

Clem Labine's Period Homes

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The 2007 Palladio Awards

*Special Award*Winner: *Archer & Buchanan Architecture, Ltd.*

Project: Hobbit House, Chester County, PA

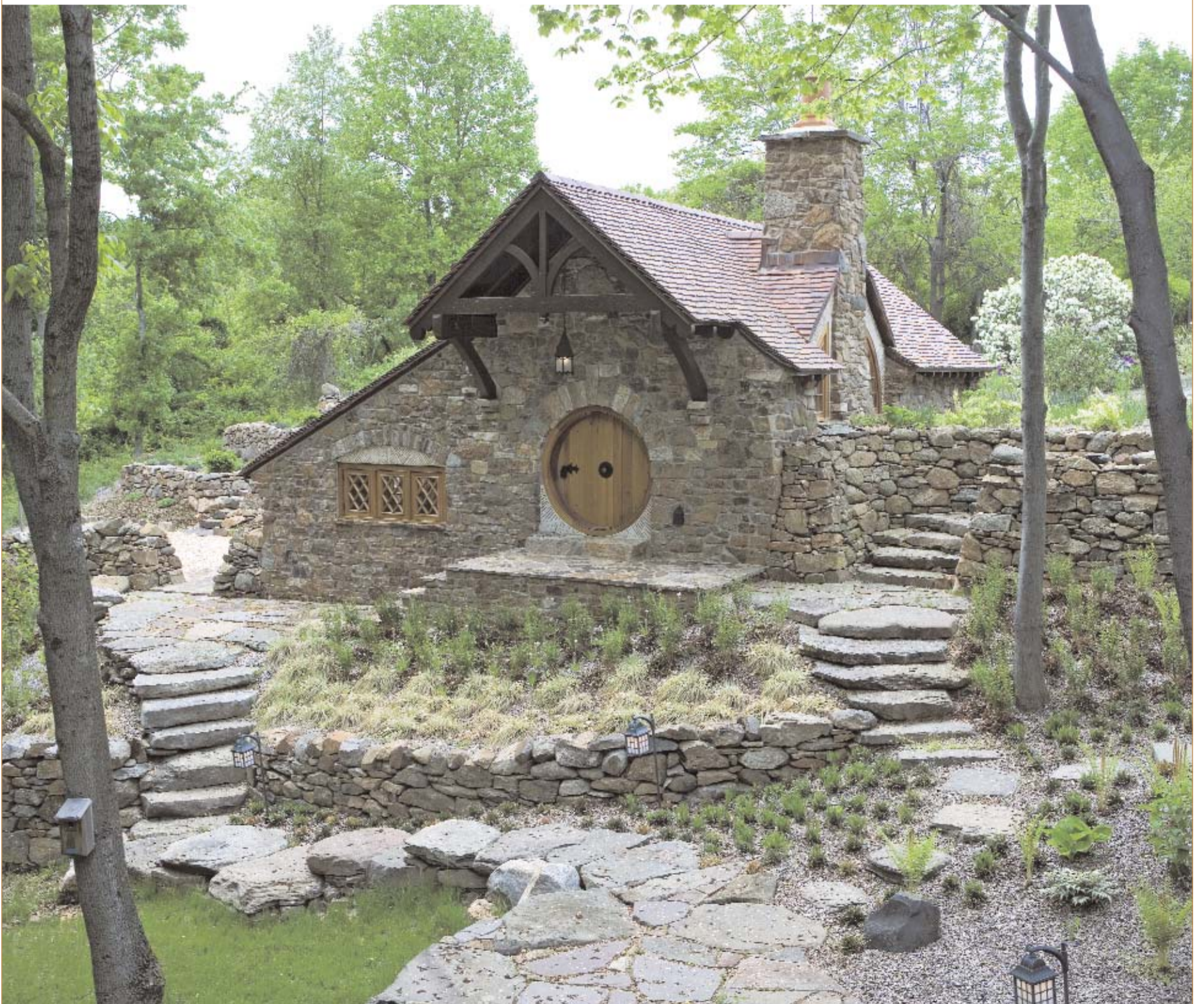
Architect: Archer & Buchanan Architecture, Ltd., West Chester, PA; Peter C. Archer, AIA, principal in charge

General Contractor: Richard Owen, Chester Springs, PA

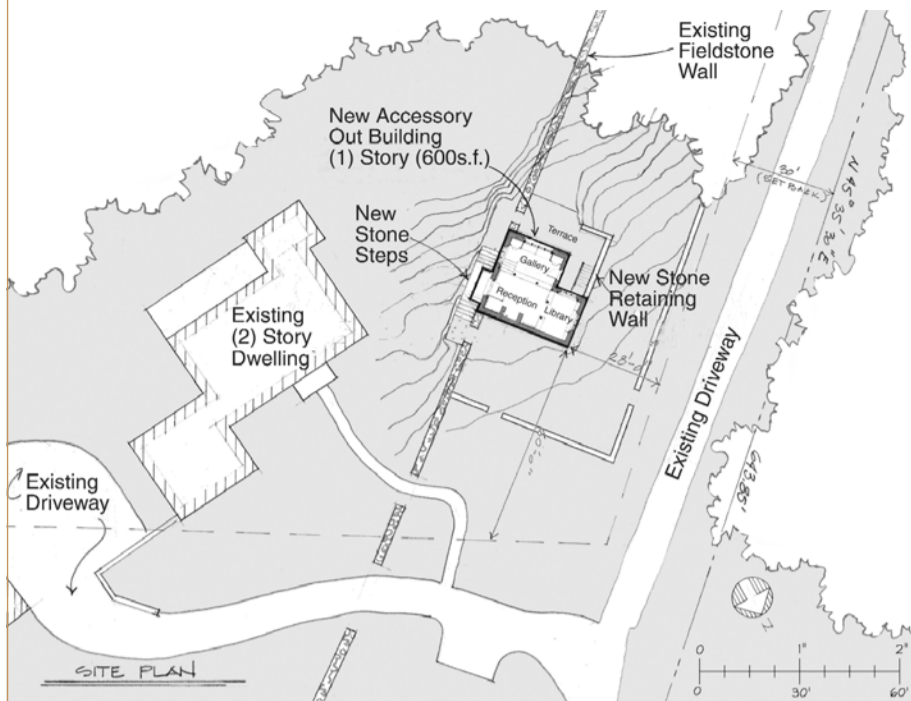
Small Comfort

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty wet hole filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or eat: it was a hobbit hole and that means comfort.” So begins J.R.R. Tolkien’s first novel, *The Hobbit* – the tale of Bilbo Baggins, of Bag End, Hobbiton, and the battle for Middle Earth that has engrossed readers worldwide since 1937. It began as a collection of bedtime stories for Tolkien’s three children in Oxford, England, and was published at the insistence of Tolkien’s good friend Lewis Carroll. Carroll, already a published novelist, read the manuscript at a local writers’ group and urged, “This could become a classic.” It was a modest prediction; neither Carroll, nor Tolkien, nor the publisher, which set its initial print run at just 1,500 copies, could have guessed that Tolkien’s work would become the global phenomenon it has. Today, there are translations of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* in every language from Mandarin Chinese to Luxembourgish, and the motion picture trilogy is the highest grossing of all time. For fans, Tolkien was the ultimate escapist – a creator of new worlds and languages. But when an avid collector of Tolkien memorabilia called upon Archer & Buchanan Architecture, Ltd., of West Chester, PA, to design a museum for his collection, the firm made the fantasy a 600-sq.ft. reality.

Back in 2004, Archer & Buchanan was working on the client’s study – the latest of several projects, spanning 15 years, that the firm had been hired to design at the Chester County, PA, property. It was there that the client displayed and archived his extensive collection of memorabilia, which includes books, manuscripts and artifacts. When the collection outgrew its surroundings, the client made an unusual request. “He called one day and said that he would like to create a space for the collection somewhere on the property,” explains firm principal Peter Archer, AIA. “He wanted to separate it from the house, so that he could experience his collection in an environment conducive to the spirit of Tolkien’s great works.”



Archer & Buchanan Architecture, Ltd., of West Chester, PA, designed the “Hobbit House” private museum for an avid collector of Tolkien memorabilia. Photo: © Tom Crane

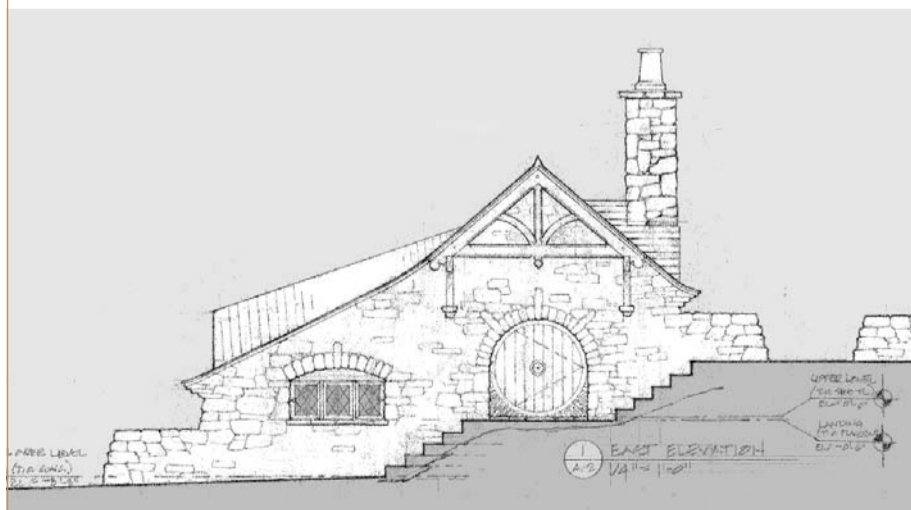


The museum is located close to the main house, and anchored to the site by a fieldstone dry-stacked wall that runs through the center of the property. *Site plan: courtesy of Archer & Buchanan Architecture, Ltd.*

A round, 54-in.-dia. Spanish cedar door, befitting the dimensions of a hobbit, was an authentic starting point. However, Archer was determined that the museum would not pay homage to Hollywood, or worse, become a gimmick. As a place for solitude and contemplation, its purpose was a serious one, and this would be expressed in the materials and craftsmanship. Rather than studying interpretations of Tolkien, the firm drew its inspiration directly from the novels, and the site itself. “We did not look to the film at all,” says Archer. “Tolkien created these vivid descriptions of the life of a hobbit and made wonderful little sketches. Those, combined with this particular property and location, were much more inspirational.”

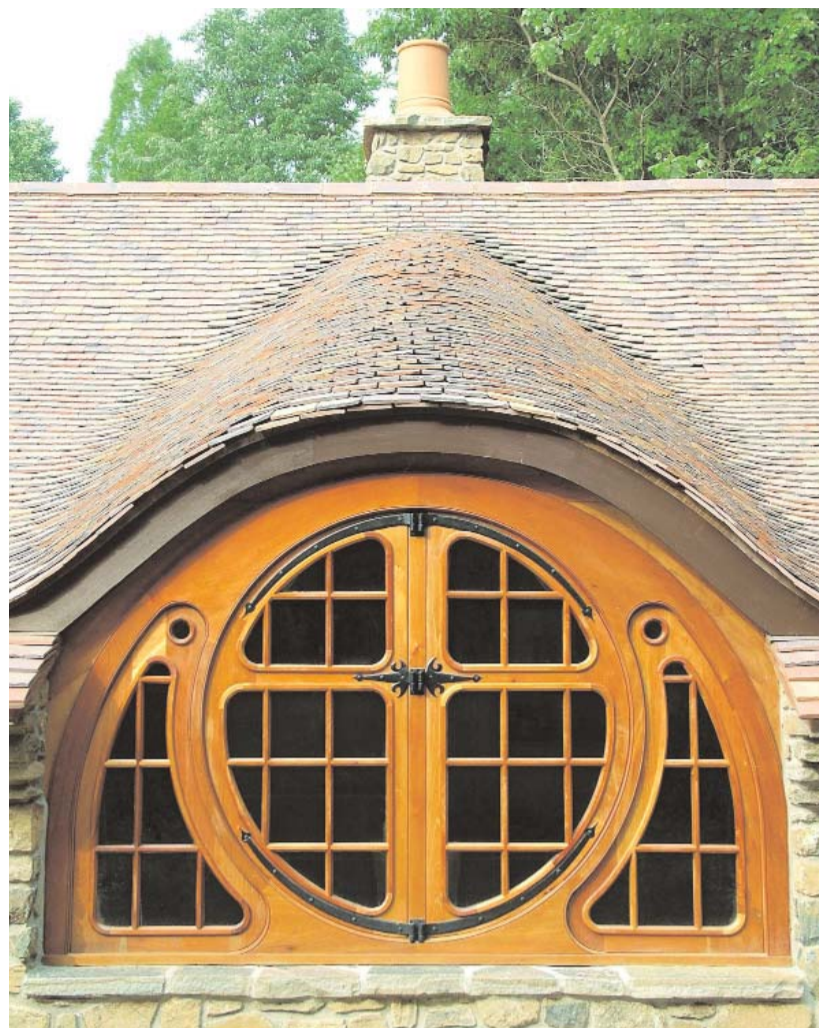
The structure was built into an existing fieldstone dry-stacked wall that runs through the center of the property and dates back to the 18th century. By utilizing stone from a derelict portion of the wall, the front elevation and small garden appears to grow out of the site. “The decision to integrate the building into the wall influenced everything else, and I think it was very successful in creating a sense of timelessness,” says Archer. “It informed us as to how one enters the building, how one walks around the building and how the structure connects to the upper yard, upper garden, lower garden and down into the woods. And finally, creating a walled garden around it gave it a real sense of place.”

Inside, the firm evoked the warmth and coziness described by Tolkien with timeless details. Douglas fir timber framing by Summerbeam Inc. of Oxford, PA, custom hardware by Michael Coldren of North East, MD, antique lighting fixtures by Vintage Lighting of Malvern, PA, and traditional casework by French Creek Woodworking of Elverson, PA, make an appropriate setting for the collection. By utilizing the slope of the hillside, Archer & Buchanan created a taller space for shelving and display, plus a desk where the client can catalog his manuscripts. And at the heart of the interior space, a wood-burning masonry fireplace surrounded by two reading chairs is the perfect place to enjoy them. Stucco was mixed over stone to give the fireplace texture, shape and form. “It’s a relatively oversized fireplace,” says Archer. “But it looks even larger within the context of this single room. We wanted to create one really exceptional room, and



Above: The primary elevation steps down with the grade of the hillside to give the impression that the structure emerged from the wall. *Elevation: courtesy of Archer & Buchanan Architecture, Ltd.*

Right: The roof tile and stone are complemented by small slivers of roof tile set in plaster around the windows and chimney.



A Tolkien-esque mahogany “butterfly” window with hand-forged iron hinges showcases the view of the nearby woods. *All photos: courtesy of Archer & Buchanan Architecture, Ltd., unless otherwise noted*

within that one space have the many functions occur.” However, one important function was intentionally omitted from the plan. “There is no bathroom,” says Archer. “We talked about it and decided not to put one there, so that you can only stay there for so long. It was just to ensure that this is a place to house the collection, not to house individuals.”

While assessing the site, Archer & Buchanan decided to capitalize on a spectacular view to the woods – and reference Tolkien’s descriptions – by incorporating a large butterfly window, which was crafted by local cabinetmaker David Thorngate. The firm imported new handmade clay roof



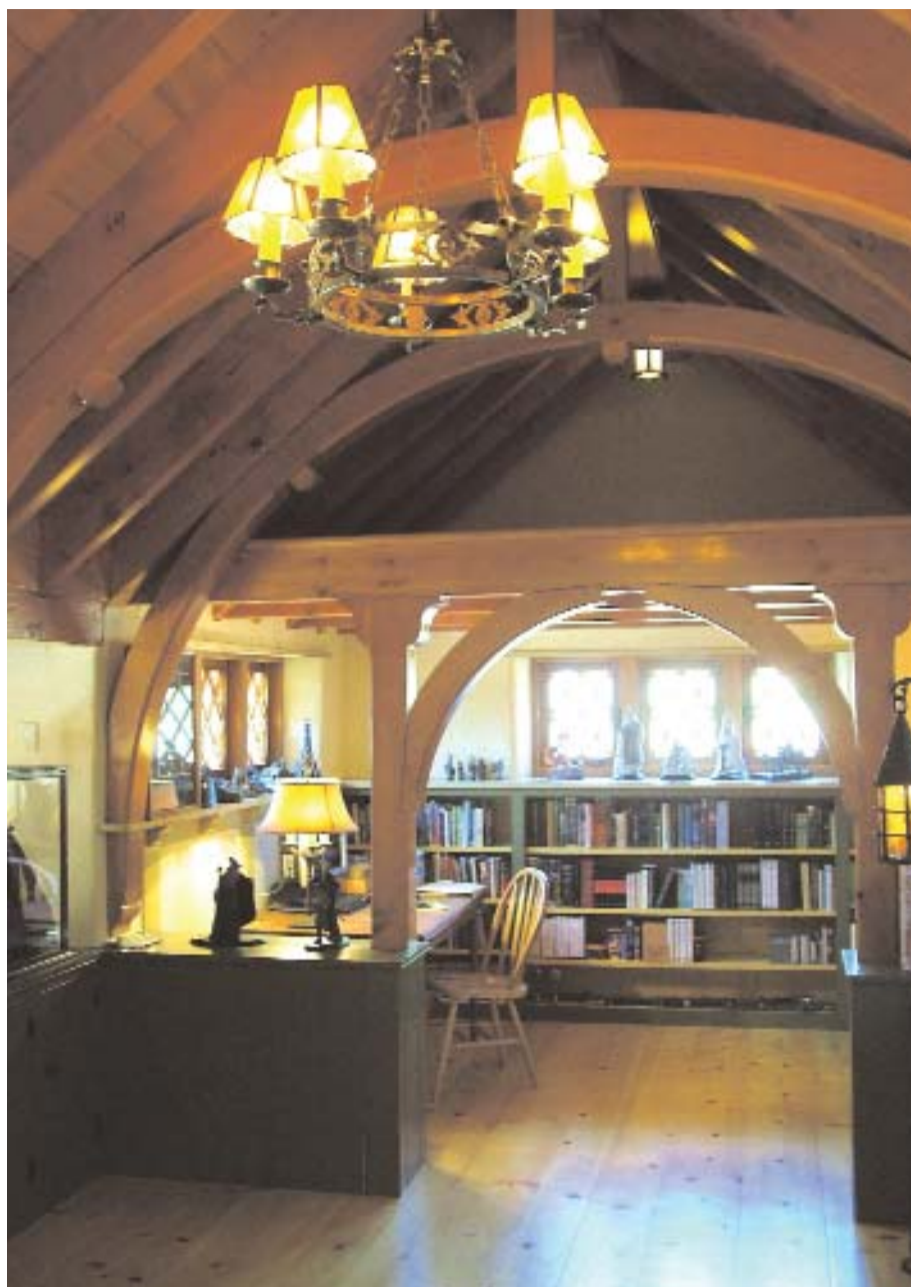


Antique lighting fixtures and a single-pivot, hand-forged iron hinge create period ambiance at the entry, which leads to the plaster and tile fireplace.

tile from France, chosen for its aged appearance. In keeping with the idea that the front elevation emerged from the existing stone wall, the roof form and large eyebrow wrap over the window, giving the impression of an old, setting roof. "So many wonderful buildings throughout southern England have curves in their roofs," says Archer. "But a lot of them have just curved through the ages and through the settling of the timber frame over time, so we wanted to be a little more purposeful here and carry that analogy through." While the main house stands apart from the diminutive museum, the client is considering carrying out some work on its façade to visually link the two buildings. For now, a separate stair from the master bedroom provides easy access to the structure, which remains hidden from the main road.

Despite the high quality of the craftsmanship throughout, costs for the "Hobbit House" were kept relatively low, a fact Archer credits to the commitment of the general contractor, Chester Springs, PA-based Richard Owen, and the craftspeople. "The builder, who lived nearby, was very interested and very hands-on," says Archer. "And we searched a wide area to bring in the craftspeople, who became so interested – it was really quite magical – that they went above and beyond the call of duty without charging huge amounts." Most of the craftspeople were sole practitioners with relatively low overheads who traveled for hours each day. "The stone masons came from way out in the country," says Archer. "But normally they build stone barns and walls, so this was just tremendous for

Stonewalls and a rustic fence carry the Tolkien imagery into the surrounding landscape.



A desk and storage area allows for cataloging and studying the collection.

them. Everyone enjoyed the building so much, and I think there's a real lesson in that, which you don't see in everyday building construction."

For Archer & Buchanan, the project was a perfect, if extreme, application of its "build it smaller and build it better" philosophy. "It was still building-construction technology and creating new to look old," says Archer. "In structures of any shape and size, where quality and materials are compromised, longevity is compromised and more maintenance is required. Our overall philosophy as a firm is to build structures that are made to last, and will still be wonderful 100 years from now. I think that really describes architecture." – *Lynne Lavelle*