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# Splendor in the Woods

By Curtis Rist • Photographs by Ned Rosen

As investment bankers, Bob and Amy Litzenberger lived a conventional, if luxurious, existence. Yet, as early retirement neared for both of them, they began to crave something different. As Bob explains, "We would have been happy with a house on about 25 acres with a nice pond. But we just couldn't find it."



Drawn to the pristine beauty of the Pennsylvania wilds, **RIGHT**, Bob and Amy Litzenberger wanted their house to merge with the surroundings rather than be an alien. The result is a carefully balanced architectural concept, **ABOVE**, that blends into the landscape without overwhelming it.









Following the completion of the main house, timber framer Tony Zaya returned for one more project: the separate pool house, which holds a full-size lap pool. "It's every bit as solid and beautiful as the house itself," Zaya says of this red oak wonder. "In some ways, it's my favorite part."

So they intensified their search and eventually discovered an untrafficked corner of Pennsylvania, a few miles from the scenic Delaware Water Gap. What attracted them to the area, says Amy, was "the remoteness, the openness, the sense of wilderness." Searching for land, they found an old hunting camp with a serviceable, 1,200-sq.-ft. 1950s cabin built from trees logged on the site, and an enormous piece of land comprising some 700 acres. When an adjacent hunting camp came up for sale, they bought that as well, bringing their total to an astounding 1,400 acres. The land represented more than 2 square miles of woods, bluestone outcroppings and a small lake—all of which could be turned into an outdoor paradise for cross-country skiing, hiking, swimming and mountain biking. Then came the bigger challenge: What to build on the land?

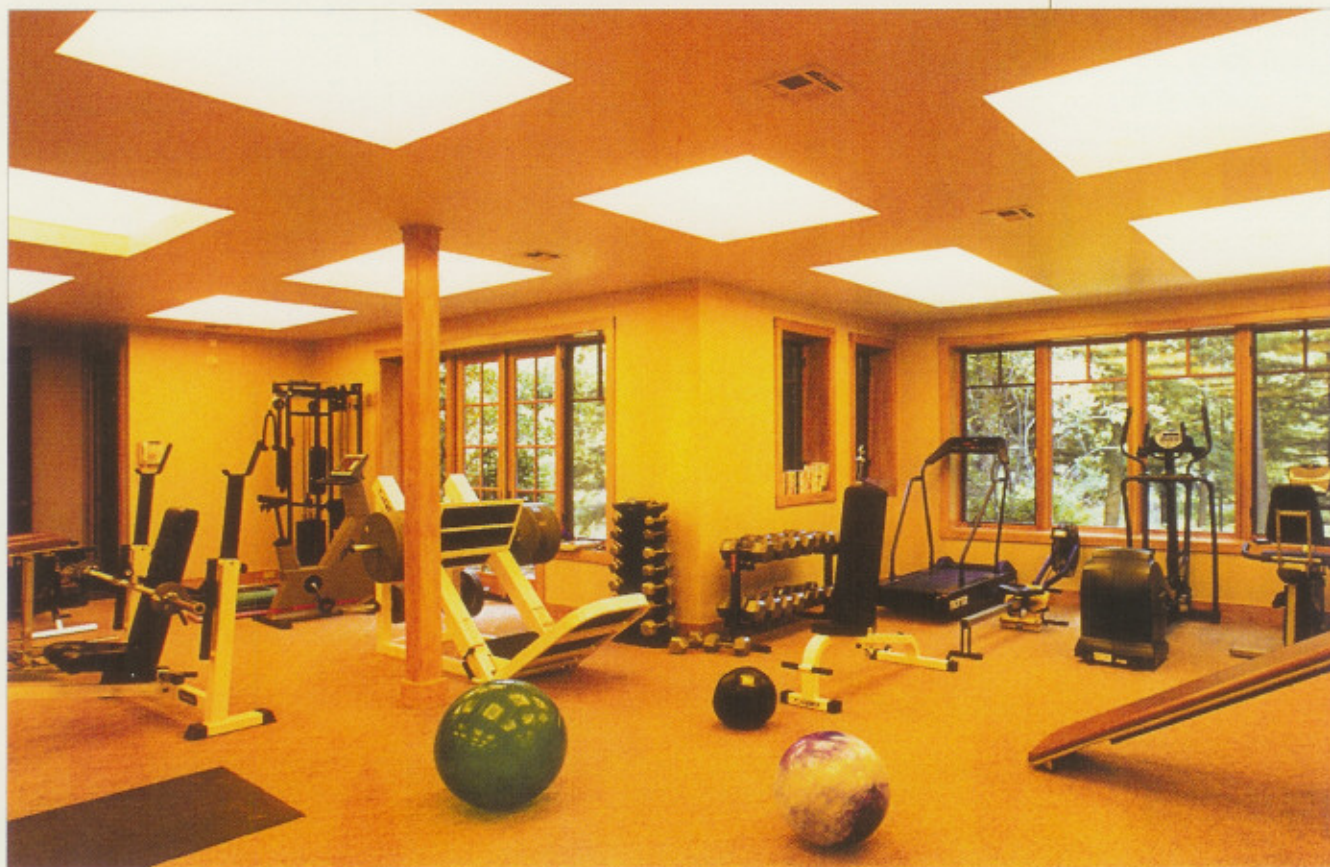
From the start, the couple knew they wanted something that incorporated their

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love of the woods. "We didn't want some monstrosity just dropped down from the sky," says Amy. But they did know they wanted something large. Between the two of them they have four children, including their 4-year-old son, Alex, along with Bob's three grandchildren. Add to this the extended family and friends that come for frequent visits, and that meant the need for something large, well above 10,000 sq. ft. "For our inspiration, we looked to (George Washington's) Mt. Vernon," says Bob, where the scale of the large house is broken up by a series of smaller wings. They wanted the same look here, he says, "something that, when you look at it, isn't overwhelming, but gives you a glimpse of only a portion of the house."

To achieve this, the couple turned to architect Randall Walter of Bensonwood Homes. Having seen pictures of one of his houses in a coffee-table book, the Litzenbergers were drawn in by the casual





look of wood timbers that Bob calls “rustic, but not as rustic as a log cabin. We knew it would be perfect for the site.” One of the biggest challenges, says the architect, was to create a house that could accommodate 20 or more people easily, yet still have a homey feel when occupied by only three or four. “If Amy was alone in the morning, she didn’t want to feel like she was having a cup of coffee in the middle of a stadium,” says Walter.

His solution was to design a house built in three sections: a central edifice with two wings. Smack in the middle, a massive living room provides the setting for a cavernous wall of glass overlooking the hemlock-lined lake below. Yet, stepping into the kitchen and the dining room next to the living room reveals a far more intimate space, with lower ceilings and enclosed spaces not usually found in a timber frame house. Bob’s vaulted-ceiling library, where he keeps


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his thousands of volumes of economics books as well as his growing collection of pre-Columbian terra-cotta sculpture, was built in a separate wing of the house. At about 30 ft. by 50 ft., “the footprint of that room alone is as big as some of the small houses we build every year,” says Walter. Had it been finished with ordinary, plain walls, the space would have overwhelmed the occupants and looked institutional. Instead, Walter designed a catwalk around a portion of the perimeter, accessible by a spiral staircase. That, along with a large, colorful stained-glass window and oodles of wood built-ins, makes the space seem more peaceful and inviting. “We call it our Pantheus chapel,” says Bob.

Having divided the house into different sections, including a 3,000-sq.-ft. media center, wine bar and gym in the basement, the next task for Walter lay in tying it all together again. “We worked hard to unify

While planning the home gym in the lower level, Bob Litzenberger wanted a full-size room to hold all of the equipment the couple uses. “Everyone kept telling me it was too big,” he says of the mammoth layout. Adds his wife, “I still think it’s too big—but I love it.”





The contemplative atmosphere in the library takes on a woodland tone with the help of vine-shaped spindles on the spiral staircase. It is a repository for both the couple's books and pre-Columbian art treasures. "This is our cultural retreat in the woods," says Bob.



"The homeowners had a great ability to take risks.  
That's what creates a magical home."



Built into its own alcove that overlooks the small lake, the master bathtub commands the room like a piece of sculpture.



"If Amy was alone in the morning, she didn't want to feel like she was having a cup of coffee in the middle of a stadium."



## sources

### Bensonwood Homes

Randall Walter,  
Architect  
Walpole, N.H.  
603.756.3600

### Lancaster County Timber Frames

Tony Zaya, President

York, Penn.  
717.755.2990

### Luna Parc

Ricky Boscarino,  
Artist  
Montague, N.J.  
973.948.2160

it, to make it work like one house and not three or four separate ones," he says. This he accomplished by specifying a number of similar finishes, including moldings, doors, colors and flooring throughout the house. The flooring, for example, is continuous oak, except for a slate entry and slate flooring downstairs.

For the timber frame construction, the Litzenbergers turned to master carpenter Tony Zaya of Lancaster County Timber Frames. Ordinarily, Zaya works with only one species of wood for exterior shingles and beams, but for this house he used a total of four: Douglas fir, which is the most common used for timber framing; red oak, to add a traditional look to the library; Alaskan yellow cedar for the exterior shingles (the wood is less prone to splitting than Western red cedar); and white pine for the living room posts. Normally, this many woods would look chaotic in a home, Zaya says, but a house such as the Litzenbergers' is big enough and well-proportioned enough to handle the variety.

The boldest departure from conventional timber framing can be found in the living room, however, where two pairs of 20-ft. tall posts rise to the ceiling. "The Litzenbergers wanted something indigenous to Pennsylvania," says Zaya, who took this literally. He found four massive old-growth white pines and simply stripped the bark off them rather than cutting them into rectangular beams. Set in place, the giant logs echo the beauty of the forest outside, and rise like four separate sculptures to the top of the room. "To have a chance to work with organic shapes, rather than logs cut in a lumber mill, was a real treat," Zaya says—as well as a challenge to figure out

how to connect the irregular logs to the rectangular beams in the main structure.

While none of the wood was lumbered from the site, the couple was able to incorporate other materials right from the land. A century ago several small, hand-operated bluestone quarries had worked on their property, and heaps of cut stone sat unused ever since. Walter's plans called for stone facing on the exterior, and Bob and Amy early on made the decision to use the bluestone. "The masons were here an entire winter, chipping each stone and

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### (OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP)

From their bed the couple can look out to the lake and also through the open bathroom into the morning light. "We were going to have the room separate, but I thought it would be wonderful to lie in bed and see the magnificent view in the morning," says Amy Litzenberger. "It's better than coffee for waking up."

In keeping with their desire for nature, the Litzenbergers put up a birdhouse to attract bluebirds and purple finches, colorful and hard-to-find species in that area.

This elegant, sensual spiral staircase in the library boasts handmade wrought-iron spindles, twisted in vine shapes and decked with leaves.

Wood siding stained a natural-looking brown was applied to the front of the house so that it would retain a woody look without weathering.

Although their house is located many miles from the nearest multiplex cinema, Bob and Amy hardly mind. For movies they retreat to this lower-level media center, outfitted with three rows of leather couches. "When friends come, we start by showing them a 12-minute montage of the construction of our home, through the various seasons, set to Vivaldi's 'The Four Seasons,'" says Bob. "It's a little treat that everyone seems to love."

Rather than being set in the middle of a vast great room, as is typical in timber frame houses, the kitchen lies tucked into a cozy area separate from the soaring heights of the adjacent living room.

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## SPLENDOR

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putting it into place," says Bob, pointing to the facing on the lower level that opens to a terrace near the lake.

As the construction project continued for more than a year, the couple found themselves occasionally feeling like Cary Grant and Myrna Loy in "Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House." While drilling for water, for instance, the well contractor struck water that literally gushed from the ground like a geyser. With more than enough pressure to pump it into the house, there was plenty left to make a perennial fountain that spouts in a bluestone-lined fountain in the back yard, and trickles down to the lake.

Amy, too, found herself personally involved in the design process. The couple wanted a spiral staircase set with treads made of half-round slabs of Douglas fir. While there was room for it to rise upstairs, the builders told her it simply wouldn't fit between the timber frames going downstairs, and suggested they go with a conventional staircase instead. "I didn't want to give up that easily," she says, patting the curving handrail that now leads to the downstairs recreation center. "So I took out my protractor, figured the staircase could go more than a

### The design drew on Mt. Vernon for inspiration.

360-degree turn, added more steps and made it work."

Now that the house is completed, visitors find much evidence of the outdoors within it. Shelves for soap and shampoo in various bathrooms are fashioned from simple pieces of bluestone. In the library, local artist Ricky Boscarino created a stained-glass monument to the local species, including a pileated woodpecker, a belted kingfisher and the ever-present white-tailed deer. The couple even named their black Labrador retriever Bluestone in homage to the history of the property.

But the biggest touches of whimsy were supplied by Zaya, the timber framer. Inspired by the Litzenbergers' passion for the outdoors, he surprised them by carving a relief of a wild turkey on the base of a post in the wine room, a squirrel's tail coming out of a knothole on another and—in the living room—a beaver on one of the white pine posts. The relentless rodent even appears to have taken a chunk out of the wood, making comically small headway in felling the gargantuan log.

"The homeowners had a great ability to take risks with what they were doing and had a good deal of fun along the way," says Zaya. "That's what creates a magical home, and that excitement shows in every detail."

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