

# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

## Record Houses

The NEW New Urbanism in Holland

Out on a Limb with Treehouses

Michael Sorkin in Cairo

04 2001

\$7.00 A PUBLICATION OF THE MCGRAW-HILL COMPANIES

WWW.ARCHITECTURALRECORD.COM

The south elevation overlooks a pond stocked with koi. A lead-coated copper "mask" on the second floor of the main addi-

tion (left in photo) conceals part of the master bedroom, while a small kitchen pavilion juts out into the wooded landscape.



Wesley **Wei** forges a balanced whole with  
his **PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE** and transcends  
the sum of its richly eclectic parts



The front of the house (right) reveals little of what happens inside, but introduces a palette of materials with the same visual weight as the original stone. The kitchen pavilion rests on a concrete plinth (below).



By Clifford A. Pearson

**T**his house in the woods evokes images of masks with their seductive power of not showing too much too soon. “I’ve always been interested in screens and other devices that simultaneously conceal and reveal,” says architect Wesley Wei, AIA, who renovated and expanded a late-18th-century stone farmhouse into a residence for an art collector. The client is a bachelor who guards his privacy, so introducing elements that obscure views inside seemed appropriate. Here, the mixing of periods, forms, and materials is a kind of masquerade in which various faces are shown to outsiders and only invited guests get to know the inhabitant’s true identity.

The original schist-and-fieldstone house, with just 700 square feet on two floors, had been compromised by unsympathetic additions during the 20th century and could not accommodate the client’s expanding collection of modern art. On meeting the client, Wei was impressed, perhaps even a bit intimidated, by the collection, which included works by George Baselitz, Francesco Clemente, Alberto Giacometti, Anselm Kiefer, and Louise Nevelson. Wei’s first sketches showed new additions that played quiet, supporting roles to the art. The client responded by saying he wanted a house that would stand up to the art, not just provide a setting for it. So Wei broke free of his self-imposed restraints and developed a more assertive design that takes its cues from the art collection and the site while creating a three-dimensional composition with its own personality. From the outside, the juxtaposition of distinct forms seems a bit jarring. Once inside, though, it’s clear that the volumes have been tailored

**Project:** *Pennsylvania House, Media, Pa.*

**Architect:** *Wesley Wei Architects—Wesley Wei, AIA, principal-in-charge; Stephen Mileto, project architect; Caitlin Moore, Alice Chun, Taylor Lawson, Joel Ziegler, project team*

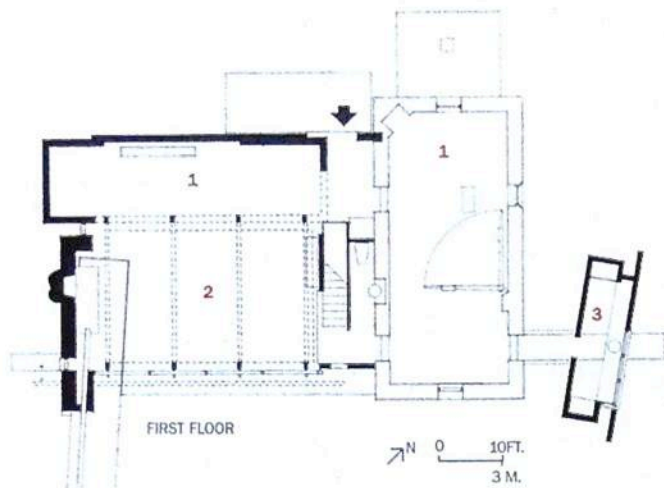
**Interior designer:** *Maria Izak Nevelson Interior Design*

**Fabricators:** *AAA Welding (steel); A.C. Gentry (lead-coated copper); bulthaup studio (kitchen cabinets); James Van Etten (custom cabinets)*

**General contractor:** *Phillip Johnson Construction, Inc.*

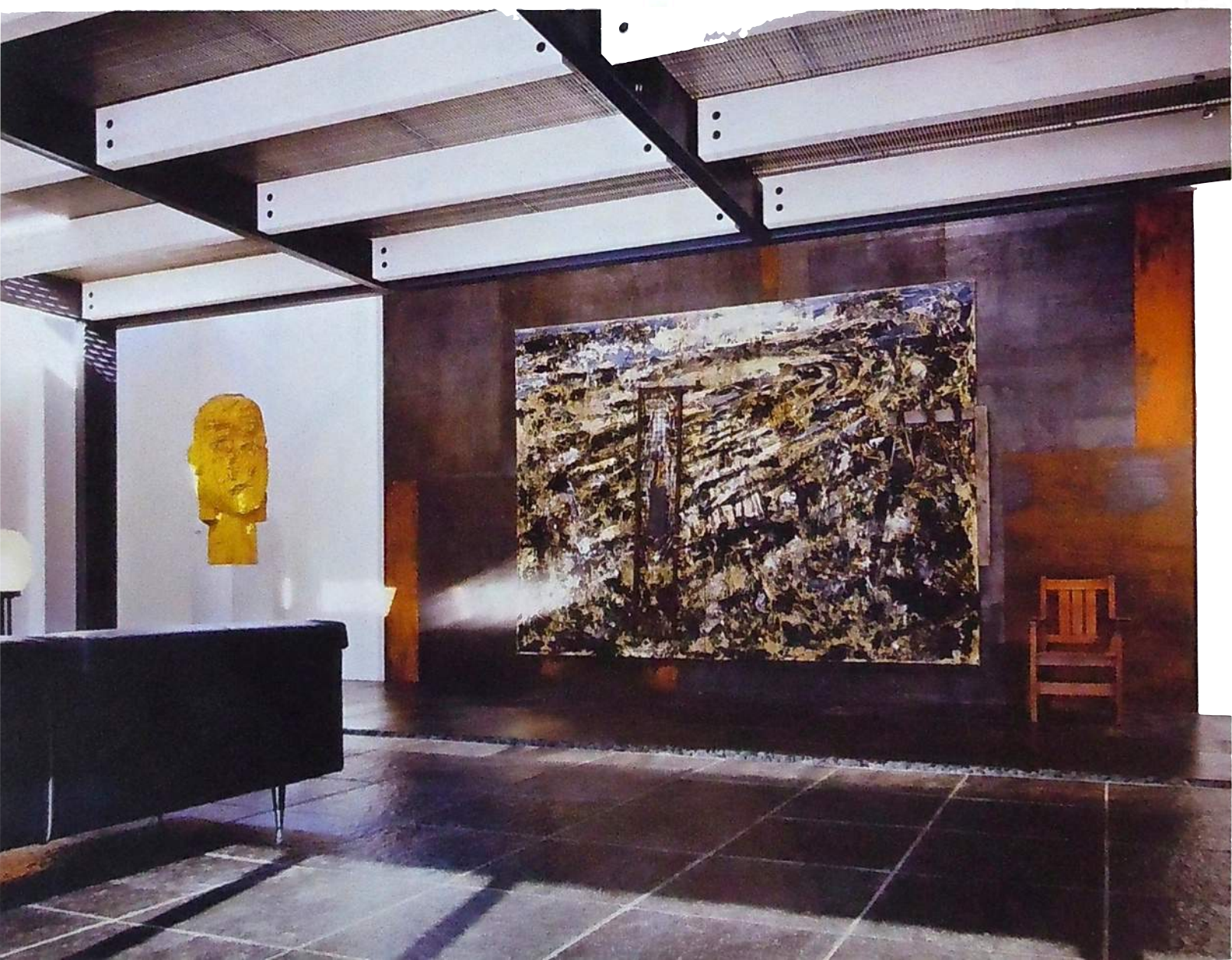


Two steps below the level of the original house, the flowing space of the new living room addition comes as a surprise.



- 1. Gallery
- 2. Living/dining
- 3. Kitchen
- 4. Master bedroom
- 5. Cedar closet
- 6. Bedroom

The 18-foot-high gallery on the front of the house was designed to accommodate a large painting by Anselm Kiefer (below).





Daylight from above gives the living room an ethereal quality. A patio (left in photo) will be extended with an aluminum deck to reach out to the pond.

to the demands of particular paintings and to the client's lifestyle; a gallery space near the front of the house, for example, rises to an 18-foot-high ceiling to accommodate a large Kiefer canvas, and a narrow kitchen pavilion shooting off the south side of the original house is proportioned for a man who rarely cooks or entertains.

Located in Media, a town about 20 miles southwest of Philadelphia, the property has an almost-rural feeling, even though other houses are not far away. A small pond with a backdrop of trees helps establish the bucolic setting, and an existing freestanding garage accommodates the client's small fleet of sports cars.

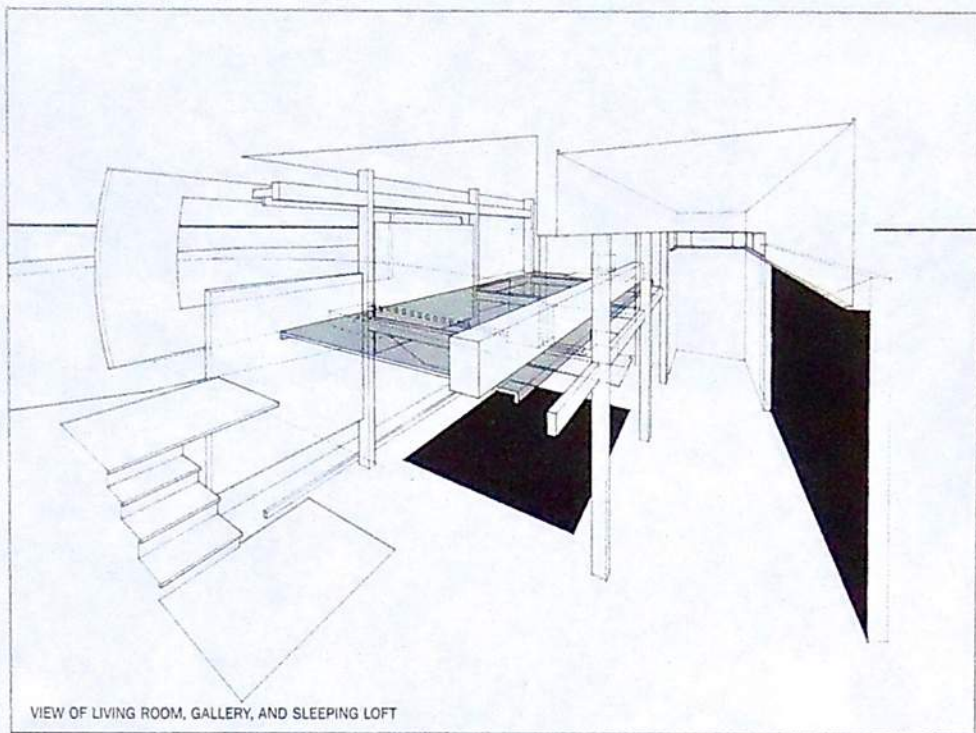
Wei razed earlier additions to the house and designed new ones on either side of the original stone building to create a trio of volumes aligned in a row. Using materials and forms that are clearly modern, the architect treated the 18th-century house as one piece in a collection of architecture. While some parts are masked or obscured, each has "a legibility, a clarity of reading," explains the architect. Thanks to the visual weight of its stone, the old structure is still the center of gravity of the overall composition. But the 2,500-square-foot expansion is more than

three times as large as the original house, and visitors enter not through the old building, but through a pivoting steel door on the larger of the two additions. Inside the house, each part maintains its own identity: small kitchen pavilion, stone farmhouse (used as art space on the ground floor with small bedroom and cedar closet above), an expansive north

## THE CLIENT WANTED A HOUSE THAT WOULD STAND UP TO THE ART, NOT JUST PROVIDE A SETTING FOR IT.

addition comprising an art gallery and living room on the first level, and grand sleeping loft upstairs.

Respecting the identity of the old farmhouse, Wei used a contrasting palette of materials for the additions: Cor-Ten steel, lead-coated copper, poured concrete, and Western-cedar planks. On the front elevation, he combined these materials with just a small band of clerestory windows to create a virtually opaque facade. This solidity is contrasted with a generously glazed rear elevation that looks onto the



VIEW OF LIVING ROOM, GALLERY, AND SLEEPING LOFT

Wei designed the stair and sleeping loft as elements floating within the new house (left). Old and new materials embrace at

thresholds between the farmhouse and the additions (below). A Nevelson sculpture stands in the main bedroom (below left).



pond. In fact, balancing heavy with light and old with new continues throughout the house. A circulation axis near the back of the house connects all the pieces, cutting through the thick stone walls of the farmhouse and providing remarkable transitions between old and new. A secondary path near the front of the house provides a similar set of thresholds.

In the main new wing, an almost Zenlike use of materials—waxed plate steel, cleft slate, subtly tinted plaster, and a channel of dark-gray river stones—offers an intriguing counterpoint to the pine floors (salvaged from old barns) and rough-stone walls of the renovated old house. A steel-frame structure that seems to hover within the enclosing volume of the addition supports the master bedroom upstairs. Wei exposed the aluminum-grate floor structure around the edges of this floating bedroom, allowing light from below to shine through. Because it faces west to the pond, the bedroom is equipped with two layers of mechanized fabric shades—one to block out the sun and the other to reduce solar warming while maintaining the view. The convex surface of the room's lead-coated copper "mask" provides a third layer of protection. "We wanted this element to be voluptuous, to be a soft form," explains Wei, "connecting the bed with the view of the water."

Just as a good art collection unfolds as a sequence of creative moments, Wei's design for this house in Pennsylvania offers a progression of experiences—initially denying visual access, then opening up views, cutting paths through thick old walls, and peeling away layers that protect, obscure, and tease. ■

#### Sources

**Stucco:** Penn Crete Stucco  
**Roofing:** EPDM; Firestone  
**Wood doors:** Morgan Morgan  
**Paint:** Benjamin Moore  
**Slate flooring:** Vermont Structural Slate  
**Lighting:** Flos, Artemide, Halo  
**Faucets:** Kohler

#### Cooktop, oven, and dishwasher:

Miele  
**Refrigerator:** Subzero  
**Windows:** Weathershield, Crittel

**WWW** For more information on the people and products involved in this project, go to **Projects** at [www.architecturalrecord.com](http://www.architecturalrecord.com)