

farmhouse for the future

A family downsizes (but not too much) with a Bergen County prize-winner that marries spacious modernity and cozy tradition.

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The main floor achieves its airiness not just with large windows but also via a series of ingenious lighting choices, including custom-built lighted beams and seven black Gabriel Scott pendants, hung just below the dormers. The raw concrete on the large two-sided fireplace adds surprising warmth.



It all started with the property: two-and-a-half leafy acres of gently sloping lawn surrounded by lush woods, with not another house in sight. Seeing it for the first time, Elle Rubach couldn't believe it was part of densely populated Bergen County. "It felt very remote, as if we were in the country," she says. "But in fact it was just five minutes from a very popular restaurant and a busy shopping center." Rubach was smitten.

She and her husband, Joseph (JoJo), had already decided that if they could find the right property, they'd build a new house on it. They weren't exactly empty-nesters, but two of their three daughters were already in college and Elle knew the house they were living in at the time—a sprawling shingle-style home that conjured the Hamptons in design and in size—would be too big for a couple, even with a dog, a cat and daughters inclined to drop by and stay over. Many of their friends were already talking about selling their houses and moving into city apartments, but the Rubachs loved to entertain and didn't think they'd find an apartment roomy enough for their well-attended get-togethers.

This page: The bar is deliberately free-standing so guests can cluster around it on all four sides; the zinc top is extra deep to accommodate dining as well as imbibing. Behind the bar, the glass doors of the liquor cabinet, which slide open and closed tatami-style, echo the design of the house's many mullioned windows. Opposite page: The custom couch was created with entertaining in mind, with a wide, sturdy back that can double as informal seating.

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“I wanted a home that was gracious and still had that entertaining vibe, but with a completely different feel to it, one where my husband and I could always be in the same room,” says Elle. She envisioned an open-concept ground floor, with connected outdoor porches and a kitchen visible throughout—a place that could accommodate lots of guests but still feel cozy when it was just the two of them.

She also knew who she wanted to design the house: Kurt Otto, principal of E/N/V Architects in Englewood Cliffs, who had designed her previous home. The only big question remaining was the style of the house. The Rubachs wanted something sleek and contemporary, but the property was in a historic district with strict zoning

This page: A focal point in the kitchen is the capacious indoor grill, clad in glazed tile; it can be raised and lowered to achieve the desired cooking temperature. Opposite page, top: A large stainless-steel vent hood dominates the chef’s kitchen, which offers ample seating at the island (under a pair of Holly Hunt pendants) and around the small marble-topped table (from Design Within Reach). Bottom: Sliding glass doors add to the intimacy of the formal dining room. The original Cliff Young table is flanked by walnut-and-leather Poliform “Ipanema” chairs. The homeowners chose to forgo a traditional chandelier in favor of an illuminated tray ceiling and a series of lighted beams.

standards, so the architecture would have to suit not just the couple’s vision but the town’s as well.

In the end, it was the property that dictated the design. On vacation with his family in California’s Napa Valley, Otto was relaxing in the contemporary winery-style farmhouse they’d rented when it hit him. “Because the Rubach house would be sitting on a big, sprawling lot with a country feel,” he says, “I realized that a contemporary farmhouse would be perfect.” With luck, the house would accommodate

the Rubachs’ modern wish list yet have sufficient traditional appeal to please the town. Before he could pass along the suggestion, Elle called him with the same thought.

The resulting house—which won a prestigious American Institute



of Architects award—is an ingenious intermingling of traditional and contemporary. On the exterior, board-and-batten siding, a series of dormers and gables, and natural stone wainscoting evoke quintessential farmhouse style, while inside, a cathedral ceiling, exposed beams, and large, four-over-four mullioned windows open up the space to light and air, striking a more modern tone. The palette throughout is neutral—every room is painted in Benjamin Moore’s Frostine, a white that, for Elle, brings to mind the walls of an art gallery. “I knew that the only things I was going to have in the house in terms of color would be the art on the walls,” she says.

Just as Elle had hoped, the two-and-a-half-story house (the master

bedroom is set a half level above the first floor to minimize the climb) manages to feel both airy and intimate. To delineate the main living area on the open-concept first floor, Otto designed a tall, two-way fireplace in poured concrete that rises to the height of an exposed ceiling beam. “It’s a subtle buffer between the family room and the formal dining room,” he says. “It accentuates the cathedral ceiling and the beams, but there’s still a gracious flow around it.”

The dining room is part of the open concept yet achieves an almost clubby feel thanks to the glass and steel doors that can either enclose it or open it up to the rest of the house. Otto deliberately dropped the dining-room ceiling to nine feet—because, he says, “no



This page: The home’s upper level houses bedrooms for the homeowners’ three grown daughters, who frequently spend the night. Here, an upholstered white platform bed (the Cloud, from RH Modern) appears to float under a series of pendants from West Elm; a vision of the green landscape beyond the window enhances the room’s overall feeling of tranquility. Opposite page: The house’s basement level is home to Elle Rubach’s piano, which originally belonged to her mother. Behind are posters from Broadway musicals Rubach attended with her music-loving daughters. The basement is connected to the main level by a glass staircase and feels very much a part of the living area.



one wants to eat under a 21-foot ceiling.”

To please JoJo Rubach, a passionate amateur cook, Otto designed a walk-up indoor grill for the restaurant-style kitchen. So that the kitchen would blend naturally with the surrounding décor, Elle chose clean-lined cabinets, the lowers in stainless steel and the uppers in walnut, stained a dark gray that’s nearly black. At more casual events, guests can sit—and eat—at a large kitchen island or around a zinc-topped bar at the other end of the floor.

Wherever they choose to sit, they can’t help but take in the house’s extraordinary surroundings. “From any angle, from any window, you can see the woods and the sky and the trees,” notes Elle. The ever-changing landscape, she says, is the house’s true décor, set off by the minimalist interior. “Everywhere you walk throughout the house,” she says, “you have to stop and look. It’s just a very tranquil place to be.”

This page: In a guest bathroom, an accent wall of gray-hued porcelain tile (also on the floor) backs a rectangular sink and mirror, here offering a reflection of an original photograph of Marilyn Monroe. Opposite page: In the master bathroom, the clear glass of the stall shower allows an unimpeded view of the surrounding greenery. For their reflectivity and simple lines, the homeowners chose white Thassos marble tiles for the walls and floor; a his-and-hers pair of vanities in statuary marble, each with a white drop-in Lacava sink, flank the shower and bath.