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THE ARCHITECTURE ISSUE

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RIVER'S EDGE



Architect Cheryl Mohr builds an Annapolis retreat with an emphasis on spectacular views and sustainable methods

BY JULIE SANDERS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KENNETH M. WYNER

A large, modern living room with floor-to-ceiling windows and a yellow sofa. The room features a dark wood fireplace, a potted plant, and a view of a river and trees. The walls are made of light-colored wood, and the floor is made of dark wood. The windows are made of dark wood frames and glass. The sofa is a bright yellow color with tufted cushions. The fireplace is a dark, rectangular unit. A potted plant sits on a small table next to the fireplace. The view through the windows shows a river and lush green trees. The lighting is warm and natural, coming from the windows.

From the central living area of the house, residents can watch the South River flow peacefully by through stacked floor-to-ceiling windows. Mohr's clients chose green materials and finishes throughout. The floors are made of FSC-certified, formaldehyde-free engineered white oak scraps salvaged from furniture manufacturers; the interior wood trim is locally grown fir.



Perched atop a gently sloping hill, the property fairly embraces its panoramic view of the South River. To the right, the vista opens onto the Chesapeake Bay and on a clear day, the Eastern Shore takes shape in the far distance. Directly across the river, picturesque swatches of green lawn meet the water in a peaceful tableau.

This is the scene that a couple encountered when, after 15 years of looking, they first glimpsed the plot of land in Annapolis that would serve as their weekend retreat. Naturally, it was love at first sight—although the 1.7-acre site was then home to a decrepit brick rambler that revealed only a sliver of the views beyond its walls.

The initial plan was to renovate, and they hired Cheryl Mohr, a principal of Gardner Mohr Architects, for the job. Mohr describes two goals: to create water views from as many rooms as possible and to design the most sustainable house the owners' budget would bear. When they started delving into the project, however, it quickly became clear that the house was in terrible shape. "All the exterior walls were unsound," Mohr says. "It was like pulling a thread on a sweater and the whole thing comes unwound. It was in structural failure."

Add to which, the circa-1980s design of the house was terribly unappealing. Mohr was confounded by the lack of windows in the riverfront home. "It's like they bought house plans and then built the house with no relation to the view," she marvels.

ARCHITECTURE: CHERYL MOHR, AIA LEED AP, Gardner Mohr Architects LLC, Silver Spring, Maryland. **CONTRACTOR:** CHARLIE BERLINER, Berliner Construction, Annapolis, Maryland. **INTERIOR DESIGN:** SUSAN KNIGHT ANDERSON, Interior Concepts, Inc., Annapolis, Maryland.





Behind the house (opposite, top), a simple, winding path leads down to the water where a dock provides access to the owners' boat. A retaining wall encloses the pool and surrounding patio (this page), accessible from the deck at living-room level. A small jungle of bamboo flanks one side of the spare front foyer (opposite, bottom), while gray-stained cypress panels adorn the opposite wall.



Ultimately, she and her clients decided to take the house down to its foundation and then build back up from there, sustainably and with those remarkable vistas in mind. "They had their sights set on making the whole project green and on capturing the specialness of the site," Mohr says.

The first step was to obtain a variance that would allow construction to take place on the property even though it was less than 100 feet from the water's edge. The variance was contingent on Mohr's building within the existing home's footprint, though it allowed her to add a partial second story. She and her team deconstructed the previous structure so painstakingly that the only parts of it that weren't recycled or repurposed were the roof shingles and the carpet.

In the finished, 7,000-square-foot house, dramatic views abound from a spare, modern setting that invites the outside in. With help from interior designer Susan Anderson of Interior Concepts, Inc., the owners carefully furnished the open-plan interiors of the main floor, selecting low-slung pieces that would not impede the views. In the living room area, a sleek, cream-colored sectional from Anora Home shares space with two custom settees to create separate gathering areas. They are grouped around a propane-powered fireplace encased in Venetian plaster with a stainless-steel chimney.

The adjoining dining area flows into a kitchen lined with Poggenpohl cabinetry and Caesarstone countertops. A separate family room, walk-in pantry and foyer lead off from there. Floor-to-ceiling windows span the entire open area overlooking the water, with a deck big enough to house areas for both relaxation and dining.

The master suite also occupies the main floor—ideal for one-level living when the homeowners eventually retire. Upstairs, four bedrooms—each with a water view—accommodate three grown daughters when they visit. On the basement level where the original structure remained with the foundation, an open rec room along with a second family room and separate caretakers' apartment all enjoy their own views of the river.

To meet her clients' sustainability goals, Mohr embraced myriad green design strategies for energy conservation, including geothermal heating and cooling via ground-source heat pumps; a solar photovoltaic system that feeds power back into the grid; a hydronic radiant floor heating system; an ultra-efficient building skin of formaldehyde-free plywood, solid polystyrene and foam-insulated walls and roof; and triple-coated low-E glass.

Operable skylights and windows supply natural ventilation and deep overhangs block summer sun while admitting winter rays.

"The owners had their sights set on making the whole project green and capturing the specialness of the site." —CHERYL MOHR



The homeowners and their guests can gather inside around a custom dining table, or raise the glass-paneled garage door to enjoy an al fresco meal (opposite). Overhead, the slats of a wooden support structure lead the eye toward the door to the deck. Above it on the upper level (this page), the hallway provides a bird's eye view of the living room, the deck and the pool—with the river just beyond.



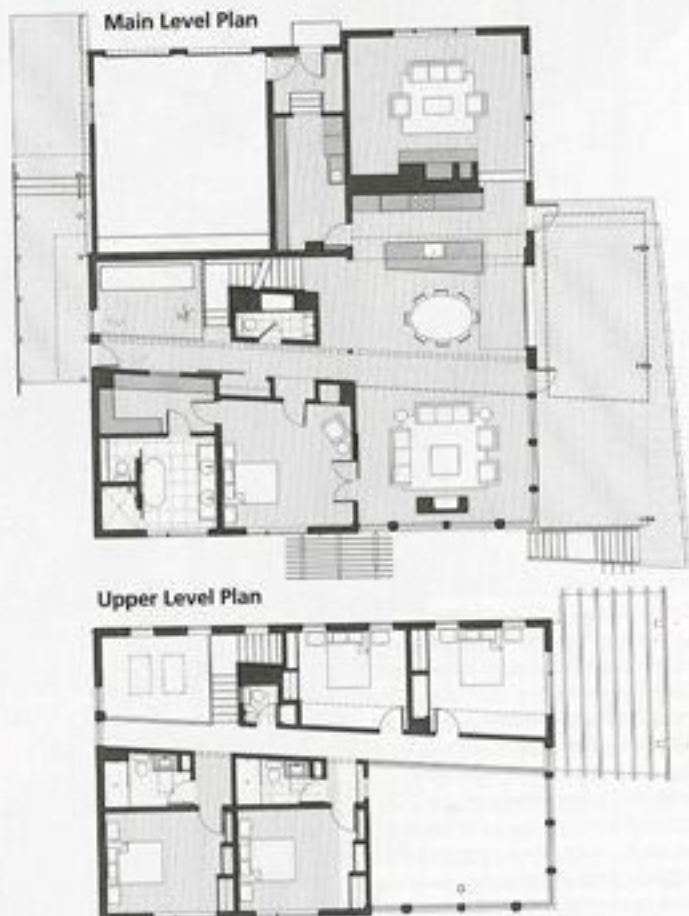
Water for domestic use is heated on demand with a propane tankless water heater, and low-flow plumbing fixtures have been installed throughout the house. A 2,500-gallon underground cistern catches rainwater as it runs off the butterfly roof that Mohr designed for that sole purpose; the water that's collected is used to replenish the swimming pool and irrigate the property.

Exterior steel supports were hot-dipped and galvanized rather than coated with toxic paints. Silica-treated TimberSIL and fir used in construction are low in VOCs as are all other finishes, inside and out. Non-toxic, recyclable polyethylene pipes were used throughout in lieu of those made of resource-intensive copper or toxic PVC. Mohr installed smart thermostats in each room to conserve energy.

The architect also had to meet the demands of building in a storm-prone environment with the potential for high winds. "The most challenging aspect of the whole project was getting all the windows we wanted while meeting the county's requirements," Mohr says. All solid corners are constructed with plywood as well as drywall and anchored in concrete to provide stability for the walls of windows that the owners craved.

Outside, the existing swimming pool has been retiled and a new slate patio installed. A retaining wall keeps the pool and decking "from slipping into the South River," says Mohr. The owners' plan is to grow native sea grasses on the slope down to the water to prevent erosion. "This is a wonderful place to just be," says the wife, sitting in her living room with what seems like an endless expanse of blue water before her. "It's exactly what we wanted." ♦

Photographer Kenneth M. Wyner is based in Takoma Park, Maryland.
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In Mohr's open design plan (left), the kitchen leads to the family room while the living room area opens to the master bedroom (above). The sleek master bath (below) is clad in porcelain tile with Poggenpohl cabinetry and frosted-glass doors that conceal the shower. Mohr created visual interest throughout the house by using sliding panels on rolling tracks as doors.







Mohr installed a polycarbonate roof above the outdoor dining area, with motorized screens that descend on three sides for insect-free, alfresco entertaining. The glass-paneled garage door on the fourth side can be raised to open the dining area up to the interior of the house. The decking is made of heat-treated local pine and the exterior siding is cypress; all the woods came from within 500 miles of the house.