

# Architecture

## MINNESOTA

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# Mix and match

A colorful North Oaks residence rambles in style BY BARBARA KNOX

**W**hen Bill and Susan Jolitz began planning their retirement home, they quickly developed a short list of “must haves.” They wanted a not-so-big house with geothermal radiant heating, comfortable, usable spaces, and a single-level living option. There was just one small hitch: Living in Saudi Arabia and planning to settle in Minnesota, they

needed an architect to design and build their dream home with them in absentia.

Architect Robert Gerloff, AIA, Robert Gerloff Residential Architects, Minneapolis, had to brush up on his long-distance communication skills. “They were here for the initial interview and they were here for the groundbreaking,” recalls Gerloff, “but mostly we did this project via the Internet.”



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After hiring Gerloff, the Jolitizes asked him to check out a site they were eyeing in a newly opened area of North Oaks. Encompassing a steep hill with a small plateau, the site sits adjacent to an active railroad line and drops off sharply to the east. But Gerloff gave the difficult site a thumbs-up, especially after learning that Bill, a railroad buff, considered the train tracks a plus.

Gerloff's plan for what he calls a "modernist house with traditional components" draws from a rural, industrial vernacular. The long, narrow house sits atop the hill, with a dry-stack bluestone wall framing a courtyard on the west side of the house. Since the Jolitizes did not have strong preconceived notions about style, Gerloff designed the house using a collage of forms, materials, and colors to define the various spaces.

Drawing immediate attention is the different siding material and color chosen for each piece of the house. For instance, while the main volume is clad in weathered cedar shingles, the exterior of the study is dressed in a wide Hardiplank lap siding painted a shade of Scandinavian ochre. The formal tower, which marks the entry to the house, sports a narrow Hardiplank siding painted white. Still other portions of the exterior are wrapped in barn-red board-and-batten siding.

"The way Robert put the exterior together, it looks like a house that was added on to over the years," says Bill. "It looks like a house that has been here a long time and learned its lessons well, and that's just what we were looking for."

Inside, Gerloff's challenges were to make the small house feel large, and to create an open floor plan to suit the Jolitizes' casual lifestyle. His solution was a home that gathers all of the core living areas (kitchen, dining, living, study, master suite, mudroom, and laundry) on the 1,760-square-foot main level, and provides additional space (guest-room/bath, mechanical room, model train room for Bill, and office space for Susan) in a 1,512-square-foot look-out basement. A screen porch juts out of the back of the house above the steep decline, affording the Jolitizes a treetop view of the pond and railroad tracks below.

The main level, designed around what Gerloff calls "the social triangle" of living room, kitchen, and dining area, feels open and airy without leaving the homeowners too exposed. "Part of the goal is always to get a compact social triangle so people can communicate from one space to another," says Gerloff, "but you also have to give each space a distinctive character."

Lining the shed roof, a pine ceiling sloping from 14 feet down to nine feet lends some variety to the social areas. Gerloff dropped ceilings to seven feet above the dining table



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Top: A bluestone wall lines a small courtyard at the home's main entrance. Above: The spacious master bedroom overlooks a wooded valley to the east. Opposite: The fully-equipped kitchen features stainless-steel appliances and a long, graceful island.



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and in some areas of the kitchen and master suite to shape more discrete, intimate spaces. At the other end of the scale, the tower entrance features a soaring 16-foot-plus ceiling.

Gerloff further delineated living spaces in the open plan by pulling in exterior colors and materials. A barn-red wall, for instance, separates the kitchen from the living room, while the interior of the tower entrance features the same white-painted narrow lap siding as does the exterior.

Especially in winter, light and shadow animate the main level throughout the day, thanks to a generous use of windows, with most rooms getting bounced light from the east and some higher light from the west. To augment the natural light, Gerloff chose a mix of halogen and low-voltage pendants, uplights, and recessed cans.

"One of the main reasons you hire an architect," says Bill, "is to properly site your house on the land. Robert did

that with our home, siting it in such a way that we get maximum sunlight in the winter, minimal sunlight in the summer, and the best views all year round. That's something you just can't achieve on your own."

For her part, Susan is delighted with the results of endless hours spent online reviewing design drawings, construction plans, and site photographs from far-off Saudi Arabia. "Robert was a great communicator and we learned to trust him to make decisions. He tapped into who we are and what we wanted, and his sense of what was right was always beyond what we could have described."

**Jolitz Residence**

**North Oaks, Minnesota**

**Robert Gerloff Residential Architects**

**Minneapolis, Minnesota**