



MODERN MAGIC

Scenic Spa Creek sets the stage for a bold, minimalist Annapolis abode designed by GriD architects

*Text by Julie Sanders
Photography by Brycen Fischer*



The house (these pages) perches above Spa Creek. Its two volumes are clad in corrugated metal while the living area linking them is paneled in cedar. Champion Hruby Landscape Architects designed the hardscape and Walnut Hill Landscape Company selected plantings and layered the steep slope with jute beneath native grasses to control erosion.

Nancy and Travis Johnson lived in New York City for 25 years before “escaping,” as they describe it, to the quaint, historic Annapolis neighborhood of Eastport. They wanted a waterfront home within walking distance of the district’s shops and restaurants. And Travis, a Naval Academy graduate, wanted to be able to keep a sailboat nearby.

The couple purchased a property on Spa Creek that perfectly met their requirements—but it came with a dilapidated, one-story dwelling, so they decided to raze it and start afresh. While Nancy wasn’t itching to build a house, “it was on my bucket list,” she admits. A fashion designer, she brimmed with ideas for a dynamic, modern structure and specified a collaborative design process. After turning away architects who “wanted to tell us what we should live in,” she recalls, the couple tapped Alick Dearie and Brian Grieb of GriD architects for the job.

“Nancy wanted to work with someone who’d really listen,” says Dearie. “Unlike most of our clients, she preferred to source everything herself. It was like a jazz duet—she would do something and we would react to it.”

The narrow, quarter-acre lot—along with myriad site restrictions—dictated the form the house would take. The architects devised the two-bedroom abode to be restrained and efficient, encompassing just 2,200 square feet of living space. It’s organized into two boxy volumes—one contains the garage and the other the kitchen, pantry and dining area with the master suite above. These volumes are linked by the living room, staircase and upstairs office area. Setback requirements allowed the house to step up in height from the street side to the water side, creating an opportunity for window walls on both the first and second floors that dramatically frame panoramic views of Spa Creek.

After years living in an edgy, urban environment, Nancy and Travis, a technology consultant, were drawn to an industrial aesthetic. “We wanted a lot of tactility, but not necessarily from fabrics. I love the look of metal and what it becomes in different lights,” Nancy explains.

“That was really the project’s jumping off point,” Dearie notes. “We always try to simplify the material palette; here, we used wood, steel, metal and concrete. If you have more than four materials, it’s probably too many.”

Architecture: Alick Dearie, AIA, NCARB, LEED AP BD+C; Brian Grieb, AIA, NCARB, LEED AP BD+C, GriD architects pc, Annapolis, Maryland. Builder: Darren Kornas, ThinkMakeBuild, Annapolis, Maryland. Landscape Architecture: Robert Hruby, ASLA, Champion Hruby Landscape Architects, Annapolis, Maryland. Landscape Design & Installation: Walnut Hill Landscape Company, Annapolis, Maryland.



Clockwise from opposite, bottom: Nestled beside the garage, the front entry appears behind a low, raw-steel wall intentionally left to rust from exposure to the elements. The living room features a sculptural staircase of steel and oak; an Eames Lounge Chair and Ottoman take in the view. The custom, hot-rolled steel fireplace is adorned with an antique Thai wagon wheel made of wood that, says owner Nancy Johnson, “offsets the metal and adds warmth.” A concrete bench extends from the outdoors in.



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The exterior is clad in horizontal cedar planks and expanses of corrugated metal in a matte finish. A concrete bench on the back deck extends inside behind the fireplace. The building’s steel inner structure is exposed in an overhang above the entry. A giant pivot front door leads into the foyer, where the architects repeated the corrugated metal surface along one wall. A short hall leads into the main living space, which encompasses seating and dining areas and a spare, minimalist kitchen—all unified by wide-plank, light-oak floors.

The sculptural staircase, with cantilevered steps made of exposed tubular steel and oak, creates a focal point. “We wanted something unique that would show the way it was made,” Nancy recounts. “The steel on the stairs connects to the steel tubes within the walls of the house.”

The living area also features a hot-rolled-steel fireplace that Dearie calls “a labor of love.” Designed by the architects, it’s an insert surrounded by a custom-designed fireplace wall with a screen that opens like a door. Nancy had the same tack bolts that hold the building’s steel structure together welded to the front as hooks for fireplace tools.

The minimalist kitchen combines sleek, white cabinetry with stainless-steel appliances and a stainless-steel island with a rustic, poured-concrete countertop. A narrow, stool-height table of rolled

steel provides casual dining space. Clutter disappears into a capacious pantry closet, leaving the kitchen pristine.

The master bedroom takes full advantage of the view, with a balcony and a wall of windows that wraps around one corner to take in the bend in the creek. When the wide pivot door to the master suite is open, the vista also beckons from the hall. A pocket door encloses the guest room, while the door to the guest bath boasts bold, conspicuous hinges. In this house, “everything down to the locks is on the outside,” Nancy notes. “I like the idea of inner mechanisms showing on the outside. They break up the white expanses of the walls and doors.”

To manage storm water, Dearie and Grieb installed green roofs on each of the home’s volumes. A large window in the upstairs office overlooks the green roof over the garage. “We love looking out when the roof garden is lush green,” says Travis. “It changes all the time; it’s like a piece of art in itself.”

Accessible through sliding-glass doors in the living area, the ipe deck flows into the backyard. Stairs lead down to the dock where the Johnsons keep a small boat “for tooling into town for dinner,” Nancy says. She adds, “Sometimes we look around and can’t believe we live here. It’s pretty cool.” ↓



The open interiors are visible from the ipe deck (above); all the furniture, including the Room & Board sofa, is from the owners’ previous home. In the kitchen (opposite), Bertoia stools pull up to the rolled-steel table, with the stainless-steel island beyond. To the left, the dining area is visible.



Louvered cedar planks on the stair landing window (left) admit light while providing privacy from the neighbors; Aspen Brands light fixtures hang overhead. The couple's home office (above) is open to the stairwell. The uncluttered master bedroom (opposite), with its corner window and ipe balcony, is all about the views. The bedstead is from e15. The master bath (top) juxtaposes a tub by Jacuzzi and sleek Decolav basins with a live-edge wood vanity top and shelves, reclaimed from oak trees felled on a friend's property.