

Inside.
Outside.
Home.

Aboode cville

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At first, site

WAHS
makes extra
room for
learning

Tough
textiles stay
stylish while
sturdy

With respect to
the view, a country
home hunkers into
the landscape

Get moving

*In a seller's market,
buyer be ready*

Blight relief

*Prepping for spring
(boxwood included!)*

Hot spot

*Inside Belmont's new
Mexi joint, Junction*



The long



A Shenandoah
Valley home
spreads out on
a hilltop

view

BY ERIKA HOWSARE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
VIRGINIA HAMRICK

Living abroad for decades gives you a special perspective on home. So does waking up every morning to a fantastic view. For one local couple, 30 years in various foreign countries was the prelude to a new chapter: retirement on a hilltop in Steeles Tavern, just a handful of miles from where the husband grew up. A modern home designed by Katherine Grove provides the setting—and the backdrop—for a lively collection of art and artifacts reflecting all those years overseas.

The view from this property, which the couple purchased some 30 years ago, is truly stunning: a panorama of the Alleghenies, the Blue Ridge and rolling forest and farmland. On a clear day, the furthest point visible is 35 miles away. “We came home from Brazil and wanted to buy some land,” remembers the owner. “We took a look at this view, and said, ‘We’ll take it.’ It was love at first sight.”

For a long time, the 160-acre plot was a place for the owners to visit with their children, sit on plastic lawn chairs and dream of a future house. They moved among various countries, including Brazil, Nigeria and France, always renting their dwellings, and when the time finally came to build their own house, they’d had many years to think about what they wanted.

Train cars

When they saw a magazine photo of a modern home designed by Grove, and realized she is based in Charlottesville, they knew they’d found their architect. Her style, using clean lines and simple shapes, fit well with the super-energy-efficient houses—called Passive Houses—that they’d admired in Austria.

Given that the house would be visible to many neighbors at lower elevations, “We wanted it to be subtle to the landscape,” says the owner, “not to look like Tara on the hill.” Yet they also wanted the ability to put up guests in comfort and privacy for long-term visits.

“It was very exposed; it was already a grass knoll,” says Grove. “The question was, how to hunker down?” She envisioned a series of volumes that would stay low to the ground, with nearly flat roofs, and take advantage of the slope to “bury” the guest rooms into the hillside.

Another major challenge was that the main part of the view faces west—great for watching sunsets, but tough on energy usage, as afternoon sun pours through the biggest windows and brings heat and glare. “We notched down the amount of glass,” says Grove. For example, the living area originally had a wall of windows, but now has a solid wall. (Being open to the kitchen and dining room, it borrows their daylight.)

Her clients were set on living outdoors as much as possible, and this suggested to Grove the basic scheme of the house: “three train cars that followed

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the distinctive curves of the ridge.” Between the garage “car” and the central “car” is a breezeway that invites owners and guests to lounge near an outdoor fireplace and drink in the view. That opening also serves as a frame on part of the view, like a living landscape painting that stops visitors in their tracks upon arrival.

The third “car,” housing the master suite, office and lower-level guest rooms, is joined to the central one at an angle. This changes the focus of the view from different rooms, and adds, Grove says, a sense of visual interest on a smaller scale than the massive vista outside. “It’s a nod to courtyard houses around the world—in Asia, Italy, Germany—or hill towns, where the buildings are never at right angles. You get these fun trapezoidal spaces.”

A house that isn’t there

Aesthetically, in many ways the house aims to disappear. Its exterior, clad mostly in sage-green fiber-cement panels, recedes into the bucolic surroundings. Inside, white walls and concrete floors serve as a cool, neutral backdrop to the owners’ globally influenced collections. There are masks and a carved wooden throne from the Yoruba people of Nigeria, an antique Dutch travel chest and specimens of Brazilian amethyst. Colorful molas from Panama keep company with African raffia mats and modern Brazilian furniture.

Every space has its designated pieces. The hallway in the bedroom wing serves as a “cabinet of curiosities,” holding everything from books to feather fans to German beer steins. “We wanted to create a gallery that could change over time,” says Grove. She made the space wide enough so that the objects can be comfortably viewed, and added east-facing windows to provide flashes of the exterior.

Brazilian tigerwood flooring distinguishes this zone from the concrete-floored public areas, where kitchen, living and dining flow together in one space that revels in the view. French doors and large windows bring the mountains inside the kitchen. Its spare arrangement of cherry cabinets and a chunky island topped with soapstone make for a warm but minimal place to gather, and a bar-height table invites the owners’ many houseguests to sit and gaze outside.

Yet, for all the appeal of the interior, the owners say the breezeway is where they spend their best times. A ledgerrock fireplace, decorated by a large rock studded with starfish and trilobite fossils, is the focal point. It’s surrounded by Western red cedar siding, which brings warmth to this spot and breaks up the green exterior panels at various other points along the façade.

“We wanted it to be subtle to the landscape,” says the owner, “not to look like Tara on the hill.”



Katherine Grove designed the house in three “train cars” that stay low to the ground, rather than a hulking mass on the hill. French doors and wide windows, as in the kitchen, help bring the surrounding mountains inside.

Three seasons a year, the owners are here eating al fresco meals, stargazing, swimming and lounging by the fire. And always, they’re captivated by the movement of shadows and light over the landscape, revealed and framed by Grove’s design. Says the owner, “I’ve probably taken about a thousand pictures.”

The breakdown

3,000 square feet

Structural system: Insulated wood frame walls with additional exterior 5 1/2" EPS rigid insulation; structural insulated panel roof system

Exterior material: Fiber cement panels and cedar siding

Interior finishes: Painted gypsum wall board with maple trim, maple hardwood flooring and sealed concrete floors

Roof materials: EPDM roofing membrane

Window system: Triple-glazed Klearwall Ecoclad

Mechanical systems: ERV with mini-split system

Design: urbanGROVE Studio, PLLC with Liminal Architecture

Construction: Structures Design/Build

Passive House Consultant: Passiv Science



Power play

The Passive House certification program, common in Germany and Austria but only beginning to make inroads in the U.S., aims for the highest possible energy efficiency. Passive-solar design, top-notch insulation and obsessive attention to airtightness are the major tenets of the approach. Though this house is not certified (mostly because it includes a swimming pool), it does follow the principles, resulting in heating and cooling costs of around \$10 a month.

