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# HOME

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What's the real foundation of good home design?  
For one prominent architect, it's building in harmony  
with the great outdoors itself **By Alexandra Hall**

# THE Perfect Setting



#### STEP BY STEP

Architect Lyman Perry takes a seat on the staircase in his Berwyn office, ABOVE. His historic home in Newtown Square, built in the 1720s and designed to fit into the natural landscape, became one of his pet projects, OPPOSITE.







Some homes are all about a particular color scheme or a motif tastefully reiterated throughout several rooms. Some homes bow to the thrust of one geographic or cultural influence or are built to showcase one heart-stopping piece of furniture. And while those are all undeniably sound and effective design techniques, the work of architect Lyman Perry points to another, far more enduring source of inspiration: a home's natural environment.

Portrait photograph by Bill Cramer | Interior photographs by Jeffrey Totaro



standing, Perry's clients come to him for three key things: his keen eye, ability to work with clients and design talent. And Perry maintains that they are driven by his love for the natural world.

"EVER SINCE I COULD REMEMBER, I'VE ALWAYS LOVED THE outdoors," says the 64-year-old architect. "When I was a kid, I always had to sit by the car window so I could look out and see nature go by."

Born in California, Perry moved with his family to a handful of places during his *(continued on page 114)*

#### COMFY QUARTERS

A view from the dining room down the hall provides a closer look at the interior stonework, ABOVE, while the fireplace in the library, with its warm wood floor and mantel, offers a welcome respite, BELOW. Natural sunlight streams into the living room, OPPOSITE.







“A lot of architecture tries to be an individual structure, but I think it’s incredibly important to work with the landscape—to build something that is creative, but feels with, not just on, its surroundings. That way it’s not a big white cube sitting on the land,” he says.

That philosophy has become the building blocks, literally and figuratively, for some of the most beautiful structures in the Boston and Nantucket areas. And it has made Perry’s masterful works some of the most sought-after around. Since he started designing buildings more than 35 years ago, word of Perry’s talent has spread like a breeze across the Eastern seaboard, from the grand-scale estates scattered around Philadelphia to the grandiose beach houses of Brant Point on Nantucket.

But big names and glamorous addresses notwith-

#### DEFINING SPACES

Large oil landscapes bring the blue skies of summer into the living and dining rooms of Perry’s Newtown Square home year-round, LEFT. The rich wood tones of the furniture and trim provide a warm accent to the white walls and stone fireplace, BELOW, BOTTOM LEFT.



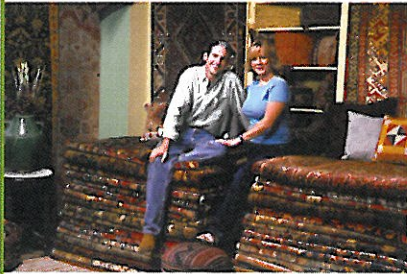








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## The Perfect Setting

*continued from page 68*

childhood, including Washington, D.C.; Williamsburg, Virginia; and the eastern shore of Maryland. "That was the most influential area for my work," he says. "The ocean and land there have stayed with me."

That influence is undeniably present in both his personal and professional lives. For Perry, every day starts at 4 a.m., when he wakes before the first rays of sunrise to go rowing, spending an hour and a half on the Schuylkill. Splitting his time between Newtown Square and Nantucket, Perry says regular rowing helps connect him to his surroundings and is one of the most vital things he does. "It gives me energy, makes me feel alive, and gets me through the day," he says.

In fact, as much of Perry's career has been spent on the water as off. After a childhood spent aiming to be a naval officer (like his father) and practicing serious rowing, he was stationed in Philadelphia to train for the 1964 Olympics. During that time, he became curious about architectural design and applied to study at the University of Pennsylvania. "I went over and took a few courses. Then I applied, and they eventually took me in conditionally," he recalls. Within his first year, Perry had won a medal from the school for his designs, and soon thereafter was asked to teach. "I didn't consider myself enough of an inspiration to teach," he says, "but I did it anyway."

Not only did he teach, but he co-founded new groundbreaking courses, most notably one exploring design and the environment in 1970. "What a good building should do," he says, "is enhance your experience visiting the entire site." He continued teaching for 15 years, all the while building homes—and a strong reputation—at his design practice.

LIKE MOST OF PERRY'S CHOICES IN RECREATION, much of his work is based around

the sea, the land and their pivotal place in his regional style. "Being an architect, I can't specialize in any one thing," he says. But bringing nature into a building—through carefully angled windows, the depth of light they let in, the dimensions of particular spaces in relation to the land around them—is his way of striving to create memorable architecture.

Included in the projects he has finished around the Philadelphia area is his own home in Newtown Square. He has built ponds on the property and taken design cues from the period of the home's original year. "It's a historic house indigenous to the area," he says. "And in renovating it, I've learned something from 1720. The house was oriented to work with the environment and weather. The structure is meant to bring the winter sun deeply into the house—in the days when it was built, you had to pay attention to things like where the heat built up in a house, where the sun rose and how the light came in."

So in winter, during the coldest part of the day, the sun is heading straight into the house. "It's an example of working with the setting," he says. "So many of these Pennsylvania stone barns are so beautifully sited, and I try and do the same thing when I design a home."

Keeping that in mind, Perry insists that the architecture of any building should be accommodating. "It should allow for you to appreciate it in multiple ways," Perry says. "Like a window seat, for example. It's there as a pillow prop, a place to sit and a place to look out. It's never about just solving a problem; it's that spark of inspiration that makes a space different from anything else."

Creating beautiful homes in the Philadelphia area is easy, he says, because of the rich history of indigenous architecture that embraces the natural surroundings. "The old homes around here are so beautiful," he says. "They are designed to complement their courtyards and terraces, and are somewhat evocative of the English Cotswold houses—except they use local



materials like schist and slate roofs.”

Much of Perry’s work is a contemporary interpretation of such early (and substantial—many have walls that are 18 inches thick) houses.

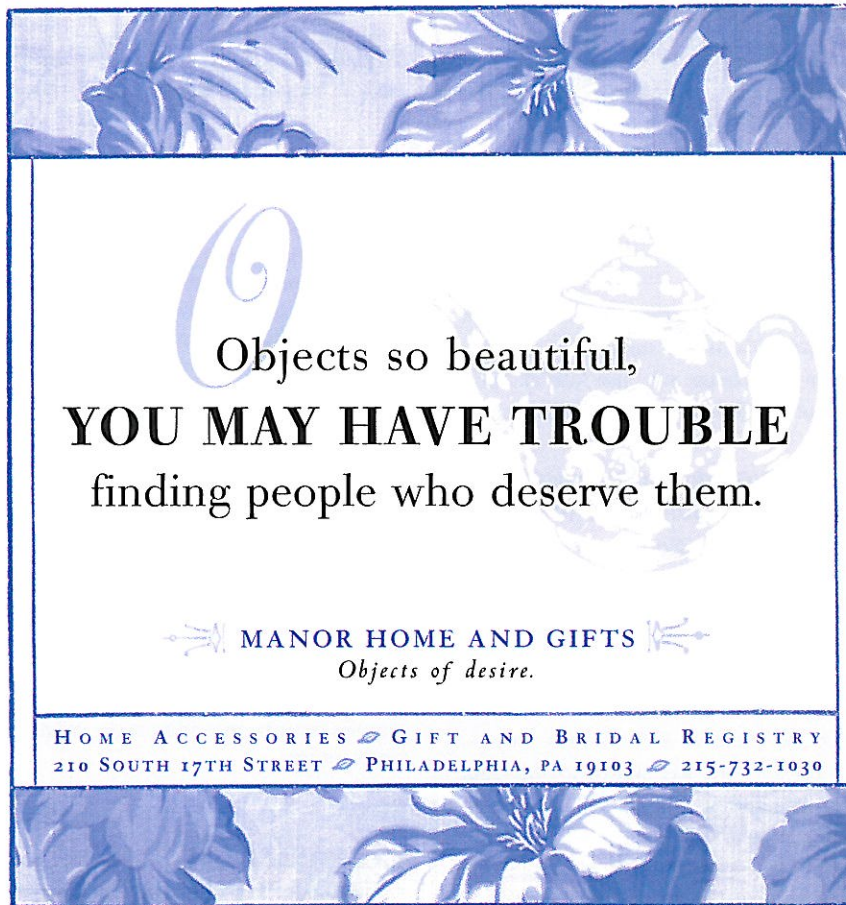
Another project Perry cites as an example of such inspiration: the Benchmark School in Media, which he designed in the 1970s for learning-disabled children. His wife, Kate, was a founding teacher. “These were kids who were alienated in their normal lives,” he says. To give them a sense of connection, Perry placed the library in the heart of the building, surrounded by the outlying 10 rooms. A decade later, the school won a prize from then-President Reagan—an award for excellence in education. “We did it for only \$30 a square foot, and at a time when design like that was unheard of,” he says, adding that the most satisfying result was the feedback from children.

It is the simplicity of living that best defines a space for Perry. “I enjoy the efficiency of living,” he says. “I don’t want to be overhoused.”

When Perry says he values feedback from his clients, that’s often because they share a common goal. Before starting any design work, he meets with them in their homes to explore colors, textures, forms and to get a sense of their aesthetic. “A lot of developers pick a house out of a plan book or magazine, and they just plop it on the site. I don’t like to work like that,” says Perry, who has about 20 employees. “And likewise, some clients come to me and say, I know exactly what I want—in which case an architect doesn’t bring anything to it. I prefer not to work that way, either.”

Why? For Perry, building homes is about a personal and organic process.

“I’m not setting any new trends,” he says. “But I like to think I’m good at the vernacular of the locale. I want to create something that’s memorable, that creates a feeling and speaks to you in some subconscious way.” ■



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