



This modern home on Hewletts Creek is a part of history, with records indicating the original house on the lot called Monk Barns was built in 1754 by the Berry-McKoy family. A large oak tree with sweeping branches, named the McKoy oak, was a selling point for the Ellison family. Its branches hug their home, allowing it to blend into the landscape. Japanese maples cast shadows on a facade of concrete panels and the roof allows for rainwater to spill over the edge into two tiered basins, creating rainy day waterfalls.

Added to basics

A modern home affords a throwback lifestyle

BY DANIELLE BOISSE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW SHERMAN

“A building should appear to grow from its site and be shaped to harmonize with its surroundings if nature is manifest there.” — FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

IN BETWEEN deep-rooted oaks and underneath the widespread branches rests a house morphed into its surrounding landscape. A long driveway extends from an unpaved road, revealing a seven-acre lot with a chicken coop, garden beds and a camouflaged modern home facing the mouth of Hewletts Creek.

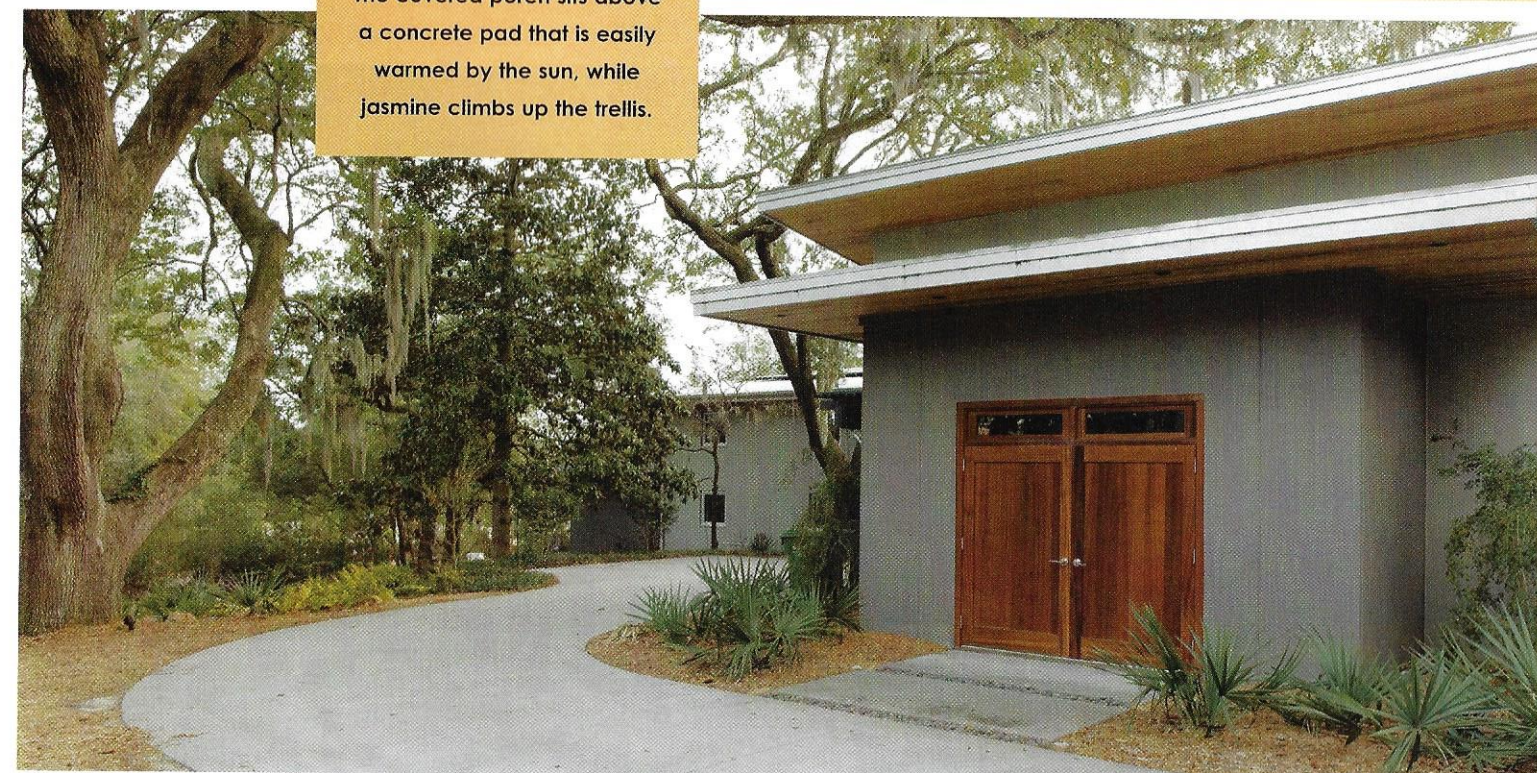
"This house was forward thinking and at the same time it is back to basics," homeowner Jane Ellison says. "It gives us what we need. It is functional, efficient and environmentally responsible. It is also peaceful. Nature is everywhere — inside and out."

Lucien Ellison, founder of Ellison Building Company, built the house to be a forever home for him, Jane and their three sons — Jack (12), Archie (10) and Baines (8).

The architectural design combines modern ideals and the intrinsic need to be connected to the outdoors. The house was positioned in a way that creates harmony with the natural setting. Windows were aligned to maximize views and enhance natural daylight and solar gain. The interior exposes the simple use of materials — concrete floors and natural cypress ceilings. The bedrooms are not large but efficient, while the outdoor spaces are equally important as the indoor spaces.



An abundance of windows provides views of Hewletts Creek. The house melts into a tiered landscape — layers of gardens align the stairs, herbs, fruits and vegetables. The covered porch sits above a concrete pad that is easily warmed by the sun, while jasmine climbs up the trellis.



THE FAMILY found the bucolic lot off Quail Run Road in 2011.

"The land is beautiful, peaceful and serene," Lucien says. "It feels like it is in the middle of nowhere or in the country. I didn't know a place like this existed in Wilmington."

The original house was knocked down, and Lucien Ellison began working with architect Kevin Pfirman to construct the first passive home in southeastern North Carolina.

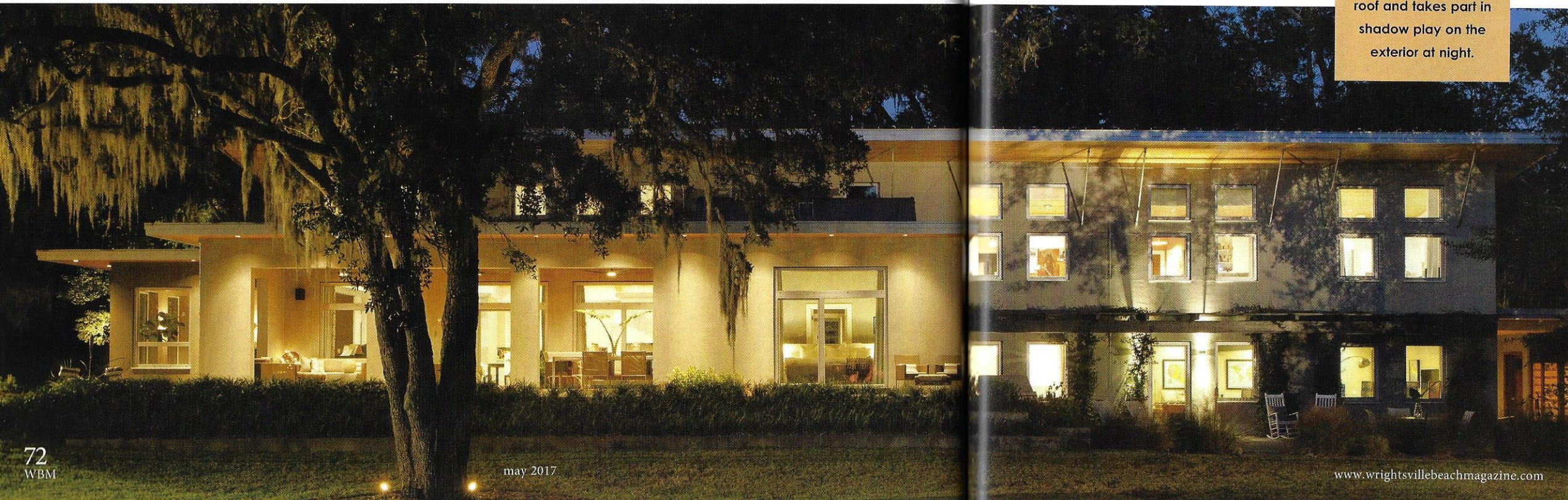
A home has to meet rigorous efficiency standards to earn classification as passive. Such houses are about 70 percent more energy efficient than average.

The standards include use of 6,000-psi concrete walls and triple-paned, thermal-insulated windows and doors, along with plenty of insulation, to keep the house airtight and prevent energy leaks; an energy recovery ventilation system that constantly flushes old air and ushers fresh air in; and solar orientation that captures enough sunlight in the winter to heat the house while eliminating sunlight in the summer to keep it cool.

"Jane and I both decided that we wanted to build the most sustainable house that we could on the property. The house is practically net zero," says Lucien, who underwent weeks of training to earn his Certified Passive House Consultant designation from the Passive House Institute U.S.



The concrete panels that wrap the exterior were dropped in by a crane without harming the branches of the McKoy oak. Spanish moss touches the roof and takes part in shadow play on the exterior at night.



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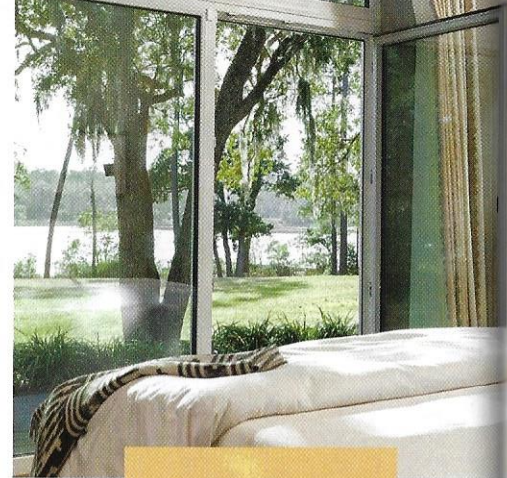
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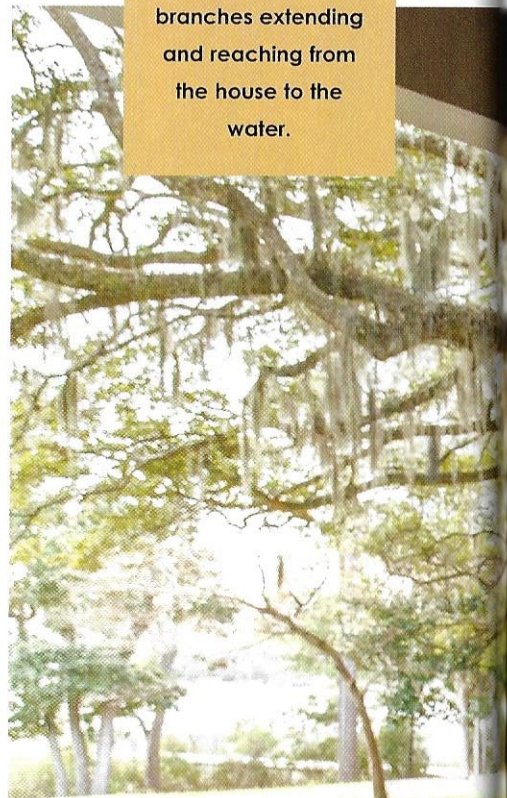
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The McKoy oak is seen from rooms inside and out, with branches extending and reaching from the house to the water.



UCIEN AND PFIRMAN worked as a team to meet the passive home standards. Pfirman created a dynamic roofline without gutters that would allow the Ellisons to one day live off the grid and collect rainwater.

"We created these two rooflines with opposing pitches that would channel the water into two basins," Pfirman says. "They would eventually become a water feature at the front and rear entry of the house. The water comes down into those basins, then they fill up, overflow and run through the rocky stream bed that we designed."

Pfirman also was intentional with the lines he created on the interior of the split-level home. Circulation spaces were aligned with views of tree branches and Hewletts Creek.

"I am not a fan of walking through spaces to get to other spaces. I am not a fan of the indoors," he says. "Even when you are deep in the house you can still see far away through a window. It lets you know that there is something beyond."





THE DESIGN is exactly what the Ellisons wanted. “No matter where I look, I see what I want to see — the way the sun hits the water,” Jane says. A dynamic and open family space consists of two living areas and an informal dining area floating in front of a large and efficient kitchen. A large kitchen island — also known as Jane’s second office — has drawers organized in chronological order of the boys’ schedules. There’s a drawer for packing lunches and another for their after-school snacks. “This is where they eat breakfast, have after-school snacks and do homework every day,” she says. “I am always right here with them.”

Vaulted ceilings lined in alternating widths of natural cypress warm the light walls and dark concrete floors. A metal girder truss runs across the open great room, collecting paper airplanes thrown by the three Ellison boys. Clerestory windows bring in natural light during the day and the light rail glows at night. An eclectic blend of furnishings, artwork and light fixtures make for a dynamic interior, guided by the architectural lines of the space.



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a LIGHT SHELF follows the perimeter of the living spaces, emitting a soft glow that projects up toward the natural cypress ceiling. Clerestory windows allow sunlight to peek through the tree branches. A metal girder truss runs across the ceiling, exposing the authentic structure and providing function with two chandeliers suspended over the dining table.

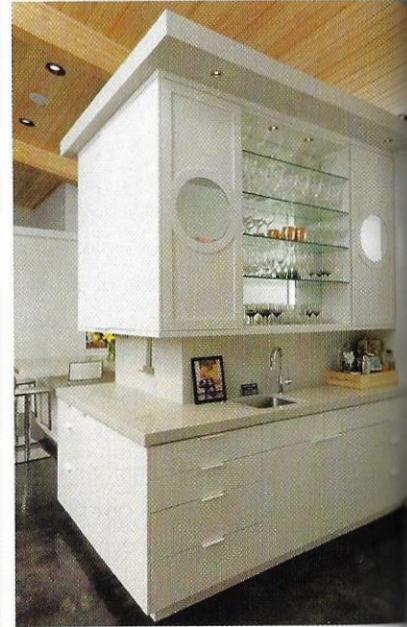
"There are paper airplanes and wine corks on top of the truss and the light shelf. We are trying to see how many we can get up there," Jane says.

Pops of color show through the artwork that was all created by family, friends and local artists. A floating cabinet for books hugs the far wall of the living area on the left side and has a TV for the guys. The right side has a more feminine sitting area with a purple sofa and a second generation Ellison piano.

"Everything has a history and is beginning to have a story," Jane says. "The house has so many layers between the personal artwork and the boys growing into the house. It keeps evolving and becoming more and more us."



The Ellisons have a functional kitchen with clean lines and simple details. A pop-up outlet in the quartz countertops allows the boys to plug in while doing homework at the island. A round glass motif is found on sliding doors into the "adult" room, wet bar cabinetry, and inside the master closet. The stairs of the split-level home provide access to the three bedrooms upstairs and a guest bedroom and playroom downstairs.



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WITH THREE BUSY SONS who all play several sports on travel teams, Jane designed a room for adult time. She and Lucien enjoy sitting in two Barcelona chairs, talking, reading or meditating.



When the floors of the adult room were poured, leaves from the 300-year-old oak tree fell, imprinting fossils in the wet concrete — an unintentional design that tied into the home's theme of bringing nature in. This room is simply furnished with two Barcelona chairs and an end table that holds meditation and Frank Lloyd Wright books.

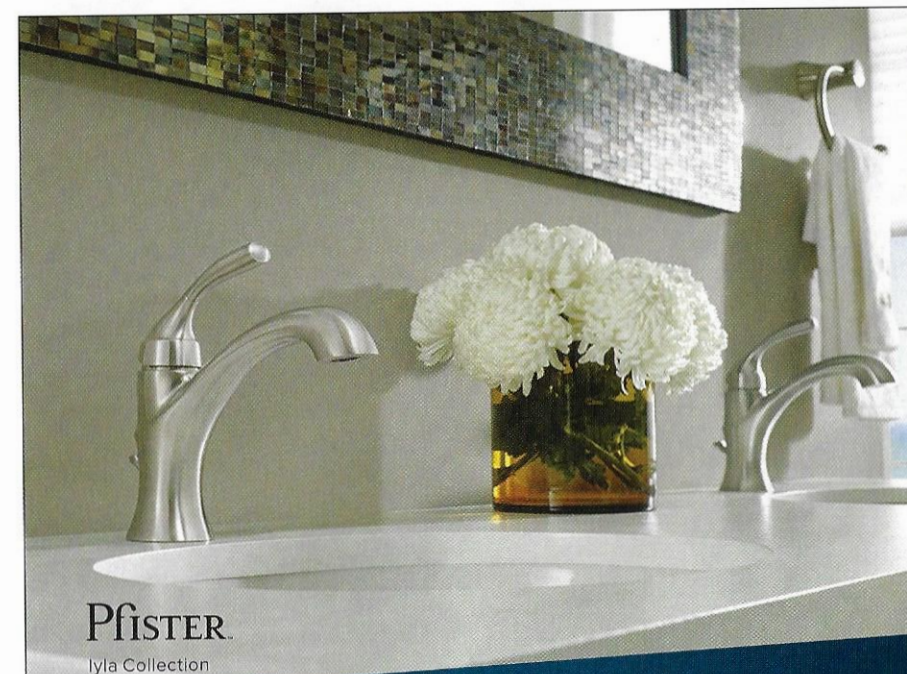
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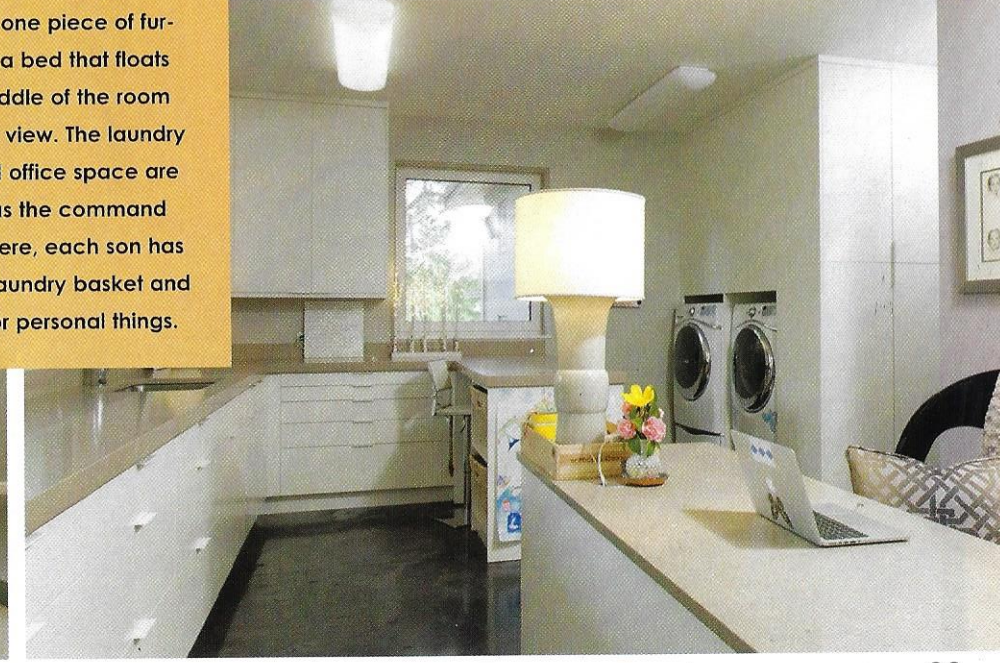
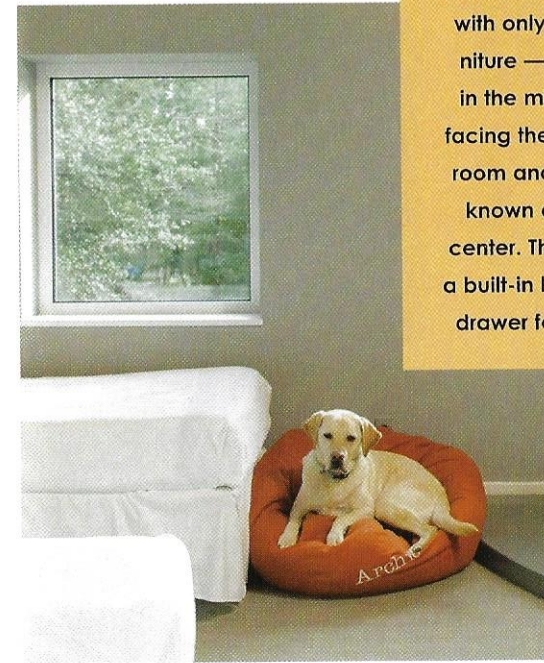
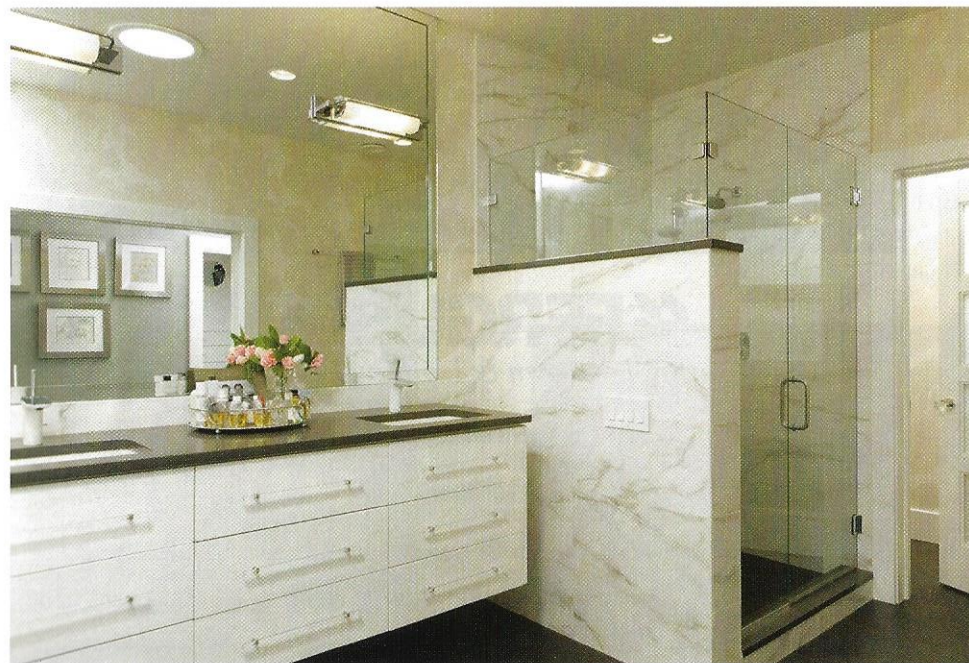
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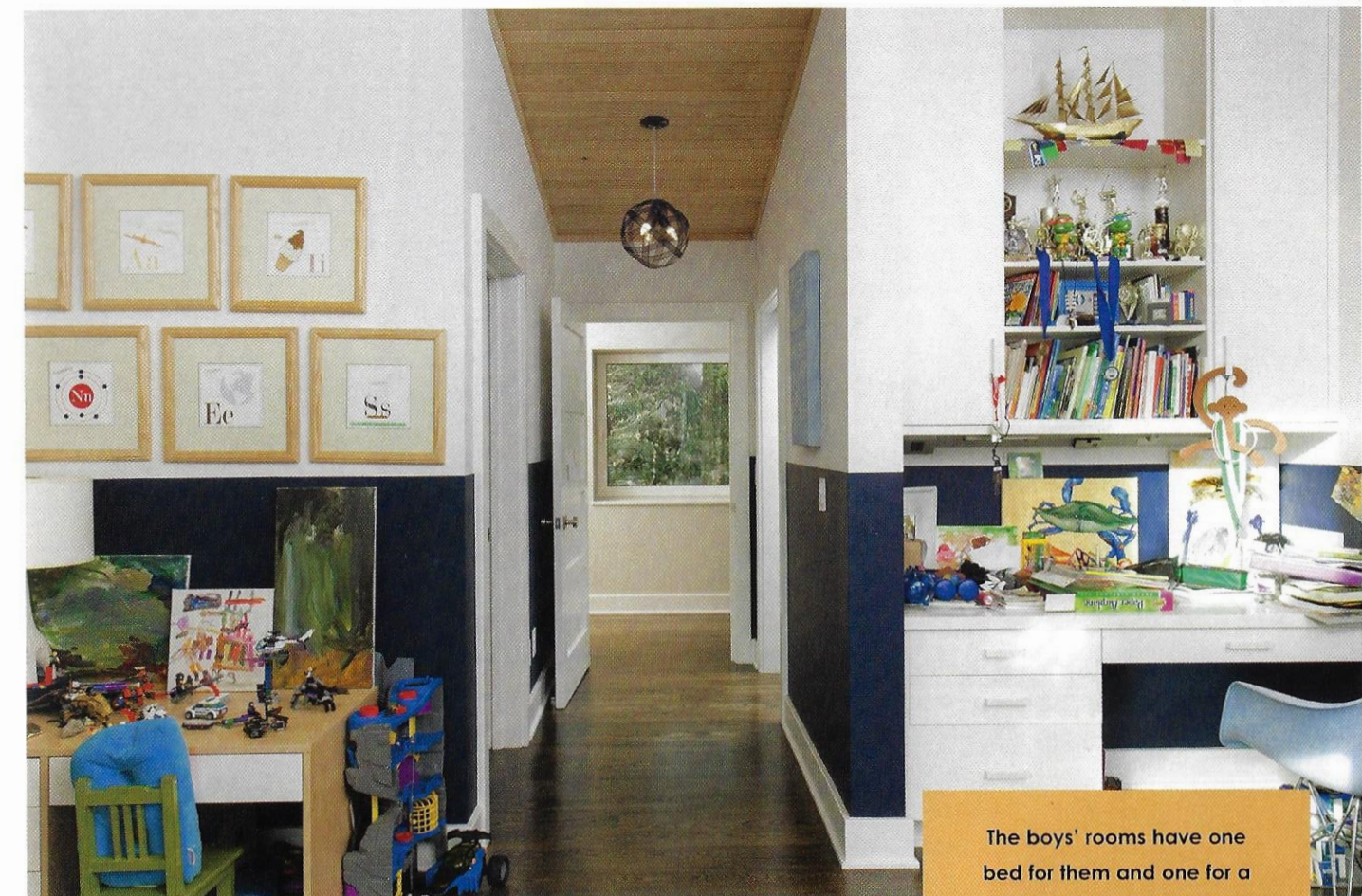
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I LOVE THE SPECIAL PLACE we've created and, no matter where we travel, I am always so excited to return and reconnect to our home base," she says. "It's a peaceful, meditative home that recharges me daily amongst the chaos that comes with our five busy family members."



Whether from the modest master bedroom, the three sons' rooms or the guest bedroom, the views of the trees and water never disappear. The master bedroom shows a minimalist approach with only one piece of furniture — a bed that floats in the middle of the room facing the view. The laundry room and office space are known as the command center. There, each son has a built-in laundry basket and drawer for personal things.

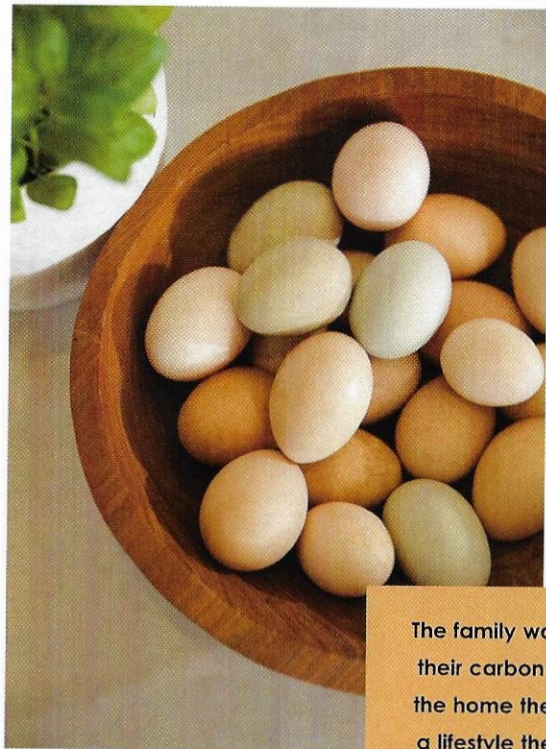




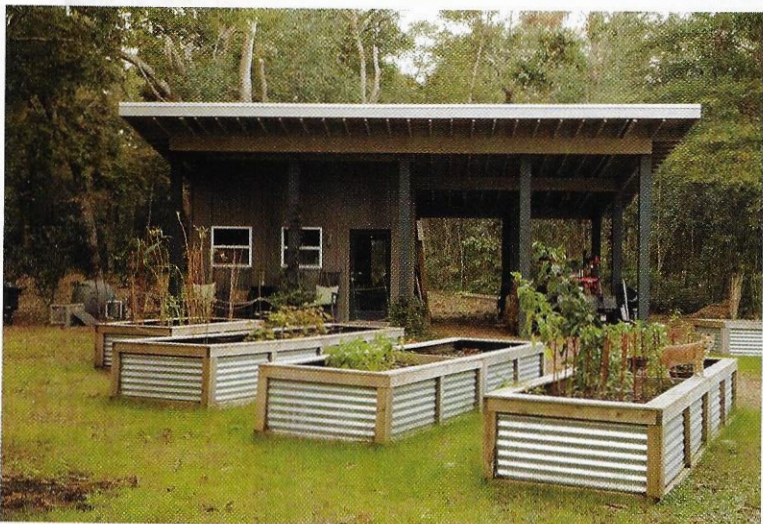
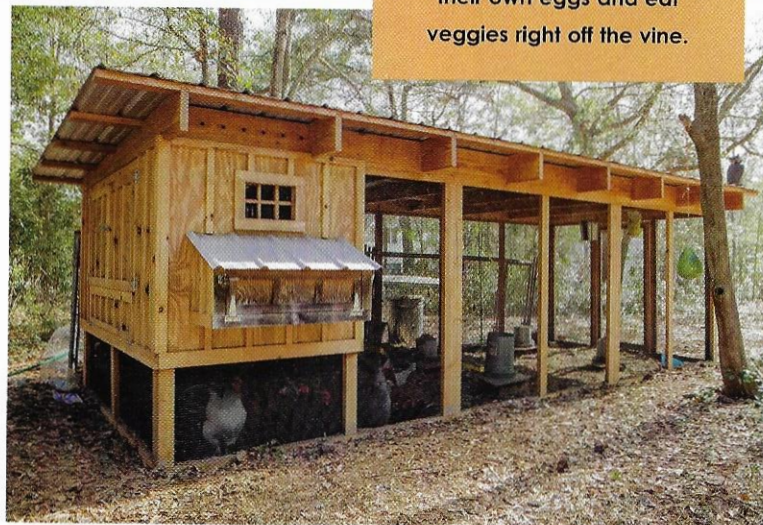
The boys' rooms have one bed for them and one for a buddy, and an individualized color scheme that flows into the closets and bathrooms. The natural cypress vaulted ceilings carry through and lead to four windows that bring nature in.

THE ELLISON FAMILY loves to entertain in the 5,500-square-foot home. Each boy has his own bedroom, with an extra bed for a friend. "The house feels the happiest when it is full with friends and family," Jane says. "We have a lot of sleepovers."





The family wanted to lower their carbon footprint with the home they built and in a lifestyle they created. A chicken coop and garden allow the family to collect their own eggs and eat veggies right off the vine.



THE ELLISONS created a yard that would offer outdoor living year-round in addition to a sustainable lifestyle. The boys have a putting green and sport court. Herb boxes and kiwi seedlings align the tiered landscape leading up to a concrete pad used for entertaining.

A porch off the living space is where the Ellisons have dinner most nights, followed by a fire in a pit constructed with bricks off the original home. In the front, there are also several garden beds and the chicken coop.

"The boys just eat right off the vine," Jane says.

The outdoor spaces have been used for birthday parties, exercise, holiday oyster roasts and a family wedding.

"We use every bit of the house and we prefer to be outdoors," Lucien says.

The three Ellison boys have plenty of room to run and play.

"This is going to be what they remember," Jane says. "They are creating lots of great memories here."

The home is modern, yet the lifestyle is a throw-back — collecting chicken eggs and eating raw vegetables from the garden. Jane and Lucien brought their family back to basics, and agree the outdoors is where they belong.



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