

THE MAGAZINE of *SPLENDID HOMES and GARDENS* • MAY/JUNE 2013

# DESIGN

NEW ENGLAND

## HOUSE MEETS LANDSCAPE

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# *marrying styles*

MICHAEL SEVY AND TINA CHRISTENSEN LOOK TO THE TRADITIONAL VERMONT FARMSTEAD TO INSPIRE A MINIMALIST HOUSE THEY BOTH LOVE



WRITTEN BY **NANCY HUMPHREY CASE** • PHOTOGRAPHED BY **JIM WESTPHALEN**



TAKING ITS ARCHITECTURAL cues from the vintage agrarian buildings found all over New England, a cluster of hierarchical forms shapes a contemporary "farmhouse" tucked into the corner of a Vermont meadow.

*Tina Christensen wanted a contemporary farmhouse* that fit into the northern Vermont landscape. Her husband, Michael Sevy, had his heart set on a minimalist U-shaped house with a courtyard, where he pictured himself sipping espresso in the sun. Architect Rolf Kielman, a principal at TruexCullins in Burlington, Vermont, and a longtime friend who officiated at their wedding, married their design ideas to create an affordable 3,200-square-foot home that exceeds their expectations.

Christensen and Sevy had found their ideal lot, a 10½-acre hayfield on “a dirt road off a dirt road” where it was private and quiet yet only 18 minutes from downtown Burlington. Kielman worked with Keith Wagner of H. Keith Wagner Partnership-Landscape Architects, also



in Burlington, to site the house in the corner of the meadow, backed up against woods on two sides and open to the south for maximum solar gain. “It came naturally to situate the house here,” Kielman says, “the way people gravitate toward the corner table at a restaurant.” Wagner concurs. “We see houses plunked down in the middle of a meadow because it’s easy to build there, but that doesn’t respect the visual integrity of the area,” he says. “Nestling this house in the corner of the field gave it not only a comfortable feeling but a longer south view.”

The couple’s design criteria required multifunctionality, including work spaces for both of them and rooms for Sevy’s three adult children, ages 18 to 25, when they were home. What evolved were two separate buildings, a long rectangular main house with a garage and entry ell and a small detached building (Christensen’s graphic design studio), which form a U-shaped

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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE  
H. KEITH WAGNER PARTNERSHIP-  
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS



DESIGN DECISION ***Holed On***

The storage wall in the kitchen was supposed to hide behind rolling wooden doors. However, ready-made doors would have put the kitchen over budget, so they were substituted with simple doors built on site from MDF (medium-density fiberboard). But a lucky mistake kicked the design up a notch. The carpenter had just finished drilling a grid of holes in the MDF being used for the closet door in Tina Christensen's design studio. The holes were meant to allow warm air to reach plumbing pipes in the back of the closet, but the carpenter thought it was a simple design directive, so he drilled a similar grid into the kitchen doors. After the initial surprise, Christensen decided she liked the look, and everyone agreed it added the right amount of visual interest to spice up the kitchen wall.



configuration around a central courtyard. Above the garage, an apartment with two bedrooms, a bath, and a common room with a wide window seat that can double as a bed is reserved for when any, or all, of the children visit.

A concrete retaining wall on the long, south-facing side of the site completes the courtyard enclosure and cleanly marks the boundary between landscaped yard and natural meadow. Kielman likens the whole configuration to farmsteads in Norway and Switzerland and here in New England. "They all have that commonality of a hierarchy of structures arranged in a way that evokes a feeling of protection or enclosure," he says. The exterior siding is white metal, which visually relates to the white clapboard farmhouses that dot the Vermont landscape but without the maintenance that painted wood requires.

**MINIMALIST STYLE IS** manifest on the kitchen island (FACING PAGE), which is faced with simple MDF (medium-density fiberboard). Waveline glass tile provides a serene backdrop to the work area. A central courtyard (ABOVE) connects Tina Christensen's graphic design studio (RIGHT FOREGROUND) with the house (LEFT) and garage (BACK RIGHT).



In fact, low maintenance, along with spare design and modest cost, was a top priority for the project. To help achieve this, Kielman turned to the 4-foot module — something he'd seen in Frank Lloyd Wright's 1950 Zimmerman house in Manchester, New Hampshire — where all windows, doors, and walls are sized in multiples of 4 feet. It's a trick that simplifies design, which in turn minimizes waste and makes construction easier and labor costs lower. And, says Kielman, it's a geometry that lends order and an air of calm.

"The basics have a symmetry, then imperfections add interest," Sevy says, citing volumes arranged imperfectly in the 4-foot-wide bookcases that line a wall of the living room. The walk-in pantry between the kitchen and entry is 8 feet wide instead of the more typical 6-foot width,

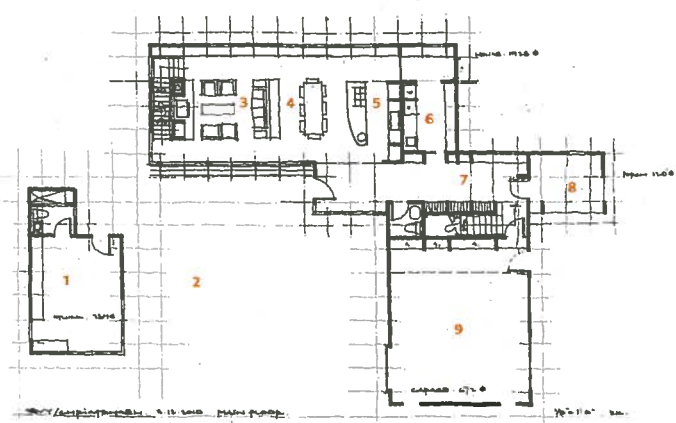


**A SOUTH-FACING WALL of glass (ABOVE) opens the living spaces to the sun and the meadow view. Locally harvested maple flooring gives the room a warm ambiance. A grid of 2-foot-square bookcases (RIGHT) is one offshoot of the 4-foot modular pattern around which the house is designed.**





**THE ENTRY HALL (LEFT)** whispers "minimalist" with polished concrete flooring and trimless closet doors. Foot pedals by Chicago Faucets give a clean look to the powder room sink area. The walls of Michael Sevy's second-floor office and music studio (FACING PAGE, TOP) are open to the views and light through the windows across the stairwell. Leonardo, one of the family's many cats, sits on a bench in the master bedroom (FACING PAGE, BOTTOM), where small, north-facing windows balance the sunlight that floods in from its wall of south-facing glass. A large walk-in closet and dressing room minimizes the need for furniture in the room, which maximizes its serene sensibility. Bedside lamps are by Tolomeo Classic. Peaked roofs (BELOW) finished in standing seam metal frame the flat-roofed front porch, where Irish setter Oliver basks in the sun.



**FIRST FLOOR**

- 1 DESIGN STUDIO
- 2 COURTYARD
- 3 LIVING AREA
- 4 DINING AREA
- 5 KITCHEN
- 6 PANTRY/LAUNDRY
- 7 ENTRY
- 8 PORCH
- 9 GARAGE

**BUILDER**  
O'Neill Builders







which gives it ample space not only for food storage but also for laundry facilities and an extra sink that is out of sight of the open-concept kitchen/dining/living area.

In the kitchen, appliances with hidden controls and simple flush doors on floor-to-ceiling cabinets enhance the clean look. Throughout the house, the absence of baseboards and trim on windows and doors adds to the minimalist look — and saved money.

The sum of the house is an efficient, well-flowing assemblage of spaces warmed by Vermont maple flooring and united by the courtyard, which every room overlooks through a wall of south-facing glass. Christensen praises the design expertise of Kielman, who, alternately, gives a lot of credit to her. “She’s a Renaissance lady,” Kielman says of his client, who notes she did consider becoming an architect when younger. “She’s got her nose in all sorts of directions — fabric, jewelry, graphic design, color. . . .”

“Colleagues always say you shouldn’t work for friends,” he adds, “but it was great.” Architect and owners also praise the good work and responsiveness of O’Neill Builders, also of Burlington. The collaborative process yielded a result that delights all involved. Both Christensen and Sevy enjoy the courtyard, the tall grass waving in the meadow, the cool air that comes from the woods through the north-facing windows, and the satisfaction of having infused their home with their own tastes and ideas.

Although they’ve lived in the house for more than a year, some “holes” intentionally remain in the furnishings.

“We grab stuff as we go,” Kielman says of joint outings with the owners. “Things connected to a memory, a trip, friends. There are places in the house waiting for such things.” ■

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