

A Cliff House Atop New River Gorge

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Sometimes it helps to have a client who's been trained as an architect.

That's what Cecilia Nichols of Charlottesville, Va.- based Formwork found when she designed developer Carl Frischkorn's home at Wild Rock, a new community overlooking the New River Gorge near Fayetteville, W. Va.

Frischkorn had studied with Michael Graves at Princeton, graduating in 1975. "He was much less reticent than the typical client," she says. "He speaks the language, he's renovated houses and built new houses before, and in general he was quite open to the new."

Moreover, he wanted a house that was distinctly modern, but not a rebuke of its place or the materials and typology of the rural West Virginia landscape. "We started out with a rural arrangement of several volumes, but stepped back to consolidate," she says.

They wanted a hard-material, modernist shell for the single structure's exterior, and lucked into an abundant supply of oily-grade heart pine at nearby Mountain Lumber . Salvaged from a textile mill in Georgia where machinery had been lubricated regularly with vegetable oil, it was basically steeped in the stuff all the way through. They used it for an exterior skin, in random widths.

"It's gorgeous, and we didn't have to finish it," she says. "The grain is very tight, and very straight."

Inside, the home was designed to accommodate the client's collection of works by West Virginia artists and artisans. "He knew he'd be entertaining, with a lot of conversations about West Virginia," she says.

With the advent of the economic downturn, Formwork has been engaged in interior design work, with an architectural component. At the Cliff House, they were fully engaged as consultants.

"To me, it's all part of the same continuum, so why shouldn't I help with some of the decisions?" she says. "He came with questions like the best layout for the living room. I'd sketch it out and he'd send pictures and ask what we thought."

When it came to furnishings, though, each came from a different school of thought. "We were kind of the design police," she says. "He's eclectic and we're more minimalists. He's more quirky, more colorful, with kind of a wiggle to it."

Wiggle and all, their Cliff House is a well-furnished modernist gem, perched atop a 900-foot drop down to the New River.



Siting for View, Light and Steep Slope

View, light and a very steep slope guided the siting of the Cliff House at Wild Rock on New River Gorge in West Virginia.

“The siting was a push-pull between the light and the view,” says Cecilia Nichols, partner in Charlottesville-based Formwork architects. “The site itself had a geometry that was very tricky once you isolated the view to the slope – we had to work to thread the house through there.”

She teamed up with landscape architect Evan Grimm of Nelson Byrd Woltz to place the home close to grade. Once stakes were in the ground, they moved it forward.

“The site is sloping away so fast on the view side that we decided the entry side should be at grade with the main living level of the house,” she says.

A cruciform in plan, the structure’s made up of two bars – one that makes a gesture across the grain of the site, and a smaller one along its contour. “That’s where the stairs and kitchen and dining room are,” she says. “If you look at the plan, it shifts where it hits that little bar, for the view where it looks out.”

She’s referring to a panoramic vista of the New River Gorge Bridge in the distance, spanning 3,030 feet across and rising 876 feet above the New River.

It’s a view that lingers in the distance from terrace, living room and bedroom. “If you imagine that whole cruciform having the most occupied spaces, the view is wagging the dog,” she says. “The client wanted to sleep outdoors as much as he could, so we made that corner as eroded as possible.”

From there, the remaining spaces trickle down in size as they move uphill, getting smaller and more private as they do.

The dining room juts out for another view – of four trees aligned with one another that the client calls his “four soldiers.” “We wanted a conversation with them, so the dining room adjusts to the lowest two so he can have a panorama to the other two,” she says. “The dining room is 18 inches higher than the living room, so it has a prow-of-the-ship kind of view.”

The architect selected her precedents carefully, looking at the work of Antonio Citterio, as well as Carlo Scarpa and especially Peter Zumthor.

“There’s a Zumthor project where he just cared about getting the proportion right, and the rhythm of the siding, and we looked hard at that,” she says. “In terms of the attitude of the house to its site and its materials, and the different dimensions of the siding and how they came together, that’s who we’re having a conversation with.” It’s an animated one, at that.



Master-Planning a Daunting Landscape

The assignment must have seemed as challenging as scaling the 876-foot-high New River Gorge itself: Develop a master plan for Wild Rock, a new community on a 655-acre plateau high above the New River, covered in native sandstone, forest and streams, all spread out across a wildly diverse topography. And make it sustainable.

“It’s absolutely stunning – it’s a daunting landscape,” says Warren Byrd, partner in Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects. “The client wanted to develop an outdoor-oriented, sustainable set of homes where people might want to live full time, and not just for second homes.”

Byrd looked and listened hard at what the land had to say, because the client wanted the property treated sensitively, minimally and well.

He responded with a set of guidelines for development in what he calls a pattern book.

Miles and miles of tracks and trails are as least disruptive as possible. The community plan is relatively loose, and based primarily on natural structure. The idea was to understand features like a stream corridor and let the community grow out of it, rather than trying to force something onto it.

“We gave it guidelines for setbacks,” he says. “Each property lot – with stream, valley, trees or forest – has a certain setback to respect the view inside to out and outside to in. People want a view of that gorge, but you don’t want people looking up at houses from down there.”

The guidelines offer direction for siting a home, and knit access lanes into topography with as little impact as possible.

Equally important is the issue of stormwater management, since every drop of water at Wild Rock ends up eventually in the New River, the Ohio River, the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. Guidelines address that issue also.

“Every step of way, you can slow the problems with water by managing the stormwater on site,” he says. “You can collect and harvest rainwater from the house with minimum impact. For the aquifer and the sandstone, it’s important.”

Water can be managed with pervious surfaces, native plants and cisterns below grade, collected or infiltrated slowly. “It’s incremental – you could do it on one site, but if you do it on 30, it adds up,” he says.

For a development the size of Wild Rock, that’s critical. The initial phase of its development currently calls for 50 homes. Eventually, there could be as many as 100 up on the plateau.

And each will have an impact, good or bad, on the watershed below.

