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ISSN 1091-7002
www.metropolismag.com



Metal House on the Prairie

A Phoenix designer puts a contemporary spin on agrarian Wisconsin architecture

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At an age when some men might start thinking about retirement, Dr. Robert Geller was still looking for a place to settle down. A medical oncologist whose career kept him jumping from one city to the next, Geller was nearing 50 and still stowing his belongings in a storage locker when he decided to join a practice in Appleton, Wisconsin. "The upper Midwest has always been very attractive to me," says the Cincinnati native. "I love the distinct seasons, the bucolic landscape and

the honesty and integrity of the people."

The physician bought an 18-acre tract of farmland on the outskirts of town and asked Phoenix architect Wendell Burnette to design a home for the site. Having studied at the Wisconsin branch of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin, Burnette was familiar with the stoic dairy barns and silvery silos that dominate the region, and he proposed building a house that echoed those simple agrarian forms.

Sheathed in ribbons of lustrous steel, the 3,300-square-foot structure (not including the garage or screened porch) looks both defiant and demure, its finish reflecting the surroundings like a chameleon. "From a distance it recedes into the landscape of silos and barns and utility structures; it only reveals its purpose when you're up close," says Burnette. The architect set the living spaces on the second floor to maximize the view, then divided them with partitions instead of full walls to preserve the sense of a single, unbroken space. "I would like to feel that I'm living in SoHo in the middle of a cornfield," Geller instructed the architect. "Building a contemporary house in a Wisconsin cornfield, I can't be worrying about resale value."

The great room -- flanked by a fire pit at one end and the master suite and study at the other -- is anchored along the long wall by the kitchen, where all but the essentials are secured behind custom cabinets covered in American black walnut. The wood's rotary-cut finish emphasizes the grain, offering an organic counterpoint to the painted-metal deck ceiling and dusky concrete floors (tinted to echo the local soil). "This is the only wood in the house, and Wendell felt it was important to really make a luxurious statement," Geller observes.

Shelves filled with collections of contemporary ceramics, coffeepots and teakettles grace the concrete wall behind the kitchen. The brackets supporting the shelves slide into vertical slots between the blocks, allowing Geller to change the shelving on a whim. Abstract canvases and a towering ceramic sculpture by Michael Lucero provide the sole notes of color in the great room, which is furnished with contemporary classics by the likes of Mies van der Rohe, Ingo Maurer and Philippe Starck that Geller collected over the years.

The north side of the building abuts the natural tree line (to protect the house from wind); the south facade is dominated by a 96-foot curtain wall of azure-tinted glass. The concrete floor and back wall soak up the sun's rays during the day and release the heat at night, staving off the chill on all but the coldest winter days (when radiant floors or a heat pump kick in). In winter, excess heat is captured near the ceiling and channeled into the guest rooms downstairs; in summer, openings set low on the south wall and high on the north wall ventilate the house naturally.

Conscious of the area's agricultural heritage, Geller rents his land to a local farmer, who plants it with a rotating repertoire of corn, soybeans and alfalfa. Geller savors the seasonal changes in the landscape, and even contributed some of his own: He added an orchard of 70 apple trees, inspired by the ones he used to pick from as a youth. "When you build your first house at age 50, you've stored up a lot of memories you want that house to have," Geller muses.

In fact, this wasn't his first foray into home construction. Five years earlier, Geller tried building a modernist house in a gated community outside Kansas City. A nervous design committee held the plans hostage for two years, then irate neighbors -- accustomed to Tudors and Mediterranean villas -- filed an injunction against the project, delaying it for another year. By the time the home was completed, Geller wanted nothing to do with the neighborhood, so he sold it without ever moving in. Is it any wonder he chose to set his next home in a cornfield?

An amateur astronomer with a master's in astrophysics from MIT (to go with his Harvard medical degree), Geller wanted the house to include an observatory for his 14-inch telescope. To minimize vibration, Burnette placed a 32-foot concrete column beside the house and set the observation platform on top, so it hovers just above the roof deck. Geller accesses the roof via a silo ladder in the study -- an approach designed to discourage visitors from wandering up there on their own (see opposite, top left).

More accommodating is the recessed porch off the kitchen, where Geller and his friends can gather by the barbecue, sheltered from mosquitoes by a seamless expanse of Australian insect screen.

Geller's love of design extends to automobiles, such as the seductively soigné Morgan *Aero 8* he keeps in the garage. Since the space (which includes a pottery studio) takes up half the ground floor, Burnette wanted the door to blend seamlessly with its surroundings. In keeping with the barn motif, the architect designed a sliding door for the opening, but updated the look with translucent panels of laminated glass -- the same material used to make windshields, which seemed more than moderately appropriate.

"Initially I thought, 'A glass garage door in Wisconsin? My God, what are we thinking?'" Geller says. "But it's a major part of the home. When the house is lit up at night it looks incredible."

Although he loves his house, Geller's peripatetic nature eventually kicked in. "Some people are born under a wanderin' star," he says. He's now living primarily in Albuquerque but visits the Wisconsin house regularly, strolling the land, tending the orchard or cruising the countryside in his Morgan. "It's become a real refuge for me," Geller says. It's also given him something he's never had before: roots. "When people say 'Where's your home?' I say 'Wisconsin.' That's where I feel most at peace."

What the Pros Know

Architect Wendell Burnette covered the Geller house in a building material called Galvalume Plus. It's a steel siding product treated with an alloy of zinc and aluminum to prevent corrosion, then finished with a clear sealant that preserves its natural luster. More commonly used on commercial structures, Galvalume will easily last 50 years or more and requires no maintenance, making it ideal for a climate with extreme temperatures, such as Wisconsin's. The siding can require special training to apply, and care must be taken to prevent bulges or dents, which will be accentuated by the reflective finish. Channels along the side of each piece

snap into the neighboring piece, forming a continuous surface; a self-healing ice and water shield underneath prevents moisture from permeating the house. Despite its industrial look, Galvalume is not inexpensive, falling somewhere between good shingled siding and a masonry exterior in cost. "You're paying a bit of a premium," Burnette says, "but it pays dividends in the future."

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