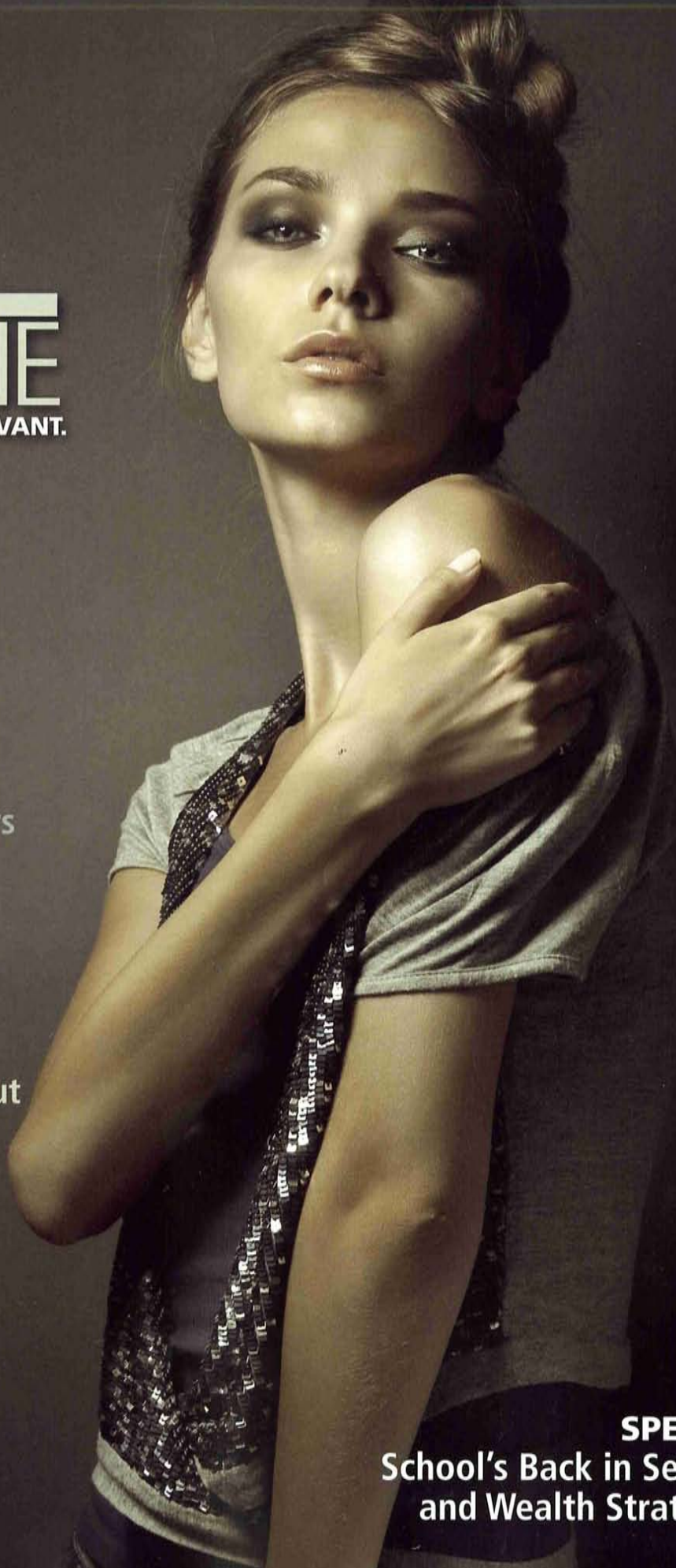


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# MOD MEN

A Chester County artist and a team of architects create a sleek, modern, open-plan haven behind an über-traditional farmhouse facade

From the road, the Chester County home of artist Clayton Bright and his wife Starr appears to have changed little since it was first constructed as part of an old hunt estate, including an 1888 bank barn and an 18th-century house. But circle around back, to the south side of the house, and you'll find the staid old building is actually a surprise venture into modernism, featuring not only original architectural elements but also a bold, boxlike glass addition with an angular butterfly roof, for an unlikely—but decidedly happy—marriage of old and new.

Architect Richard Buchanan, who created the addition and renovation with his firm Archer & Buchanan Architecture, says that owner Clayton Bright, "is an artist and he had a number of artistic ambitions for the house, inspired by Mies [Van De Rohe] and Philip Johnson's glass house, and by Japanese winter gardens, and by Chester County farmhouse architecture. His challenge to us was, 'How are you going to put it all together?'"

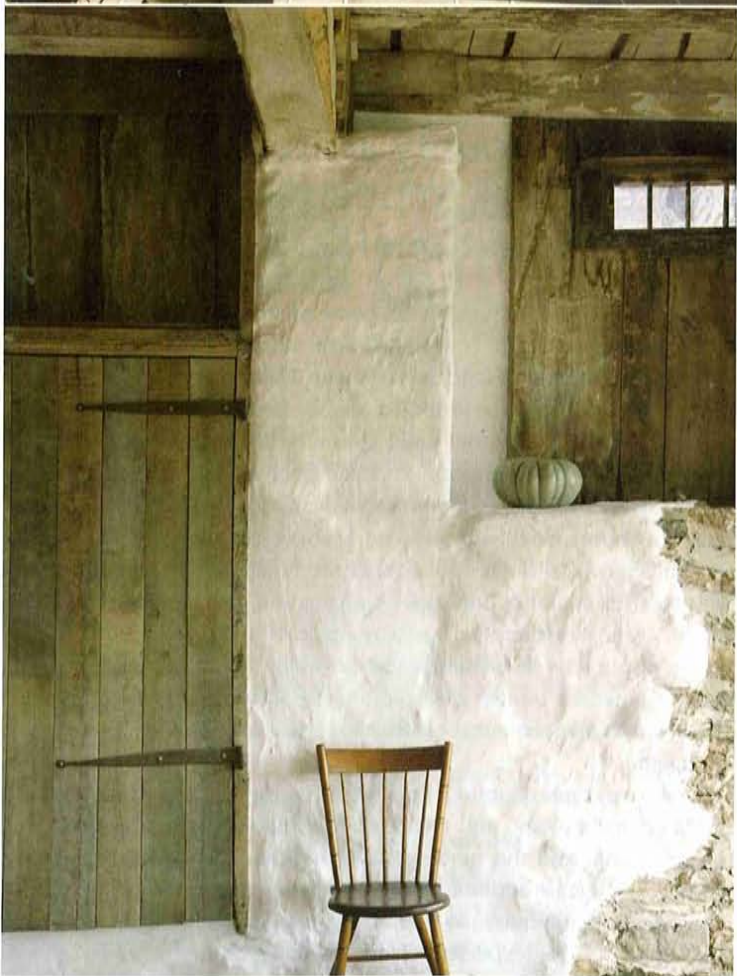
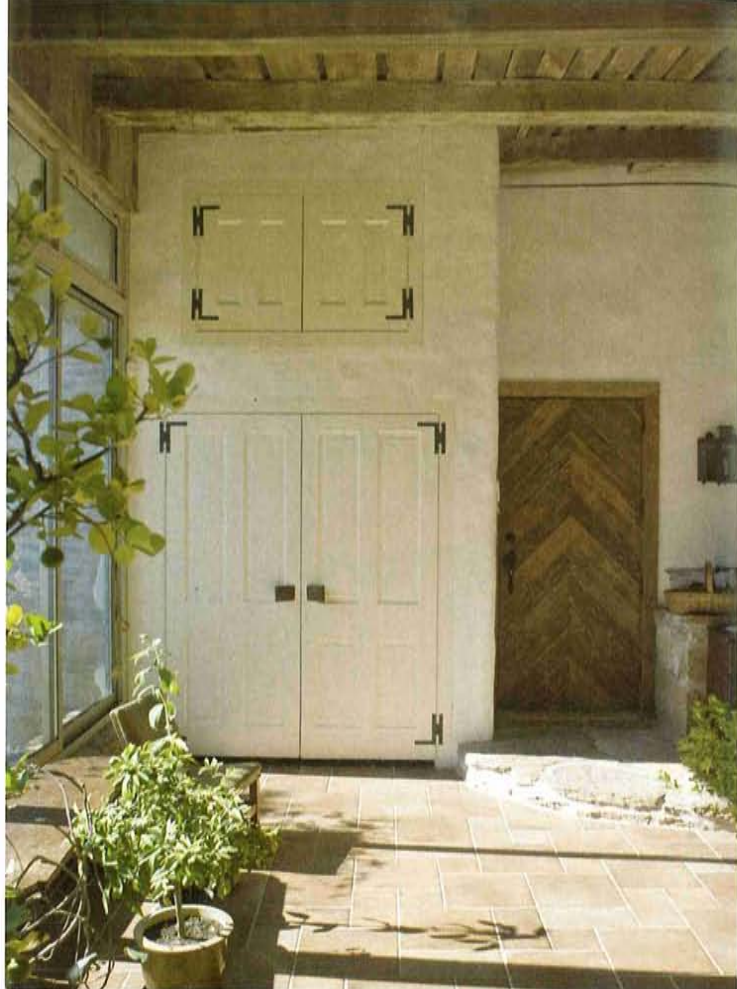
The answer turned out to be updating the pre-existing structures with the latest technology, and creating an addition that brought together the traditional and the modern in a way that respected the region's landscape. "In this addition, we were attempting to contrast very old with very contemporary, so within the contemporary spaces there are very traditional, unexpected elements, and within the older spaces

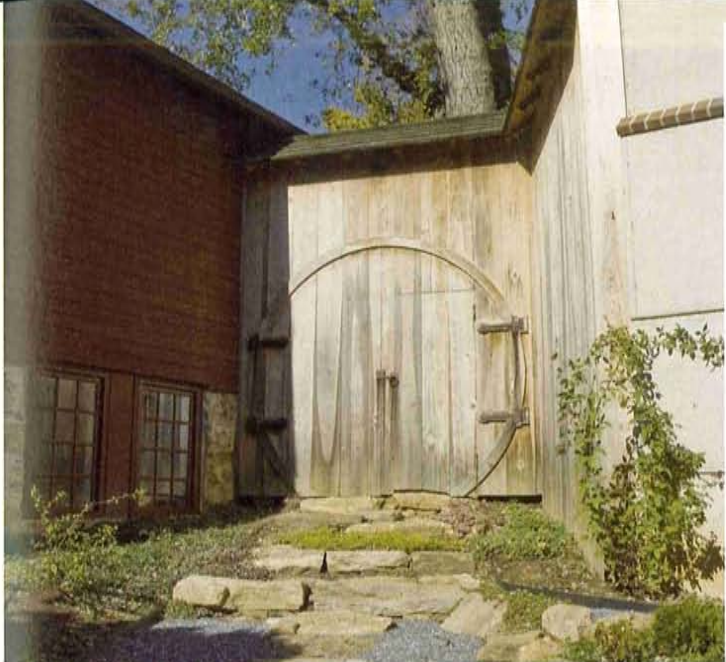
there are sleek contemporary details," Buchanan says. "That makes it a very interesting essay on traditional and contemporary aesthetics."

The seed for the idea came a few years back when the Unionville property—just across the road from the Brights' former house—went on the market. There weren't many takers since the 80-acre property was subject to a conservation easement, but Bright thought the old barn might make for an ideal studio space. "But," he says, "the moment we first saw the view, we thought it would be a shame to waste it on the studio alone."

Instead, they called on Buchanan to create a space that could be home to the Brights and their three children, while also hosting studio and exhibition space for Bright's painting and sculpture.

It was a challenging project for a number of reasons, the first being that the house was situated unusually close to the road. That, says Buchanan, "is a very green thing to do, capitalizing on the logic of an old farmer to live on the least desirable part of the property and preserve the rest of the land as open space." But it meant that he needed to close the house off to the north and open it up to the south, away from the road, maximizing the panoramic vista. The nearly 5,000-square-foot addition did just that, repositioning the main entryway while at the same time connecting the barn and the schoolhouse into one cohesive series





of living spaces.

Then there was Bright's fascination with glass houses, and his determination to create an addition that would be unabashedly modern, yet would still retain a sense of harmony with the original architecture.

Bright found himself driving up and down Route 202 "stopping at every shopping center" to examine the architecture and find a glass structure that seemed to make sense in the landscape. The swoop of the jutting butterfly roof eventually caught his eye. But ultimately, making an ostentatious modern statement wasn't Bright's style. So, the new construction facing the road is quite traditional, says Buchanan, "and the glass box is entirely hidden so as not to destroy the view from the road. That's what makes this statement particularly successful: the expression of this dramatic modern element is a very private one." A new stone chimney creates a sort of visual bridge that can be read as part of



the angular glass box or as the natural neighbor to the more traditional gabled structure.

The glass wall not only provides sweeping views, but also works with green design principles, thanks to the addition of a steel trellis, which is actually an integral structural element. Wisteria, wound through the trellis, blooms in the summer, shading the space from excessive solar light and heat; in the winter, when the wisteria sheds its leaves, more sunlight penetrates and warms the space.

The addition is essentially modern not just in its aesthetics, but also in its reliance on an underlying modernist design principle: an open plan. A great-room downstairs includes a family room, fireplace and an elaborate kitchen for Bright's wife, Starr, who's a highly trained chef. Upstairs, says Buchanan, the open plan means versatility: "Every time I've gone there Clayton's actually using the space in a different way—for dining, painting or sculpting." Meanwhile the small house—and the chicken coop that had been situated beneath it—were renovated into a bedroom; and the former barn contains a conservatory and a library full of art books, as well as bedrooms and other spaces.

Inside the house, Bright did all the design work himself, seeking out vibrating contrasts of old and new. The architects did the same when it came to technical upgrades, seamlessly excavating behind century-old stone walls to fully wire the house with state-of-the-art updates like radiant heat.

And while this, too, is invisible from the road, out back they created a decidedly zen Japanese garden, with a new stone bridge over a pre-existing pond and more wisteria wired into place against the wall.

All in all, says Buchanan, "It's an ideal environment for this family, mixing landscape and house, work and family. Any modernist work in Chester County is a departure. But he's able to pull this off because it's a personal expression in his own little world." ■