

Changing Skyline *By Inga Saffron*

A citified loft adapts itself to a suburban landscape

The typical flat-roofed modernist house nearly always sits in splendid isolation, usually atop a grassy hill. It's a product of suburbia. The typical loft apartment is nearly always carved out of the chaos of a decaying urban neighborhood. It's a product of the city.

But looking at the latest project by architect Wesley Wei, it appears these two forms are closer in spirit than one might think. In grafting a sleek addition to an 18th-century farmhouse in Gradyville, Delaware County, Wei has married the refined modernist box with a hard-edged, urban-pioneer aesthetic, creating a loft in a garden.

It's not really surprising that such a union should occur now. The pages of shelter magazines are filled with images of urban loft spaces, and they are frequently used as backdrops in films and television sitcoms seeking an edgy look. Wei, who lives and works in Old City, is surrounded by these castoffs of the machine age. Yet he remains committed to the modernist ideals forged when the machine was still a model for living.

See **SKYLINE** on E6



Perched over the living room of the Wei-designed house is a steel-mesh platform (upper right), the kind often found on ships. That's the floor of the bedroom. The owner reports that when he sleeps, he feels as if he is in a cloud hovering over the Earth.



The entrance to the Gradyville house shows how the addition blends with the main house – and fields outside – to make it more than a modernist box.



Architect Wesley Wei wanted the house to be part of nature. One way he achieved this was by extending parts of the house to the outside – for instance, the fireplace floor sweeps out to a dock.

Urban loft's suburban cousin

SKYLINE from El

Wei, who produces some of Philadelphia's more cutting-edge architecture, didn't set out to transport an urban loft to the country. His client merely asked him to design a new wing for his tiny stone farm-house in Gradyville, Delaware County, that would be worthy of his extensive collection of German neo-expressionist art. When Wei saw that the collection included somber, brooding works by artists such as Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz, Wei felt that the house should reflect some of their dark mood.

For him, that meant tough, industrial materials such as rusted steel, lead-coated copper, concrete and cinder block – the same materials found in many Old City factory buildings. But because he also wanted the house to be comfortable in its rustic environment, he tried to blur the boundaries between inside and out. By making one side of the house a two-story-high wall of glass, Wei creates the feeling that the pond and woods outside are part of the living room furniture.

His hybrid of industrial materials, clean modernist lines, and sensitivity to nature was so successful that the regional chapter of the American Institute of Architects gave Wei its Gold Award this winter. It's the first project in seven years to be deemed worthy of the institute's top prize. **Contractor Phillip Johnson** helped make sure that the craftsmanship matched the quality of the design.

While some architects like to sketch their ideas and others click on the computer, Wei pieces his buildings together like a jigsaw puzzle. He makes dozens of models until he finds one in which all the parts fit just right. In Gradyville, near Media, the result is a Mondrian-like composition of color, texture and materials. It's as much a three-dimensional collage as a house.

Unlike some architects, Wei isn't trying to create a fiction by making the new look old. The addition to the colonial-era farmhouse is staunchly in the modernist camp of Mies van der Rohe. What pulls it all that the colors of the new industrial materials are a perfect match for the warm, honey-and-cream

schist of the old farmhouse. The same approach could work well on Rittenhouse Square, where Wei has been hired to design an addition to the historic McIlhenny house.

The inside of the Gradyville house also borrows from the loft aesthetic. You enter through an 8-by-8-foot metal door into a soaring gallery space lined with polished steel panels. But step over a trough of river rocks and you are in the open-plan living room, gazing out the glass wall onto the sylvan landscape.

Perched over the living room is a steel-mesh platform, the kind often found on ships. That's the floor of the bedroom. The owner reports that when he lies down to go to sleep, he feels as if he is in a cloud hovering over the Earth. For all Wei's urban tendencies, he wanted the house to be part of nature. One way he achieved this was by extending parts of the house beyond the plane of the glass wall. What was a concrete fireplace floor in the living room, for instance, turns into a small dock for the pond on the other side of the glass wall. Within the house, he created sight lines connecting nature with indoor functions. Rooms with water, such as the bathroom and kitchen, overlook the pond, while the fireplace is lined up with the kitchen hearth.

Unlike the typical homeowner who craves a kitchen big enough for three generations of family, Wei's client didn't even want a kitchen table in the galley-sized space. Except for the large, dramatic art collection, a minimalist worldview prevails. There are a total of five pieces of furniture in the house. "It's spartan," Wei noted, "if you consider living with a \$1 million Kiefer spartan."

The house also feels luxurious without being swathed in the usual opulent marble and brass found in typical suburban McMansions. The addition cost just more than \$500,000 (less than usual for this type of project), thanks to the inexpensive industrial materials. Construction of an urban loft in the country turned out to be reasonable as well as beautiful.

Architecture critic Inga Saffron's column appears weekly. Her e-mail address is isaffron@phillynews.com.