

NESTLED IN THE void between the structure's two boxes is the courtyard, which architect Dan Hisel calls "the first room of the house." An array of Himalayan birches and Christmas ferns looks like it came from a CAD drawing, a deliberate decision meant to match the taut lines of the house.

# BOX SET

THE SIMPLE ENVELOPE OF A NEW HOME IN CARLISLE CONTAINS A SMART LAYOUT FOR MANY PURSUITS

Written by BRUCE IRVING • Photography by PETER VANDERWARKER • Architecture by DAN HISSEL DESIGN



**H**ERE'S SOMETHING FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT never said: "The best client an architect can have is another architect." It is, however, something architect Dan Hisel says about his work in designing a contemporary home for professional photographer Gigi de Manio and her husband, architect and graphic designer Tim Downing. Their three-way collaboration produced a stunning "pair of highly crafted boxes," as Hisel describes the house, and a lasting bond. Hisel and Downing first met at the Yale School of Architecture, where they both earned degrees in 1996. Fast forward to 2004, when Downing and

de Manio were envisioning a house to build on five acres they had bought in Carlisle, Massachusetts, wanting a home for their young family, and a place to work. They initially thought of building from a house plan, but their creative bent demanded a more innovative design, so they called Hisel.

"Right from the start, Tim and Gigi knew the sensibility of what they wanted," says Hisel, "and I knew it too, because it was a style we all loved—European modernism, with a distilled, clean, and minimalist approach to design." Downing and de Manio imposed another crucial principle: Quality finishes and material integrity would take precedence over spatial or structural complexity. The couple's program called



**THE KITCHEN (FAR LEFT) is kept visually quiet by simple white cabinetry and counters of white Carrera marble; Tim, Gigi, and children take family meals at a table with a view. Glimpsed through the living room windows (BELOW), the forest is an ever-changing tableau on full display. An aperture (LEFT) aids cross ventilation, but also allows the kids to peek from the stairs into the living room.**



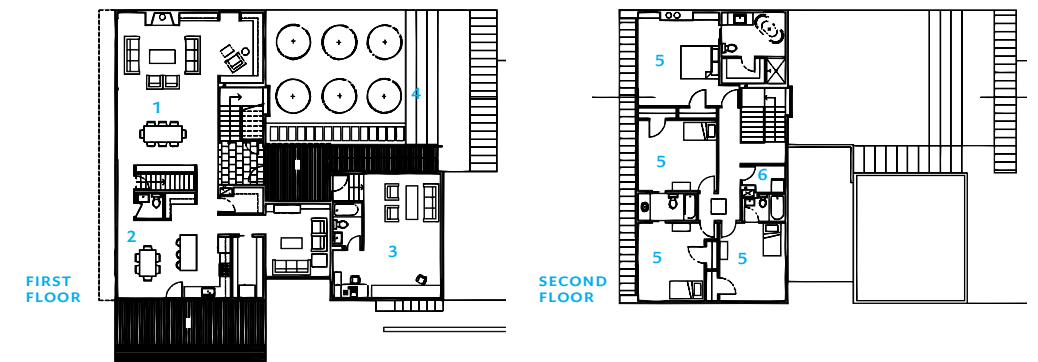
for enough square footage for their family of five, formal and informal public spaces, two home offices, and a skinflinty construction cost of \$200 per square foot.

So the challenge for Hisel was to pack the most program possible into as simple a building as he could, making more money available for things like quartersawn one-by-four-inch oak flooring, custom kitchen cabinets, brushed stainless-steel door hardware, top-drawer lighting fixtures, radiant floor heating, and a tempered-glass stairway balustrade—things that delight the senses and exude a quiet sense of quality.

The resulting home has a simple grace that comes from

great discipline; every choice was made under precise and exacting standards. One example: The exterior cladding is horizontal tongue-and-groove Atlantic white cedar planking, free of knots, custom milled, and treated with a bleaching oil that renders it a soft gray. Early on, it was decided that the 5-inch width of the planks would control all of the house's vertical dimensions—a rigor that determined the floor-to-ceiling heights and the placement and sizing of windows. No notches mar the seams; all the planks run smoothly by windows and doors, and terminate at simple, thin, butt-jointed corner boards.





**FLOOR PLANS:** An open plan for the first floor moves from the formal entertaining space of the living/dining area [1] to the casual family gathering spots of the kitchen and breakfast area [2]. The studio [3] is completely separate from the living areas, accessed from the courtyard [4]. All bedrooms are placed on the second floor [5] and the laundry is there as well [6].

TOTAL SQUARE FOOTAGE: 4,300

Architecture Dan Hisel Design, Somerville, Massachusetts

Builder Pondview Associates, Carlisle, Massachusetts



The 4,300-square-foot house is divided into three orientations, each with its own activities and views. The formal entertainment space and library has a black granite fireplace and looks out at the forest through a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. The kitchen and family/breakfast room spill out onto a deck and a flat lawn where the kids can play. Finally, facing the driveway and the public, de Manio's photography studio sits above Downing's graphic design office, which can be used as the garage someday. Nonetheless, it's not a rigid, overly controlled plan—there are sightlines throughout the house, with views to other rooms and the outside—and the overall palette of colors and finishes is warm and organic, not cold and machined.

But while the trio brought a rigorous formal intelligence to bear (they speak passionately of “framing devices,” “precise moments,” and “tectonic choices”), they also were tough and practical. Downing acted as his own general contractor and hired a retired computer programmer as site supervisor.

**WANTING A CLEAR separation between home and work, Tim and Gigi have to walk outside to get to their offices: Tim's graphic design firm occupies the garage (OPPOSITE, BOTTOM); Gigi's studio is above the garage (TOP). The front of the house (OPPOSITE, TOP), containing most of the living spaces, faces the forest. A side deck (OPPOSITE, CENTER) adjoins the kitchen.**

“I was in charge of the money, he was in charge of quality control,” he says. “I paid him by the hour and saved the customary 20 percent surcharge on subcontractors.” Everything he could get done by others he did—the siding was bleached at the mill, the custom garage door was installed by the fabricator. And when it came time to build the dramatic mahogany entry stairs, Hisel sent Downing and de Manio a marked-up map of the Harvard campus, with similarly proportioned stairs for them to test-walk before they committed. “None of them was quite right,” laugh the two Yalies, “so we picked our own run and rise.”

For de Manio, all the care that went into the house has a practical side to it as well. “When potential clients come here,” she says, “they often ask, ‘How did you get this place?’ I think they see it for the thoughtful and artful place it is, and when I tell them we built it, I think they understand that they'll get the same kind of work out of me, because this is a reflection of who I am.”

“It was easily the hardest year and a half of my life,” says Downing. “It's a ton of work to make a simple house, but we always knew that if we put forward a problem, Dan would come back with a solution.” Hisel adds with a laugh: “And you—an architect!—never once drew a picture of the answer for me. That's my kind of client!”

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