



OUTSTANDING HOME:

Mission Accomplished

STORY BY ELLEN HOPKINS + PHOTOS BY ED ASMUS PHOTOGRAPHY

ARCHITECT: KRISTI THOMPSON, MWA, INC.
BUILDER: GERALD MENG, MENG CONSTRUCTION
INTERIOR DESIGN: JEAN MORELL
LIGHTING DESIGN: LEE HARRIS, LIGHT & SPACE
LANDSCAPE DESIGN: NICK WILLIAMS, NICK WILLIAMS
& ASSOCIATES; RARE EARTH LANDSCAPE CONSTRUCTION
SQUARE FEET: 5,700
YEAR COMPLETED: 2006



Recycled trestle wood, rusted and corrugated metal, basalt ledge stone and steel beams introduce the cohesive aesthetic and design of this Northstar home.



Thoughtfully placed light scoops and skylights brighten the home's rich interior spaces.



OUTSTANDING HOME



The spacious interior lets the architecture speak, while a more silent feature — home automation — gives the owners comfort control.



For architect Kristi Thompson, winning a design award was not only a personal goal, it was also an important objective of clients Tom and Cathy Van Berkem. So perhaps it comes as little surprise to the trio that the Van Berkems' stunning Northstar residence took top honors in this year's Tahoe Quarterly Mountain Home Awards.

"When Cathy told us she wanted this house to win a design award, it wasn't so much a challenge as giving us the freedom to do something creative, something we'd love," says Thompson, who's been working with MWA for six years. "This freedom of expression allowed us to really enjoy the design process, straight out of the shoot."

Thompson says that the process started with napkin sketches, and that while the Van Berkems wanted to be involved every step of the way, "they liked most every idea we came up with. They were completely hands-on, but so easy to work with, that it was a real pleasure."

There were some parameters, the main one being Cathy's need for light. "Cathy has a disorder where lack of sunlight can lead to depression," explains Thompson. "This proved a bit of a dilemma, considering the lot is north-facing, with lots of trees and views every direction but south."

The problem was solved with the incorporation of thoughtfully placed light

INSIDE AND OUT, THE HOME IS AN ENLIVENED PALETTE OF MATERIALS, CRAFTSMANSHIP AND VISION.

scoops, which collect sunlight and direct it to the interior as needed. At street levels, a huge wall of south-facing glass captures light, and a see-through staircase allows it to filter below. On the view side, a peninsula of deck faces west, allowing afternoon basking.

Northstar's building codes also created some challenges. The prescribed driveway, for instance, was down an ultra-steep slope with a big curve at the bottom. "That simply



OUTSTANDING HOME



As on the exterior, recycled trestle wood from the Great Salt Lake forms a textured lattice on the kitchen ceiling.

wouldn't work in the winter," Thompson says. "It was impossible, and we were fortunate enough to convince Northstar of that."

The restriction was partly aesthetic in nature. Northstar prefers its homes to have eye-catching entrances, something appealing from the road. A street-level garage can detract from that. Thompson et al. solved that problem with an entryway bridge between the driveway and the front porch. Under the direction of landscape architect Nick Williams of Tarzana, California, Truckee-based Rare Earth Landscape Construction created a spectacular water feature that cascades down the hillside, under the bridge, and splashes into a pond beside the second-level patio. Placer County placed its own restrictions on the garage. "The county has a snow storage easement," Thompson says. "The garage had to be indestructible as far as the plows go, and that meant no windows, or any glass at all, on the first 15 feet of building. Instead, we took elements from the house and created garage doors of recycled wood and rusted steel."

Green building elements are incorporated

inside and outside the 5,700 square foot, tri-level home. The wood siding, railings, decking and timbers are all recycled trestle wood. Steel beams in place of heavy timbers mean fewer trees cut and also serve as an interesting architectural element. Liberal use of stone, concrete and metal siding also decreased the need for new lumber. Inside,

the walls are engineered studs, created from smaller pieces of lumber, glued together.

"This PSL, or 'parallel strand lumber,' also makes for straighter, flatter walls," says builder Gerald Meng. "Green was a definite objective. We used soy-based foam insulation in the ceilings, and blown-in cellulose insulation in the walls."

With 25 years of experience, Meng had risen to many challenges, and the Van Berkem project presented a few. "The main

one was the time constraints," he says. "From ground breaking to move-in was 18 months. That meant doing a lot of the framing over an extremely heavy winter. And, because of the steepness of the lot, we had to build 12-foot retaining walls. There were a lot of crane lifts involved."

Still, says Meng, "From the first time I saw

THOUGHTFUL SPACES FOR FAMILY, COOKING, STUDYING, RELAXING AND GUESTS ARE SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE HOME'S THREE LEVELS.

the plans, I wanted to be involved. Working with MWA was a great experience, and interacting with the owners was one of the best parts of the job."

Meng says his favorite room in the house is the kitchen, because of its layout and the way the light comes in through the living room. "I really love the openness of it."

These large, open rooms are on the second level, along with the master suite and the media room. The entire home is wired, and

a computer controls everything from the temperature to the security system to the rooftop weather station, and a whole lot more. "Music, CDs and DVDs are all loaded into a central system and can be called up from any TV or computer in the house,"

DURING SUMMER, A MAN-MADE STREAM FLOWS THE LENGTH OF THE LOT. IN WINTER, A SKI LIFT LOADING TERMINAL IS 50 YARDS DOWNHILL.

explains Thompson. "The wine cellar is also temperature controlled and inventoried with a barcode scanner. The Van Berkems can check up on all these things by computer from their other home in Calabasas."

The Northstar property was, in fact, supposed to become the Van Berkems' vacation home. But with Tom's retirement, and Cathy's ability to work from home, it will become much more than that once their 17-year-old son, Ben, graduates from high school in Southern California. "We really love Truckee," says Cathy, "and have enjoyed getting involved with the community here."

Ben is not only master of his own suite, he also had a hand in the design process. "He picked all his own finishes," says Thompson. "His bathroom is the most expensive in the whole house, with a beautiful glass sink bowl and small glass tiles."

Thompson, who wanted the architecture to "speak," custom-designed the home's

railings, fireplaces and even some of the light fixtures. The garage was customized with special epoxy flooring, drains and a hot water sprayer to allow the Van Berkems to wash their vehicles inside, even in winter. A dumbwaiter moves items up and down

between the garage and the utility room. Even the decks are made special with fire pits and spiral staircases.

Family friend and interior designer, Jean Morell, handled the interior design. The Southern California octogenarian allowed the home to keep its architectural voice, with a simplistic, light-handed approach. "Sometimes the architect and interior designer end up at odds," explains Cathy. "But Jean asked Kristi what her vision was for the project. With this home, Jean's philosophy was that the architecture is the statement, and the design should not compete with it."

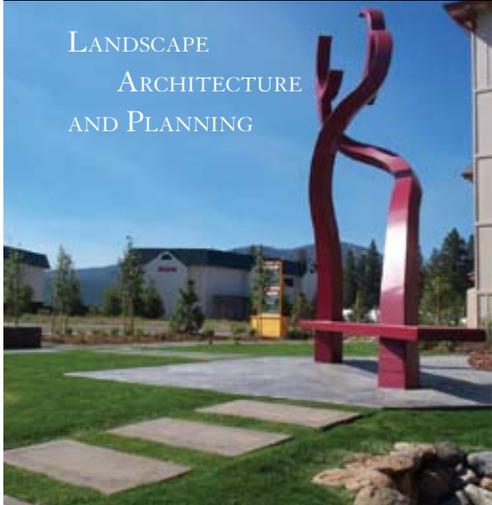
This was the first time the Van Berkems built a house from the ground up. The process, says Cathy, was a little intimidating. "We did spend a fair amount of time on the front end, and we stayed involved all along the way. But I remember in December, the house was just barely framed, and we were asked to choose lighting fixtures. It felt like we were picking things out in a vacuum, but luckily we had better instincts than we thought. Watching everything come together was simply amazing." 

A peninsula on the deck reaches west, grabbing the afternoon sun.



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