

On Site

# Field of Vision

A NEO-FARMHOUSE SETTLES ON THE LAND WITH SUBTLETY AND PRECISION.

BY BRUCE D. SNIDER

It seems an unlikely place for a second home: ten acres of tree-bounded prairie in the farm country of northwest Indiana. No water frontage, no mountain scenery, no boating, skiing, golf, or tennis. But when one well-traveled Chicago couple laid eyes on this humble patch of grassland they knew they had finally found their special place on earth. They were attracted to the quiet open space, the psychological distance from their life in the city, the abundance of wildlife, and the beauty of a landscape slowly reverting from farmland to a wilder state.

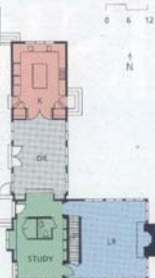
Simplicity, restraint, and respect for the landscape create harmony between this new home and its peaceful rural site.



SECOND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR



Handled like a suburban house lot, they knew, the land would lose its fragile magic. But the owners—a successful interior designer and her retired-executive husband—make no pretenses of being farm folk. For their country home, they sought a rare mix of rural simplicity and urban sophistication.

Given that program, says architect Dan Wheeler, it seemed perfectly natural that early design work quickly settled into “a study in vernacular.” Wheeler and project architect John Eck borrowed the simple gabled shapes, clapboard walls, divided-light windows, and standing-seam metal roofs of the archetypal Midwestern farmhouse. But here that familiar vocabulary is filtered through the architects’ modernist sensibility, which lends the straightforward forms and materials a studied simplicity.

The building’s location, atop a knoll at the edge of the woods, minimizes its intrusion on the meadow. A gravel drive winds through the trees before arriving at the house, which acts as a gateway to the clearing. The building itself consists of three simple masses: a two-story gabled element and two parallel single-story wings, one attached to the main house, the other a freestanding garage and woodworking shop. The wings face each other across a courtyard—inspired by the owners’ travels in Japan—whose level, manicured lawn and orderly ranks of maples stand in contrast with the random profusion of meadow grass and wildflowers outside.

Inside the house an even more ordered simplicity reigns. With the exception of a staircase, no spaces are devoted simply to circulation. Rooms flow one into another, each space tamed by a symmetry that exists at the service of function rather than at its expense. Each window

### Details: Simple, Right?

“As simple as that house looks,” says project architect John Eck, “it was so complicated.” Much of the work, in both design and construction, consisted of coaxing things into the precise alignment that separates simple elegance from a simple mistake. ■ The fence that borders the courtyard is a perfect example. Its heavy cedar-clad panels float, seemingly unsupported, between capped, cedar-wrapped posts. In fact, each hangs by four unobtrusive pin-and-eye connections that allow the panels to be demounted if necessary to accommodate a large party. It is a straightforward design, but one that relies on pinpoint execution. ■ The posts had to be absolutely plumb and perfectly spaced even though, to resist wind loads, they were sunk in three feet of concrete. Even the pin-and-eye hardware demanded finesse. “They’re a coarse thread,” says builder Tim Chupp, “so one revolution changes the alignment of the panels drastically.” Twisting the pieces in to achieve the right depth and the proper orientation simultaneously wasn’t rocket science. But like many other operations in this simple, difficult house, it required the most sophisticated tools in the custom builder’s arsenal: a steady hand and a patient mind.—B.D.S.

The building’s symmetry and clean details are easy on the eye, but they demanded a high degree of discipline and skill in construction.







Project Credits: Builder: Chupp Homes, Valparaiso, Ind.; Architect: Wheeler Kearns Architects, Chicago; Living space: 3,600 square feet; Site: 10 acres; Construction cost: Withheld; Photographer: Alan Shortall. Resources: Bathroom plumbing fittings: Dornbracht, Circle 175; Bathroom plumbing fixtures: Duravit, Circle 176; Kohler, Circle 177, and Porchet, Circle 178; Dishwasher: Bosch, Circle 179; Doors: Marvin, Circle 180; Fireplace: Rumford, Circle 181; Garbage disposer: In-Sink-Erator, Circle 182; Hardware: Baldwin, Circle 183; HVAC equipment: Carrier, Circle 184; Kitchen plumbing fittings: Chicago Faucets, Circle 185; Kitchen plumbing fixtures: Kohler, Circle 186; Oven: Thermador, Circle 187; Paints: Benjamin Moore, Circle 188; Refrigerator: Sub-Zero, Circle 189; Security system: ADT, Circle 190; Windows: Marvin, Circle 191.

seems naturally to frame an ideal view, while also fitting an ideal composition in the room itself and in the building elevation. The deepest impression is one of resolution, an absence of visual tension that exerts a calming influence.

Except, of course, if you have to build it.

"There wasn't anything in this job that wasn't a challenge," says builder Tim Chupp. Architecture that finds a place for everything soon exposes anything that is even slightly out of place. Clean lines and spare detailing leave precious little margin for error. As in any job, Chupp says, "You still make mistakes, but you try to catch as many as you can." The mistakes he refers to must be the kind that only he can see, because the finished product is squeaky clean. According to the owner, "He's one of those people who just can't do anything that's not right."

Far from simply executing the plans, Chupp devised ways to exceed the architects' specifications. If the clear cedar clapboard siding looks unusually crisp, it is due to an experiment Chupp performed, using a jig to produce glued finger joints in the longer runs. After a short time in contact with the architects, Chupp had read and fully absorbed their intent in the design. "I think he has a very deep aesthetic," the owner says. "He really does get it."

"Getting it," however, can lead to pitfalls of its own. Chupp did not like the number of control joints in the exposed concrete floor of the kitchen/dining wing. With a stiffer concrete mix, he calculated, he could get by with a single joint, under the partition between the dining room and kitchen. The new recipe worked, but with an unexpected side effect. "By cutting back on



the cement, we had less cream coming to the surface." A uniform color would be impossible. Looking at the curing slab and struggling to push the image of jackhammers from his mind, though, Chupp began to think the cloudy, mottled finish looked kind of nice. The owners and architects agreed, so Chupp gave the floor a wax finish and called it good. "Everybody who sees it asks if we can do it for them," Chupp says, "but I don't know how to do it again, because it was a mistake."

In this house, where the matter of control is carefully calibrated, Chupp's fortuitous mistake is the exception that proves the rule. The clients wanted a place that looked "unfussed over," Wheeler says. "But to make something look unfussed over is often the fussiest work possible." Here the effort has succeeded, from the effortless rationality of the interior, to the controlled nature of the courtyard, to the feral beauty of a meadow that, for now, will remain just as it is. ■



## The Builder: Gaining Momentum

Tim Chupp is the first to admit he could pick up easier jobs than houses as precise and demanding as this one. But building easier houses is not what the 38-year-old builder is after. In fact, seeking distinguished projects to showcase his abilities constitutes his core business strategy. ■ By maintaining a small crew—his staff includes at most four others—he guarantees a small number of clients round-the-clock access and the benefit of his 18 years of experience in the field. A project manager whose craftsmanship, Chupp insists, exceeds his own, frees the captain to pilot the ship without getting tangled in the deck lines. ■ But Chupp still takes a hand in working out the more challenging details on his projects. And that should come as no surprise. After choosing the right projects to build, building them right is his whole marketing plan. "My goal," he says, "is always selling that next job." —B.D.S.



The sophistication of the interior is tempered by views of the field outside, which is frequented by deer and flocks of wild turkey.