

# house

American Houses for the New Century

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UNIVERSE

# Wesley Wei Architects

## Pennsylvania House

### Media, Pennsylvania

#### 2000

For a house in Media, Pennsylvania, architect Wesley Wei's primary challenge was to update a small eighteenth-century fieldstone farmhouse to suit the needs of its owner, a bachelor with a sophisticated art collection. The Philadelphia-based Wei admits that he was intimidated at the prospect of designing a home for not just a man with exacting taste but for the masterful creations of Francesco Clemente, Alberto Giacometti, Anselm Kiefer, George Baselitz, and Louise Nevelson. The client pushed him to design a house that would do more than serve his daily needs, and even more than simply display art. He wanted a house that would rival the masterpieces it would contain.

The result is a deft three-dimensional collage, with startling combinations of materials, forms, and periods. His interventions are as dramatic as they are functional. The original building, a 700-square-foot two-story pitched-roof box, had endured numerous clumsy additions in the past, which Wei eliminated entirely. His additions are distinctive volumes with independent architectural integrity that also manage to respect the identity of the old farmhouse. Corten steel, lead-coated copper, and western cedar clad the new parts of the building—materials that Wei felt carried as much visual weight as the old. Deployed monotonously, these materials also render the exterior façades inscrutable, which was crucial to the privacy-crazed homeowner.

Inside, it is obvious that the spaces have been organized and designed with specific artworks in mind. Just inside the entrance, a gallery space vaults eighteen feet upward, clearly tailored for a large

painting by Kiefer. The kitchen, which spins off the original stone house like a satellite, is a narrow, compact galley—a departure from the spacious combination kitchen-living rooms seen in many contemporary houses, but utterly suited to the client, who rarely cooks or entertains.

This house is more art gallery than house, which explains why material treatments are kept simple and nondistracting. They might even be described as deliberately harsh: poured concrete walls, steel beams cutting through the old and new parts of the house, exposed sections of the original thick stone walls, and more. This hard-edged aesthetic echoes the look of contemporary art's natural habitat—warehouse-converted galleries and artists' studios.

Like these neutral art settings, the rooms in the house's new wing are reserved, subdued—all the better for focusing attention on the artwork. To deepen the house's sense of quiet, a channel of dark gray river stones imparts the living room with a Zenlike air. The new elements seem especially idiosyncratic in relation to the old stone and pine floors (salvaged from old barns) of the renovated old house. Just like good art, the house surprises, delights, and challenges the mind and the senses.



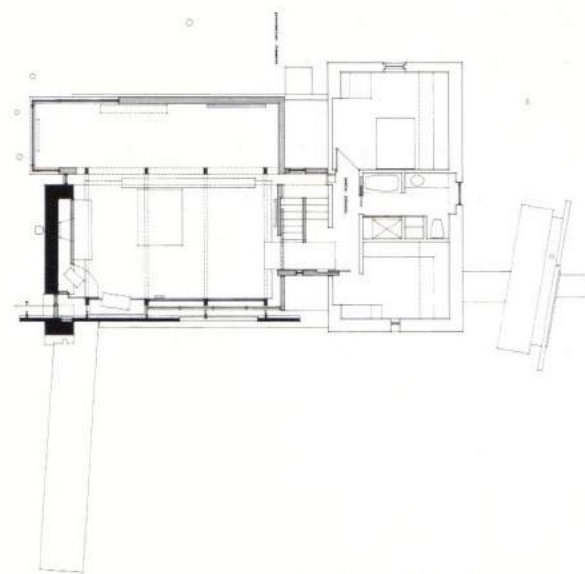
In a suburb of Philadelphia, in an area that has retained its rural character, this house transforms an eighteenth-century fieldstone farmhouse into a contemporary bachelor retreat and veritable art gallery. The rear of the house overlooks a koi pond. The main addition to the house (left of the original stone house) is glazed at the ground level, and clad in lead-coated copper on the second floor, concealing the master bedroom. The kitchen is an autonomous volume attached to the other side (right) of the farmhouse; its cedar siding emphasizes its independence and counterbalances the visual weight of the other exterior surfaces



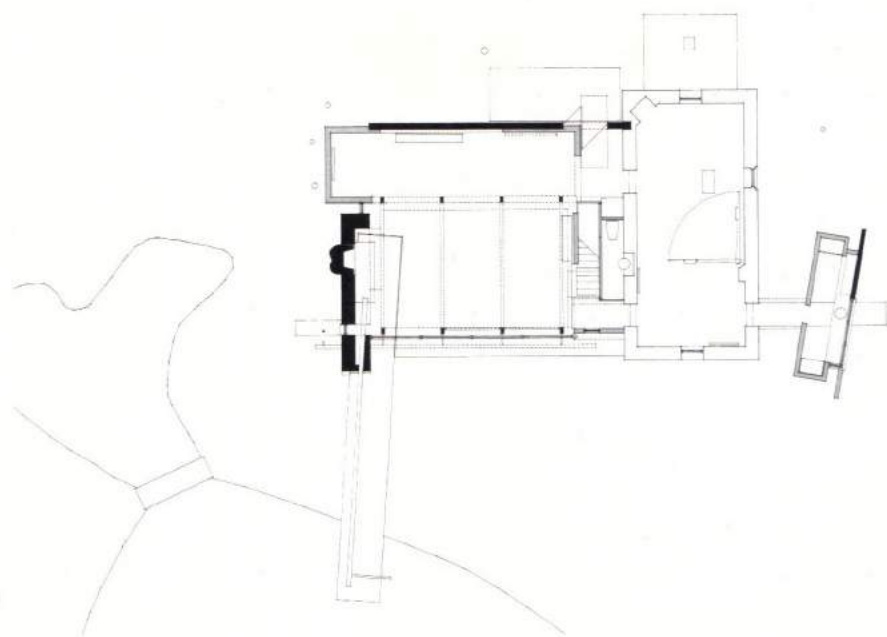
The front of the house (above) is reserved, fittingly, for the homeowner prizes his privacy. The architect deliberately chose new materials that would stand up to the old stone walls. The kitchen is a small, narrow volume that extends from the old farmhouse (facing page). Clad in cedar planks, the room sits on a plinth of concrete blocks. The kitchen is set off from the main house and is diminutive, because the homeowner rarely cooks or entertains.







Second-floor plan



Ground-floor plan

The ground floor of the main addition is awash in sunlight, not only from the expansive sliding glass walls facing the back garden, but also from the exposed aluminum grate on the ceiling, which allows light from the bedroom above to filter through. The original stone house serves as a gallery space (center of the ground-floor plan, below), as does the long rectangular space at the front of the house, adjoining the living room. The kitchen is detached from the main house (to its right). The master bedroom floats above the living room (the second-floor plan, above), which is supported by a steel-frame structure.



An eighteen-foot-high gallery space at the front of the house was designed to accommodate a large painting by Anselm Kiefer (above). The floor of the addition is a step below that of the original stone house, to mark the transition from old to new (facing page). The new part of the house is framed in exposed steel. A channel of river stones imparts the room a Zenlike calm.







The architect left the places where the old and new house meets the exposed (above), drawing power from the contrast of textures and time periods. The wall of the second-floor master bedroom curves outward, toward the rear pond (facing page). It gives added dimension to the otherwise rectilinear room, where the steel-frame structure is continued from the ground floor below.

