



A private art gallery is the centerpiece of this contemporary home designed by architect Kevin Pfirman. The courtyard surrounding a spreading live oak tree was created by Tony Parker, Classic Landscapes.

An appetite for
art and artifacts

by Marimar McNaughton

photography by Joshua Curry | assisted by Andrew Sherman



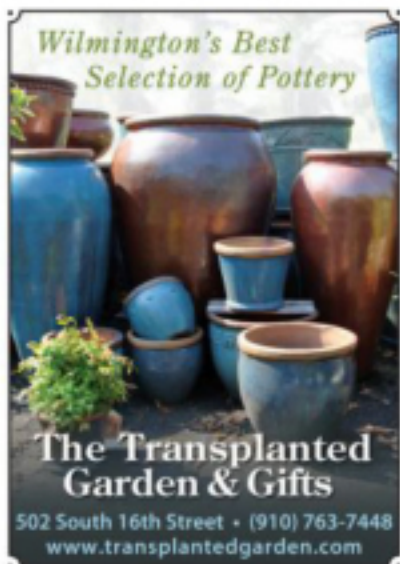
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The hollow plink of slit drums calls villagers to gather in ritual fashion. The elaborate flourish of melodic piano keys draws listeners to fashionable rituals.

The slit drum—lanky breadfruit timbers carved with totemic facial features—represents a rite of passage to the indigenous New Hebrides people and their ceremonial culture. It is said that when a man accumulates enough wealth, represented by his herd of pigs, he pays for a drum to be made and advances to a higher social status.

You will find no pigs—ducks perhaps, but no swine—beyond the threshold.

But the incongruous pairing of the Vanuatu artifacts with an 1854 rosewood low signature Steinway box grand piano, yes, amid other juxtapositions at this Joshua's Landing contemporary waterfront home, a repository for its residents' eclectic collection of artifacts, antiquities and fine art.

For the first time in their lives, the intrepid worldly couple hired an architect, Kevin Pfirmen, to create a house, with the gallery at the center, that would showcase their prized acquisitions amassed during decades of living and traveling, in the continental U.S. and abroad. The slit drums and Steinway range—like their cultivated palate—from one extreme to the other. Tribal masks and figures are displayed on pedestals on

A modern salon with vaulted, cypress clad ceilings, clerestory windows and Cape Fear Riverwood floors sets the stage for a curious collection of fine art and artifacts collected during decades of living and traveling abroad.



The slit drums and Steinway range—like their cultivated palate—from one extreme to the other with the gallery at the center. Tribal masks and figures are displayed on pedestals on an Asian carpet that blankets a Cape Fear Riverwood floor.

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an Asian carpet that blankets a Cape Fear Riverwood floor. Hundreds of pieces of cypress form the puzzling vaulted ceiling that soars above it. Buttressed by exposed beams, the upper walls of this private art gallery are perforated with clerestory windows. Three of the gallery's interior walls are lined with paintings. The fourth wall, framed by posts, opens to the adjacent corridor.

Like an orange peeled, the architecture reveals an exposed structure—a collection of sections—and supports the massing of the house, where the wings—one for living and entertaining, the other for sleeping and repairing—converge in the middle, surrounding the gallery and its adjacent dining room.

The floorplan supports the wandering of guests from the gallery and the dining room into the corridor. The corridor's glazed exterior doors open onto a covered porch. Porch steps lead down into a secluded courtyard. Looking back at the home from the courtyard, the gallery and dining room sparkle like jewels inviting guests to float into and out of Mort and Judy Neblett's stunning Hewletts Creek home.

Judy Neblett spent a year working with Pfirman to design the structure.

"It is the first time we don't have a formal living room," Mort says. "We had been traditional people," he continues. "It's a fun house."

Judy describes their previous home, a historic dwelling on the Intracoastal Waterway and Masonboro Sound. "You came into a small entryway and then it was a two-story gallery," but their appetite for art and antiques outgrew the space. "Here we were seven years ago, not ready to get rid of our art. Our kids can't take it; it's too big. We realized we needed to build."

Having lived abroad for long periods—the Nebletts once visited the home of silk industrialist Jim Thompson. Thompson's famed House on the Klong in Bangkok was assembled from multiple Thai country



Dinner guests may drift into the adjoining corridor supported by cypress columns. The interior architecture is reiterated by the structure of the adjacent, engaged porch, below, which looks over the courtyard, a section of which is pictured left.



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dwelling, which Thompson filled with collectibles. In spite of his beautiful objects, the house itself had an enviable sense of calm for which the Nebbets had searched the globe.

"I spent a lot of my life traveling overseas on business," Mort says. Using Thompson's Bangkok house as a model, Mort adds, "Kevin did exactly what we asked him to do."

Judy explains, "We like to entertain, so we had to have a dining room, and Mort has ducks, so we had to have a duck room, so that's how it evolved."

Having owned a gallery for a short while, Judy, a former art history major, says she and Mort have collected art forever. "Everything we have means a lot to us and our life," she says. "We've been married for almost 46 years, so we've really collected for a long time."

The Nebbets also possess an unbridled reverence for place. From his early days as a Wilmingtonian and a Wrightsville Beach boy, and her childhood spent in Pennsylvania's Brandywine River region, the Nebbets honored the natural setting.



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Case in point, at the far corner of the home's living wing is Mort's office.

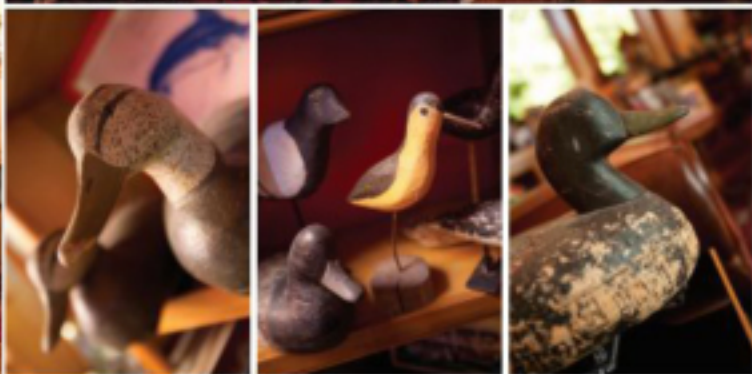
"It's a great place to have an office," he says. Gesturing toward the view of the creek, he explains, "This is tidal, so later in the day it will be completely high; you won't see any of the oyster beds."

Neblett's office, his third consecutive duck room, is tinted Mandarin red, trimmed in crisp white. His array of relic working waterfowl and shore bird decoys includes a handful of ornamentals.

"I like ducks and I like the out of doors," says Mort, a game hunter as well as an artifact hunter.

"We used to go to flea markets ... before they were a big deal," Judy says. One local antique dealer, auctioneer D.C. North, was instrumental in rounding out the decoy

Hand-carved shorebirds displayed on pecky cypress are the prelude to a collection of waterfowl decoys, right. The living wing blends a cozy den with an open kitchen with breakfast nook overlooking Hewletts Creek.



collection. "Most of these are by known carvers," Mort says.

The waterbird collection, some pieces more than 100 years old— one cork bird decoy that was "shot over" by Teddy Roosevelt hunting on Quogue, Long Island—represents well-known North Carolina and Virginia decoy carvers, Ned Burgess and Alvira Wright to name two, that North helped Neblett curate during a long fertile period of collecting.

"I thought we would miss living on the waterway because you could

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look straight across to the ocean, but I love this because I love birds," Judy says. "We see all kinds of birds."

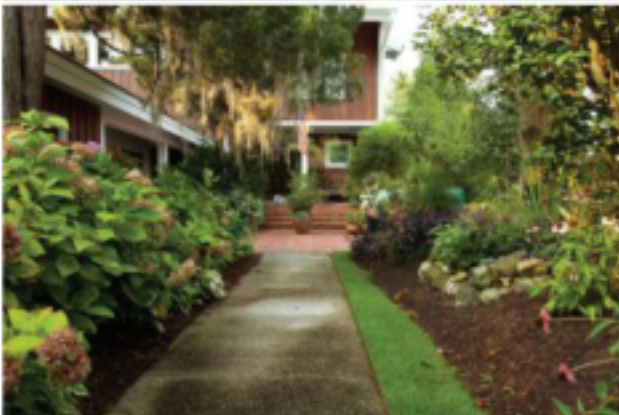
Covering the floor of Mort's bird room is a textile woven by Sinai nomads. "They don't make rugs like Persians but they weave pretty pieces. Somebody, a merchant, put an edge on it. I just liked the colors," he says.

Throughout the home the floors are carpeted with rugs from the Far East to the Middle East, China and Iran. Lamps made from Thai temple drums and a repurposed sheep shearer's table are functional living room accessories as well as conversation pieces; in the dining room, Afghan lintels above the mantel and a table they have carted around ever since they lived in Australia in the 1960s, tell part of their story. Everywhere there is art on canvas—paintings by Maude Gatewood and outsider artist Howard Finster; Tiffany art glass displayed near \$25 trinkets from Harbor Island Antiques; clay tiles from the British Museum gift shop and a clay teapot from the Cameron Art Museum gift shop.

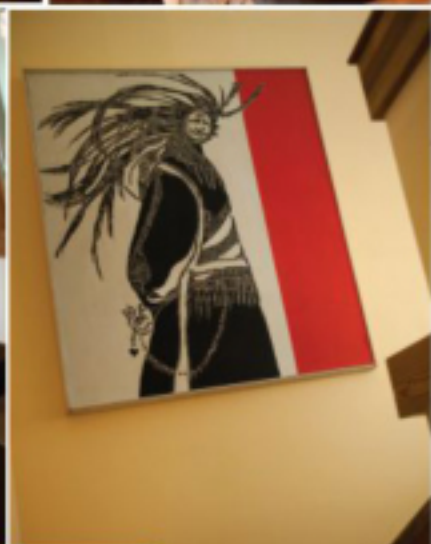
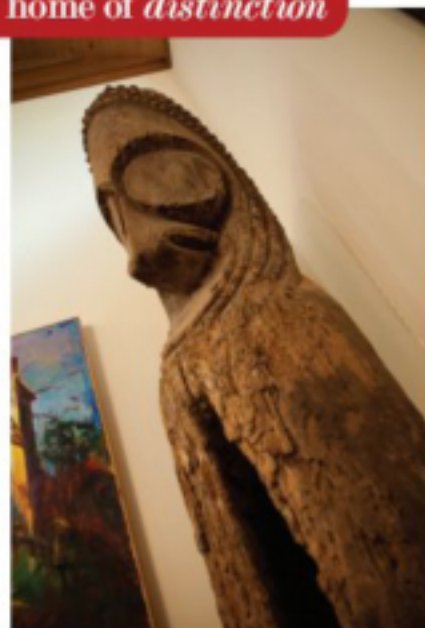
Built by Lee Cowper, in phases, Pfirman's design, an assemblage of individual buildings, linked by corridors and outdoor spaces, specified some traditional seacoast board and batten exteriors combined with unique, maritime industrial building materials, like corrugated, galvanized aluminum siding.

When they found it, the land had long been Joshua Frank's farm, an area also used by hunters who would bring their kills to the creek bank for field dressing, leaving the carcasses behind. When the Nebletts chose the site for their home, the U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded them a grant to clean it up. In addition, as stewards of the natural wetland area they are required to meet certain criteria, establishing an osprey nest platform, a rain garden and planting only vegetation that is indigenous to southeastern North Carolina.

Now, pavers crease lush carpets of



Top, Indigenous plants thrive on this resurrected waterfront site at Joshua's Landing on Hewlett's Creek. Pavers crease manicured grounds surrounding a detached workshop, above left.



grass to form pathways and as many as 50 urns, imported from Asia, are potted with tropical specimens that Mort cultivates and maintains himself.

One of the site's biggest challenges was designing and building the house around a spreading live oak tree. "We actually cantilevered over the roots of the tree," Judy explains, "so the roots are not disturbed by the house." Supported by concrete pilings and steel girders, the wings of the house form a large

horseshoe. "It made sense to make a big 'U'," Judy adds, "and it made sense to have you come into the gallery."

Because of the northern exposure and the heavy tree canopy, few plants would grow inside the courtyard designed by Tony Parker of Classic Landscapes. Scott McGhee

was the onsite arborist. Today, a statement rock pirated from the northeast Cape Fear River is surrounded by a split-leaf Japanese maple, ornamental grasses and quilted moss.

The courtyard view is also framed through the couple's master suite windows on the ground floor of the two-story, three bedroom, three and a half bath wing.

"It is so calming to look out here," Judy says. ✨

Clockwise from top left, Vanuatu slit drum; hand-carved Indonesian Garuda; R.C. Gorman painting; and Senegalese tribal masks.

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