

Past and future mingle in a house of allusions



BY BRIDGET MCQUATE
PHOTOS BY HUGH LOOMIS

What looks like contemporary construction built within the stone-walled ruins of an old barn is just one of many illusions — not to mention allusions — that the home of Dale N. Krapf presents to visitors.

The sprawling home sits on 17 acres in an agricultural area of East Bradford Township, Chester County. Its stone walls are not barn ruins, but brand new — carefully assembled by masons to look old.

The architect, Charles J. Frederick of Cee Jay Frederick Associates in West Chester — who is also a landscape architect — is attracted by the idea that all buildings are eventually ruins in the landscape.

"The landscape long survives anything manmade we put on it," he says.

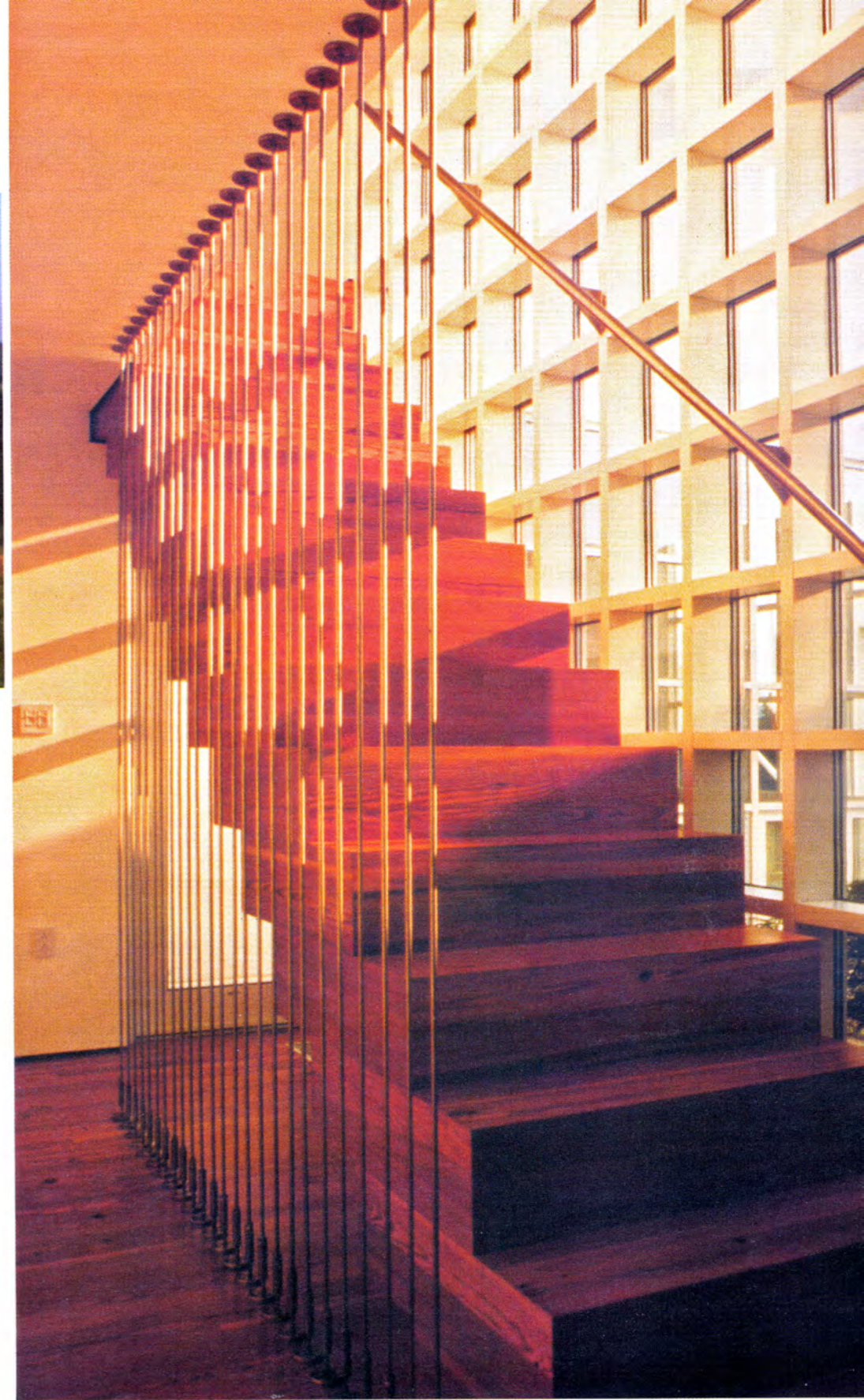
The Krapf house is most easily understood when viewed from above, as two long wings forming a cross, with a barn on one side and a pool on the other. From a courtyard between the barn and garage, the house appears fairly traditional. But walk around the home's perimeter and you see that each side presents a new take on a traditional standard.

Walking behind the stone barn reveals an oddly angled wooden side covered by a roof that slants severely downward almost to the ground, in what the architect calls "a contemporary abstraction of a barn."

Above: Behind the traditional stone barn, a contemporary abstraction of a barn.

Left: In a sitting room, a carpet represents the flow of the Brandywine River.

Right: Stripes and squares flank a sculptural stairway.





Top: A white steel frame suggests a ghost image of a barn raising.

Left: The brise soleil forms "an outdoor room" around the pool.

Around the next corner, the house presents a maritime theme with white stuccoed walls, large window panels and a brise soleil in the form of a white wall suspended by pillars. In places, the brise soleil appears as topless pillars, evoking the familiar image of ruins. The roof plane is reduced to exposed timber beams in one section to direct sunlight into a courtyard below.

To mix metaphors, a reference to the local tradition of barn raising is thrown into the nautical theme with a white steel frame slanting out from the house like an exposed interior support. Frederick explains that the frame is a ghost image of a barn raising and portrays a "frozen moment in time," a further suggestion that architecture is fleeting when compared to the enduring landscape.

Another nautical allusion is a white steel "widow's walk" that extends from the interior through the tilted frame and recalls a longing wife searching the horizon for her sailor husband's returning ship.

If this house were a novel, it would tell quite a story.

The brise soleil turns the corner of the house by breaking through a stone wall and continuing to the pool area where it forms "an outdoor room" around the pool. Next to the pool, an exercise room supported by conical pillars juts out of the house proper like a modern version of a straw shed on a barn.

The architect and owner wanted the interior to be spacious and light-filled with white walls, high vaulted ceilings and skylights. Interior rooms are modern with occasional nods to traditional forms, like the sliding barn door that leads from the master bedroom to a tiny balcony above the living room.

The lifestyle and interests of the owner, a world-class canoe racer, are reflected more prominently inside. A white carpet in a sitting room was custom made to trace the path, in black, of the Brandywine River that he runs in his canoe. A wooden racing canoe is mounted on the living room ceiling with light fixtures installed inside to fashion a "canoe lamp."

The architect intentionally separated pieces of the interior by creating transitional spaces where "it's almost like you're leaving the house to get to the next room."

Huge window panels along these in-between corridors bring the sun and gardens inside. One interior corridor features the same conical pillars that stand along the outdoor pool area. A powder room has a window directly above the sink where one expects a mirror. A sculptural stairway in one hallway is bordered by vertical tension rods (a "harp") on one side and a wall of windows on the other, patterning sunlight into stripes and squares on the white wall inside.

In creating this house, the architect's modus operandi was admittedly taking familiar parts, abstracting them and putting them together in wholly original ways. One can easily say, though, that the general mood of the house ... depends on where you're standing.

Bridget McQuate is a Philadelphia freelance writer and the editor of The Philadelphia Architect, monthly newspaper of the American Institute of Architects, Philadelphia Chapter.