground, balconies off second-floor rooms, entry courtyards and walls of wood, stone and brick.

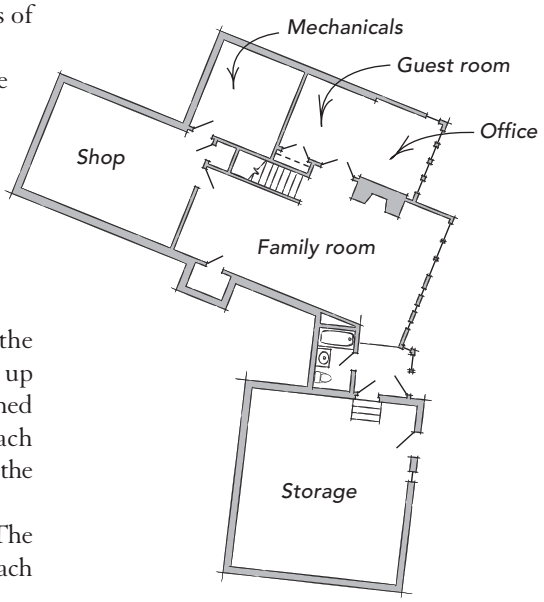
The images they had collected of home interiors were particularly compelling to me: natural wood in several hues on floors and walls; clean, abstract forms of trim and cabinetry; and tall windows, with varied ceiling heights.

Two approaches, one site

After weighing the site conditions and the Nancekivells' needs and desires, I came up with two different schemes. Each contained the same rooms. But the attitude that each took toward the site was different, as were the form and exterior appearance of each.

The first scheme, which I thought of as The Long Cottage, was a conventional approach





Tailored to the landscape, this house steps down the hill

Called The Path on the Hill, this scheme separates the masses of the house at the entry, simultaneously taking advantage of the view and receiving light on many sides. The main long piece has a shallow depth, allowing deep penetration of angled winter sunlight. Light is pulled into an interior bathroom for the kids by way of a south-facing skylight. In the summer, deep overhangs and the flat-roofed balcony over the courtyard shade the house from the steep angle of the midday sun.

SPECS

Bedrooms: 3, plus a guest room
Bathrooms: 3 full, 1 half
Size: 3700 sq. ft.
Cost: N/A
Completed: 2000
Location: North Oaks, Minnesota
Architect: Michaela Mahady
Builder: Greg Anderson Construction

ONLINE CONNECTION
Tour this house on our Web site at www.finehomebuilding.com.

Floor-plan drawings: Paul Perreault

Rooms along the path

The path through the house leads from the dining room (1), through the kitchen (2), past the breakfast nook (3) and into the living room (4). All level changes have at least two steps because one-step level changes are notoriously dangerous. Photos taken at D and E on floor plan.


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2


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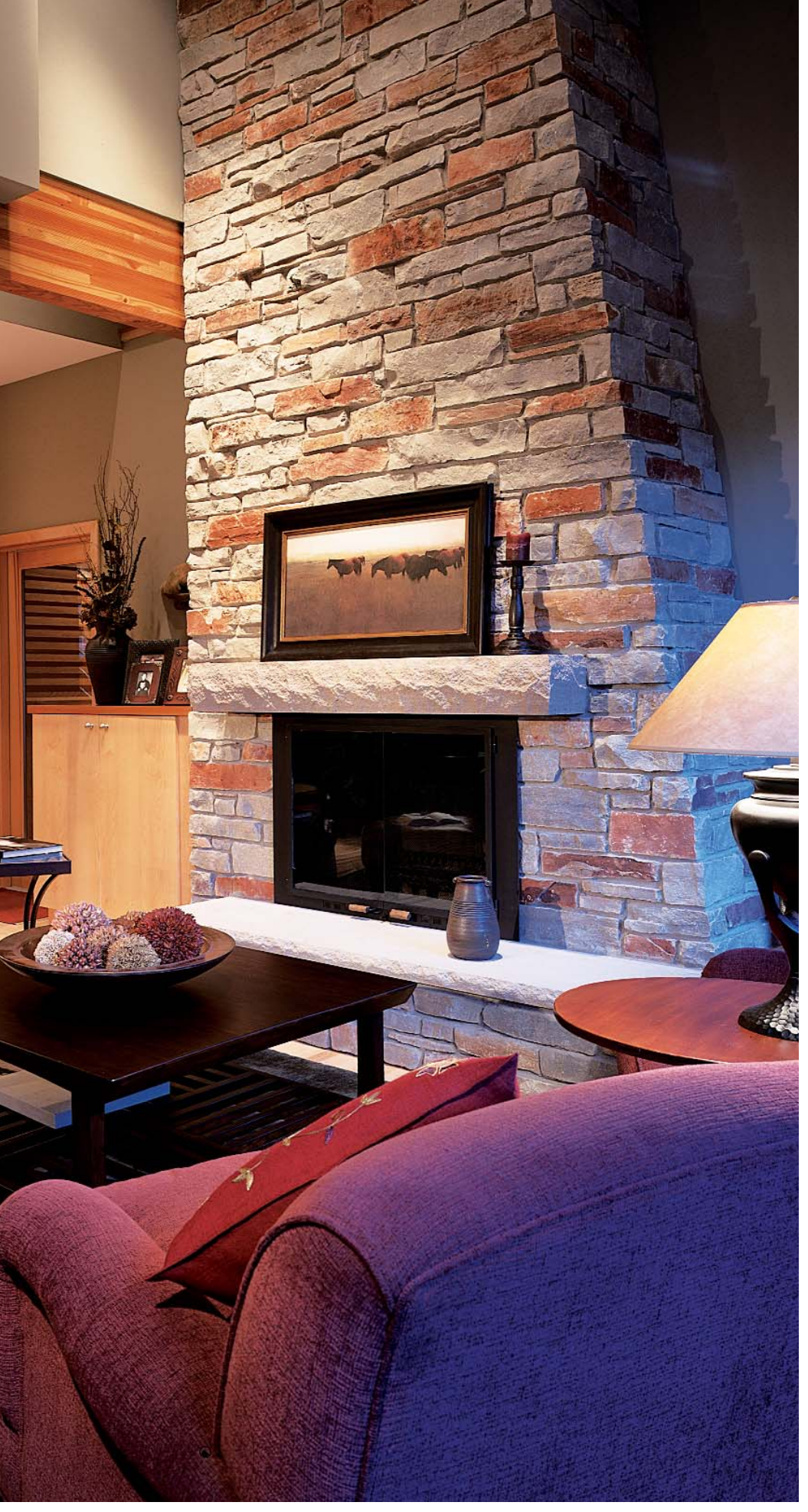

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to the walk-out site (top photos, p. 112). In it, the mass of the house stretched from north to south on the site, perpendicular to the slope, so that all the rooms at the back of the house faced the eastern view of the logging trail. This scheme had two distinct and separate levels: one and a half stories in front, and two and a half stories in back. The Long Cottage had steeply pitched roofs, narrow gable ends facing north and south, and a deck off the tall side of the house in back. It was a classic walk-out plan in a picturesque, cottage form.

The second scheme, which I regarded as The Path on the Hill, was based on a strong response to the land that I had the day we visited the site. What the site seemed to say is that the house could be a long path, gradually descending the hill (photo p. 113) much the way we had walked it while we were there. That yielded a long, thin house running east and west across the slope of the hill. The main house contained the major public rooms, with the master suite above and the boys' area in a separate wing a little farther down the hill. The roof of that long thin piece was a big, wide south-facing gable with a low pitch so that lots of sunlight could penetrate deep into the house in the winter. The rooms in the house gradually stepped down so that when you were in the house, going from room to room, you were retracing the path down the hill.

As I presented the two schemes to the Nancekivells, I could see that they clearly preferred The Path on the Hill. But without saying so, Jim nudged his son Eric, who had joined us at the table to review the plans, and said, "Eric, Michaela doesn't like this one as much as the other one." Jim was pointing at the plan of The Long Cottage, and he was right, of course. Despite its charming appear-

Photo 3: Charles Miller



ance, The Long Cottage was just sitting on the site, not listening to what the site was saying.

Arranging the rooms

We removed some trees on the south side of the house, carving a sunny garden space out of the woods so that the long, thin house can invite the sunlight to its gabled side face. A large trellised courtyard flanks the house, acting as a sort of exterior living room. The courtyard is composed of a series of exposed-aggregate concrete slabs, which gradually descend to the entry.

The glass entryway (bottom photo, p. 112) forms a transparent link between the primary portion of the house and a side wing. The side wing, yet a few more steps down the hill, contains the children's bedrooms, bath, closet and study areas (floor plan, p. 113). Rather than insert the closets into the bedrooms, Karen suggested that the closets be in the hall that connects the bedrooms to the bath—in effect turning portions of the hall (with window seats at each end) into dressing areas. This idea has worked well, making the entire lower wing completely the boys' realm.

Jim and Karen's realm, on the other hand, is above the public rooms, in the main body of the house. Their bedroom (photo p. 111), dressing room and bath are tucked into the rooflines of the main south-facing gable, opening to a balcony perched over the courtyard. Their area and that of their children are well apart. But both are connected to the shared areas of the house, achieving the sense of separation and togetherness in the home that they had originally sought.

Dining, kitchen and living areas are in a single, open linear sequence, each space a few steps down from the other (photos facing page). Within the long open space, furniturelike cabinetry partitions of maple act as partial walls. You can glimpse the entire length of the house at the open sides of these partitions, yet they provide definition and a sense of shelter around the activities in each place. Those places are linked by a path—a path gradually descending the hill, one very much like the walk we took together that autumn day when we first visited the land. □

Michaela Mahady is a principal partner in SALA Architects in Stillwater, MN.
Photos by George Heinrich, except where noted. The project team included John Hecker, Maury Stenerson and Meghan Cornell.