



Redefining Retirement

Two architects collaborate on a one-of-a-kind project that provides lessons in comfort, craft, and flexible living at all stages of life



Outdoor living. *The view of the lake from the back terrace is nothing short of breathtaking, and it's a favorite spot for the homeowners to watch the sunset. The living-room and master-bedroom wings wrap around the terrace, giving it a sense of containment.*



A fitting form. *Designed for retirees, the site and approach were constructed carefully. Access from the parking area up to and through the main floor of the house is completely free of grade changes.*

BY SARAH SUSANKA

It has always seemed odd to me that we would call the season of life when people stop working for a steady paycheck “retirement,” as if it were from life itself, when for retirees I’ve worked with over the years, this is really the time they start fully engaging the things they love most. When we learn how to frame retirement differently, and to design houses to support what we’ve always longed to do, it can mean something entirely different. That was certainly the objective of the couple that this home was designed for.

Architect Tina Govan and I were fortunate to be given the opportunity to collaborate on the design of this house, not only because it sits on one of the most beautiful properties I’ve ever seen, but also because it’s for people who understand what retirement can be: a time for entertaining, for actively engaging the natural world, and for seeking tranquility and quiet contemplation.

Two houses in one

When Tina and I first sat down with our new clients, they told us that they wanted this house to perform as two houses in one. On the one hand, they wanted a house that would comfortably serve their everyday needs as a couple now and as they age. On the other, they wanted a house that would provide enough room for guests and family and even offer them their own private area for short or extended stays. A long-term dream was to have

this house become a place for future generations of their family to gather.

They also were interested in making the house energy efficient and in using local materials. They wanted a home that was very much a part of its place: connected to nature and to the traditions and artistry of the area.

A site-driven plan

Our approach was to design the house and site as one, weaving indoor and outdoor spaces together in a way that choreographs the journey from the driveway down to the lake below. We developed the house as a series of structures lacing their way along this pedestrian path and punctuated by dramatic views through to the mountains and lake beyond.

By conceiving the house in this way—as a kind of village gathered around outdoor rooms rather than as a single building—we were able to reduce its scale, define a richer range of indoor and outdoor spaces, and blend the house more easily into its natural surroundings.

Accessibility with a dose of reality

Like many retired clients, the homeowners wanted the house to allow them to age gracefully as their needs change over time. From the outset, Tina and I knew that we would be designing the house to accommodate an elevator should one ever be needed, and we knew the main level would need to be accessible by wheelchair or walker, without the house broadcasting that this was its objective.

I learned an important lesson about designing for the aging human body while working on a new home for my very first clients, a woman in her late sixties and her mother, who was well into her nineties. The mother had specific needs related to the design of her bathroom, needs that differed substantially from Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) require-

5 WAYS TO DESIGN HOUSE AND SITE AS ONE

BY TINA GOVAN

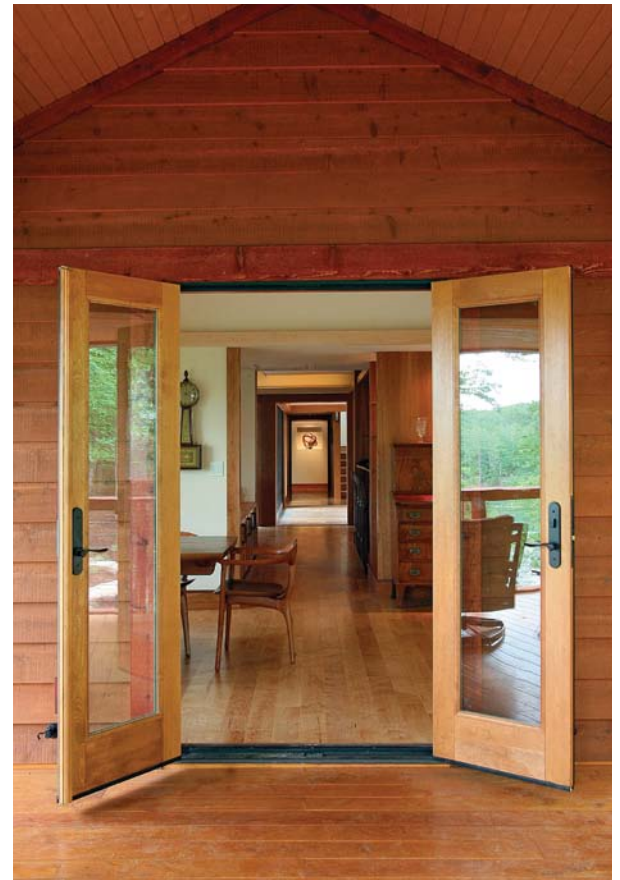
This house was designed with an approach relevant to anyone looking for a house that works in concert with its landscape and that can accommodate an evolving lifestyle. Five themes at work in this project are worth paying attention to, no matter if you're designing your first house or your last.



1 CONTINUITY Indoor and outdoor spaces weave together seamlessly in this project. An outdoor lakeside living room with a fireplace embedded in the body of the house is the activity center. The master bedroom and living room spill out onto this dramatic outdoor space, while the lower guest level is dug into the hill, offering an up-close view of the lake. The western roof terrace faces the lake and the mountains beyond, while the south-facing porch projects toward the water like the prow of a ship.

Integrating outdoor rooms seamlessly with the body of the house and creating impermanent walls to the outside introduced a much wider range of options for how to live in the home. The house can expand and contract with the seasons, and the daily experience of living is animated by routine, easy, and ever-changing encounters with the outdoors.

Shifting spaces. When the breezeway's bifold glass doors are open, the lake beyond is fully visible from the front of the house—a key objective of the design. When full-width screens are lowered, the breezeway becomes a porchlike hallway, blurring the distinction between inside and out.



2 CHOREOGRAPHY The experience of the house is controlled from the moment you set foot on the property. The arrangement of the home reduces its overall scale when viewed from afar, allowing the house and the site to be viewed more easily as one. Gazing through windows, breeze-ways, and openings between buildings reveals a rocky landscape, with lake and mountain views in the distance. A controlled experience such as this adds meaning to a home and its site.



Low and wide. The roof eaves extend into the landscape, and the colors give the house a low profile while maintaining its artful integration of structure and nature. Photovoltaic panels on the garage roof are oriented due south for maximum solar exposure.

3 FLEXIBILITY The design of this home is driven by adaptation and flexibility. The expansion and contraction of the floor plan, the movable walls between indoor and outdoor spaces, and the fixed yet changeable elements (such as the main stairway and a dining room customized to transform from a space for two to a gathering spot for many) demonstrate that this home is designed to accommodate all phases of life. Design like this—with an upfront vision and investment in short- and long-term uses—creates a timeless home that is in tune with its setting and that will be comfortable and functional for generations to come.

Light to walk toward. A lighted piece of artwork at the far end of the corridor between the screen porch and the master suite perfectly exploits a physiological pull toward light, which makes us naturally drawn to explore.

ments, which many builders and designers use as a reference when working on homes for their clients' retirement years. Had I designed the house to ADA standards, my clients would have had to remodel it to fit the mother's actual needs.

Since then, I've tried to design houses that can easily be modified to meet the particular physical challenges of homeowners or guests. I don't go overboard making accommodations for things that may never be needed, however. For instance, I make most doorways wide enough to allow for wheelchair passage, and I provide blocking for future grab bars in likely places, but I don't provide a 5-ft. turning radius in every bathroom. I modify only one main-level bathroom for wheelchair accessibility. The important lesson is that individual needs will almost certainly require some remodeling in the future, so make the commonsense accommodations early, and leave the specific ones for a later date.

Not small, but not so big either

If I were to refer to this project as a "not so big house," some would look at its size and say, "Who is she kidding?" Yet in attitude and sensibility, the home embodies all that I have written about in the Not So Big books. Not So Big does not mean small. It is about eliminating rarely used formal rooms and focusing instead on quality, character, and comfort. It's about building a place of beauty as well as function, about building an inspiring home that will serve its owners through all phases of life. □

Sarah Susanka, FAIA, is a North Carolina architect and the author of the best-selling Not So Big House series of books from The Taunton Press. Tina Govan, AIA, is principal of Tina Govan Architects in Raleigh, N.C.



4 ACCESSIBILITY Because the house was designed for retirees, efforts were taken to make it easy and safe to navigate by aging residents. The beauty in the approach taken here is its subtle accessibility. Single-floor living means the homeowners don't have to navigate stairs, while zero-clearance thresholds—with doorways appropriately sized for wheelchair access—function now and will do so in the future. The long, wide main hallway that connects the indoor spaces to the outdoor spaces ensures easy access through the house.

These design elements are difficult to change down the road, so they were integrated into the design at the beginning. Grab bars and need-specific amenities can be added later to create a home that meets actual demands, not theoretical ones.

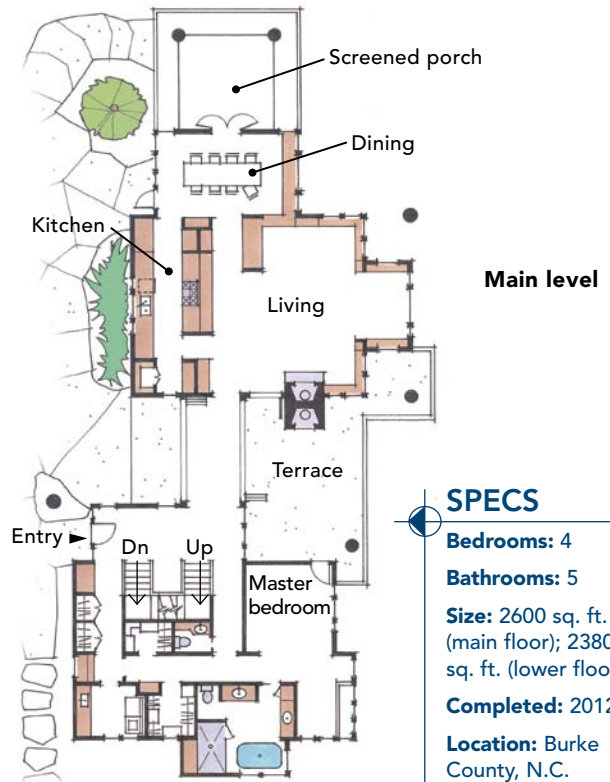


Framed for change. The stairway has been designed to receive a home elevator (where the large pottery piece sits now) should negotiating stairs ever become a problem. Details such as the stair railing and the register cover above the hallway add a level of beauty and craft throughout the house.



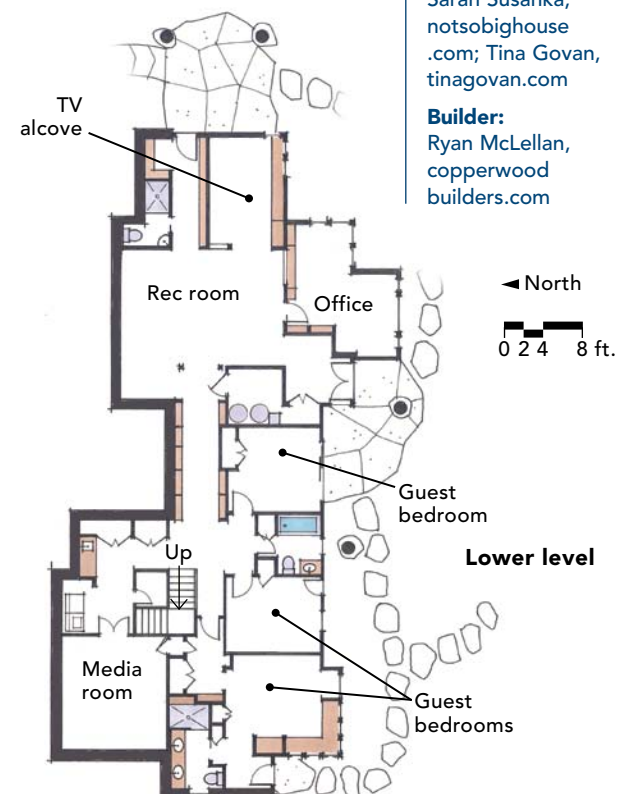
A PLAN IN MOTION

Designing the house as three distinct yet connected spaces—private, public, and guest—allows the home to expand and contract as the needs of the owners change from season to season and from week to weekend.



SPECS

- Bedrooms:** 4
- Bathrooms:** 5
- Size:** 2600 sq. ft. (main floor); 2380 sq. ft. (lower floor)
- Completed:** 2012
- Location:** Burke County, N.C.
- Architects:** Sarah Susanka, notsobighouse.com; Tina Govan, tinagovan.com
- Builder:** Ryan McLellan, copperwoodbuilders.com



5 VARIABILITY The distinguishing of spaces inside of this house is achieved by varying ceiling heights, using a variety of finish materials, and creating long views through the house that reveal its multiple layers.



Not only does this variability in scale and detail make the spaces more interesting, but it helps create specific areas to occupy: a reading nook that frames a water view, a corner bench wrapped in windows and light, and a sitting area with a vaulted ceiling to gather with friends and family.

A variety of ceiling heights. The main living area includes a central gathering place as well as sheltered and intimate alcoves. Areas with lower ceilings are framed with a continuous trim band and offer areas of retreat within the spacious great room.