

THE ACOUSTICS

GREAT LAKES BY DESIGN

The French Transitional

This transitional lakefront retreat by Glennwood Custom Builders and AMDG Architects Inc. is a thoughtful interpretation for its landscape in which the natural world serves as central theme for its interiors

The French Transitional

Text: R.J. Weick

In the fossil-rich, post-glacial landscapes of the world, there is a presence and a resilience that is often hard to define in words. It is in the knowledge that ancient fossilization, uplift, and glacial activity, these monumental forces unbridled by time, helped shape lakebeds, tributaries, and wooded countryside. Its legacy is in the habitats that sprung up in its wake, serving as shelter and home to dynamic ecosystems and wildlife, and in its evolution and enduring ability to inspire.

For the husband-and-wife owners of this lakefront retreat, the landscape and the natural world served as a central theme, defining space and place as a timeless celebration of ar-

chitecture, beauty, art, and personal expression. Drawing on the French Norman Style, a rich vernacular that evokes its regional countryside and enduring architectural elements, this home is a thoughtful interpretation for its landscape, in which transitional design cues transform it for modern living as it opens toward the lake in a curation of layered warmth. Its composition of slate, granite, and limestone lend a sense of permanence and presence from approach, while its purposeful blend of glass and traditional elements on the lakeside soften its overall form, strengthening its relationship to the water.

“I wanted something different and sophisticated,” she said. “I have always had an

eye for beauty. I appreciate beauty, and beauty comes in many forms—and, to me, it’s so thrilling to think that this land has been here for such a long time, where various creatures have come and gone, and it just gives you a sense of legacy that people have been here in this area for that time.”

Realized by AMDG Architects Inc. of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Glennwood Custom Builders of Petoskey and Traverse City, Michigan, with Drost Landscape of Petoskey, Michigan, this transitional, French Norman Style-inspired retreat works with its sand and fossil-rich limestone landscape for the owners. Its interior, designed by the homeowner herself,





leans into its environment and ancient craft, in which handwoven rugs sourced directly from Rajasthan, India serve as foundation for the interior design. For the team behind the design and build, it was a project that leveraged their respective skills and dedication to craft, creative ingenuity, service, and design.

The team

“[The clients] had obtained this beautiful site, and they were looking for an architect who could be really collaborative and help them see the vision that they had for this property,” said Brent R. Dykstra, RA, residential studio leader and senior architect at AMDG Architects.

“Our mission is to use our gifts and talents to serve others, and our niche is complex design challenges. We endeavor to listen, to un-

derstand, and to know what is important and meaningful to our clients and then respond with creative ideas and design thinking. When we propose a design gesture that reinforces multiple layers of meaning—say, for example, circulation, views, and functional disposition of the program—we help bring to life our client’s aspirations. Which is really to say architecture is about people; in the words of AMDG’s founding principal Peter Baldwin: ‘Great design begins with a client who is deeply understood,’” Dykstra added.

AMDG Architects is a full-service architecture firm founded in 1992, dedicated to delivering spaces and environments that support their clients and impact their lives in meaningful ways. Dykstra noted that good design often means being a responsible steward of resources

on behalf of someone else, and from the very beginning of the project, the team came together in a very collaborative and intentional way.

“Our team really appreciated the collaborative spirit that Glennwood took [with this project], which started in schematic design. I think the earlier we can be in clear communication and collaboration, the more it benefits the client,” Dykstra said.

“They really wanted to make sure they built it not only per the drawings, but also per the design intent, executing it with quality and care, because a lot of the finishes and a lot of the details were frankly challenging, and I think they did a marvelous job. Similarly, Drost did a really good job picking up the design intent and executing a beautiful landscape design that advanced the design principles that we talked about early on when siting the home,” Dykstra added.

For Glennwood Custom Builders, a full-service design-build firm, collaboration is fundamental to delivering a building process in which quality craftsmanship, dedication to detail, and the expertise of all those involved from initial conception through structural build are brought to the table. It is about appreciating great architecture, the depth and breadth of experience of the professionals on staff, and contributing to an overall build process that is defined by excellence.

“We really enjoyed learning about the clients, the owners, and their vision for the project. It was a great fit for our team. They selected AMDG for their design, which we were really excited about, getting to work with them. It was a really great process collaborating with their team,” said Chess Ingram, director of project management at Glennwood Custom Builders.

Founded by Jeff Collins, Glennwood Custom Builders has developed a portfolio of work across design style, scale, and location over its 25 year history. The company also has a 10,000-square-foot shop for custom cabinetry, built-ins, painting, and pre-finishing, and offers services like site evaluation, construction management and consultation, in-house framing and custom cabinetry, furniture design and fabrication, and Green Build certified solutions.

“We specialize in craftsmanship and high quality, and with our in-house framers and in-house finish carpenters and painters, is definitely something that is showcased in this house. I mean the quality and level of detail in the craftsmanship definitely comes through,” Ingram said. “It was a very fun project, and the collaboration with AMDG and the homeowner throughout the entire process is what made the project so successful.”

Landscape and bedrock

For husband-and-wife clients, avid international travelers, this waterfront site became an ideal setting to realize a new retreat that was situat-





ed within a day's drive from their primary residence. For her, the region was also a familiar one, originally hailing from the greater Detroit area. So, when the pandemic halted most international travel and the property became available on the market, it would serve as a welcome retreat for the couple.

"My husband and I enjoy building projects together. As soon as the foundation is in, in his mind, his work is done and that's when I take over, but it's a really wonderful partnership because each of us brings our various talents to it, and I think we challenged [our team]. I think when everyone learns something new, it is very exciting and very invigorating, it's not just the same old same old," she said.

The site itself, which previously had a roughly 17,000-square-foot house that had burned down and was slated for a spec build, features a wooded area, a gently sloped terrain, and a shoreline set upon a limestone bedrock. Dykstra, who noted an essential element of the creative process was the communication and use of time as the team navigating the early phases of COVID lockdown, said the siting was very much about the views to the lake from multiples spaces, and the build team was very intentional about the distance and the angle at which the home set relative to the shoreline, to natural light, and to outdoor spaces.

"We were able to work collaboratively with Glennwood Custom Builders and Drost

Landscape to come up with a footprint and an elevation of the floor levels that optimized that view as the site slowly descends to the water," Dykstra said. "In addition to being intentional about the siting and the views, we had to be intentional about the approach to the home and the way you move through this wooded area before it eventually opens, unfolding in a forecourt to the entry. The home really brackets and creates space at the approach, and then sets up this really fabulous view to the lake."

Ingram noted that one of the challenges of the build was the limestone bedrock of the site, how close it was to the surface, and having to navigate portions of the old foundation

still buried onsite while excavation was conducted for the new build.

"We expected that we would have a fair amount of breaking up some of that limestone bedrock to construct the foundation," Ingram said. "In the beginning, the owners also expressed a desire to have a truly acclimated wine cellar, which would be essentially a cave dug into the ground deep enough that it could be naturally acclimated for temperature and humidity. That is not something we had done in the past, which was a fun challenge going in and something we are very proud of that we were able to achieve."

Located underneath the driveway, the wine cellar features a limestone floor and is designed to be modulated by the ambient temperature and climate of the natural earth. Dykstra also noted the owner's design criteria was for an "old world" cellar without any mechanical ventilation. The team conducted a number of studies relative to the temperature gradient of the soil to maintain proper conditions.

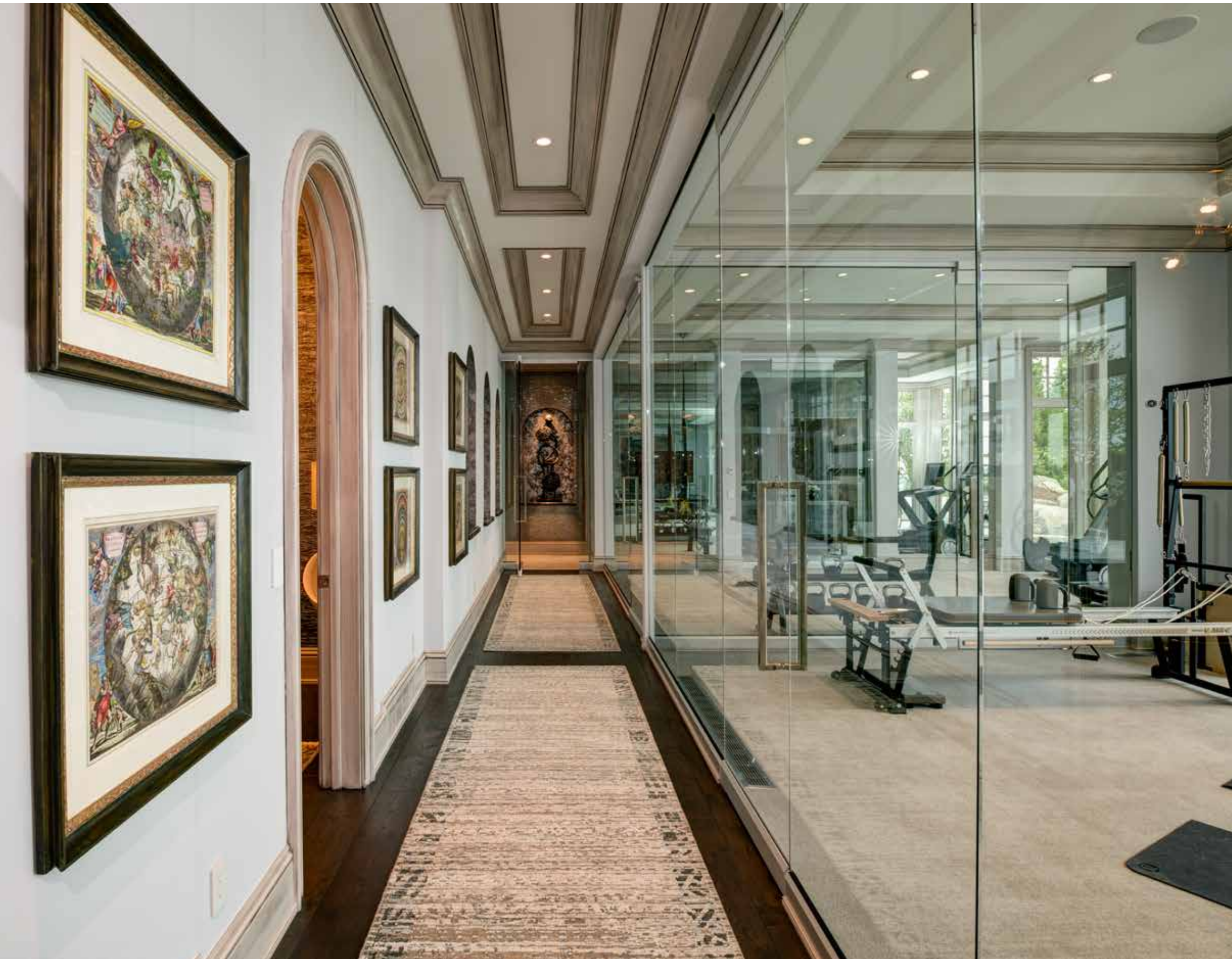
"Building the wine cellar was a unique project," Ingram added. "The excavator spent a lot of time breaking up bedrock so we could dig this wine cellar deep enough. We had an engineer who had given us specifications for how deep it needed to be below the soil to maintain the right temperature and humidity



that left us with a natural limestone floor and then we built the concrete structure around it, which was finished with stone masonry to look like a natural cave."

Style and design intent

Built to withstand wind exposure in excess of 100 mph by means of an embedded steel frame structure, this transitional, French Norman



Style is designed to last. While located in a region far outside the traditional risk zones for storms like hurricanes, its freshwater setting is no less familiar to brutal weather patterns, fluctuating water levels, and high force winds within a dynamic ecosystem that is constantly changing. Its materiality is one of resilience and low maintenance, featuring Corinthian granite stone and composite board-and-batten siding, and performance-based Holly Hunt acoustic wallpaper in certain areas of the home. There are also copper flashings and valleys, and a Vermont Slate roof designed to withstand the natural freeze and thaw cycles of the area.

"It's different than you typically see here. The roof is designed to last a lifetime, which is not something you see very often," Ingram said.

The vernacular itself also gestures to the enduring nature of the built world, in which its material composition grounds it into the land-

scape and lends a sense of permanence despite being a new build. The decision to take cues from the transitional style also blurs aesthetic boundaries, redefining space as something timeless rather than a specific moment in time, such as through the softened arches within the interior and the expansive use of glass on the waterfront side of the home that hints at the clean-lined fluidity of contemporary without abandoning traditional elements.

For the homeowner, the exterior was meant to feel like a chateau set in the Normandy, France countryside, while the interior embraced a more transitional aesthetic that allowed for the curation of their art collections and antiques, and passion project-dedicated spaces, like a state-of-the-art woodshop.

"I'm pretty traditional usually, but I wanted something a little more transitional. Imagine, if you will, an eccentric aunt who



The detail-rich retreat features soaring 11-foot ceilings that invite natural light and the colors of the water deep into the home amid a soft, layered palette. Its programmatic layout is intuitive and stretches outward to the waterfront, featuring three bedrooms in the main house and an apartment located above the attached garage. And its interior is one that builds off the handwoven rugs, bringing in locally handcrafted iron railings that evoke the sinuous form of branches and seaweed, hanging sculptures made from steam bent hardwood—such as the textured, 25-pound Renee Dinauer piece above the fireplace in the great room—intricate glass blown chandeliers from Italy, and fossilized limestone in the lower level.

“The client really was looking for a place to assemble and curate a lot of personal art and artifacts, and acquired collections, and so as much as it is a space for them to retreat and enjoy their respective pursuits—cooking, woodworking, curating art and pieces from antiquity, commissioned sculptures, and acquired paintings—it is also a place to recharge, enjoy nature, and enjoy the site,” Dykstra said. “There is this beautiful balance between this retreat for personal pursuits and also a place to curate, show, and enjoy these personal interests and passions. The home just takes on all these layers, this personal expression of its owners.”

had gone on all kinds of travels and collected unusual things, but what made it easy is that I had this theme of the natural world. If it didn't pertain to the natural world, even if it was gorgeous, we passed on it,” she said.

“I went to Rajasthan, India and selected my

rugs very early on, got them on the loom, because something had to be decided first. It set the color palette, it determined the countertops and cabinets, and at least for me, it seemed like the way to do it, and there wasn't a lot of temptation to deviate,” she added.



Details and finishes

Details, like collected objects and art, carry their own powerful narratives and have a unique ability to evoke connection, curiosity, and emotion—to history, to landscape, and to memory. For this home, it is a story in which each piece, finish, and object elevates the design into a cohesive experience. The antique limestone floor in the kitchen and foyer is reclaimed from cathedrals, and there is custom cabinetry fabricated by Schlabach Furniture of Ohio Amish Country, hand-painted Valhalla wallpaper, floor-to-ceiling quartzite in the showers, and a library featuring custom bleached walnut panels on the walls and ceilings.

“The owners went to Brazil directly to a quarry and had them cut blocks of quartzite out of the quarry and ship it over to our fabricator. The countertops and showers are really fabulous,” Ingram said.

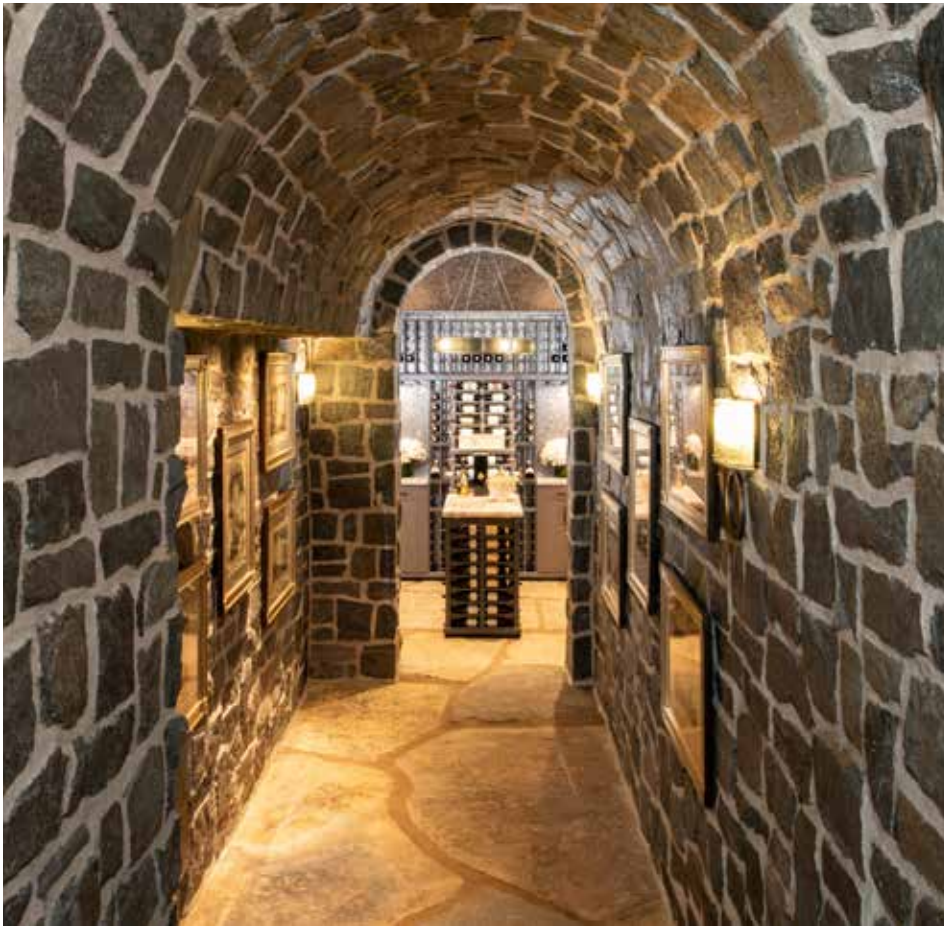
Those countertops feature a 2 3/8” built up edge profile, and in the lower level, the limestone countertop and backsplash has fossils that date back roughly 50 million years. There is also the wine cellar, which features handmade Valhalla mica paper, antique prints of French growing regions, and a barreled limestone that featured an old hand-packing technique the mason was able to recreate that dated back centuries. Other features of the home comprise a steam shower, dry sauna, and shower in the spa room; a hot yoga room complete with its



own HVAC system; a custom-built hot tub that can accommodate up to 12 people; an exercise room; and the professional-grade woodshop.

“His hobby is woodworking, so we built him a 2,000-square-foot professional woodshop with a dust collector system and an air

compress system, with all state-of-the-art woodworking equipment. They've got Rumford masonry, wood-burning fireplaces, custom hand-painted wallpapers, and beautiful landscaping features,” Ingram said. “Their entire driveway and motor court is constructed



with herringbone pavers and they have a water feature at the arrival motor court with ponds and waterfalls and a bronze eagle the owners purchased in Wyoming.”

Even the bronze eagle holds a story and meaning, in which the statue represents a bald eagle nicknamed Larry known to hunt from one of the trees onsite near the shoreline.

“Larry has been with us from the start. That bronze eagle in front of the waterfall shows what we have witnessed Larry do time and again,” the homeowner said. “I say that ‘he’s going out for sushi’ and to watch those birds hunt and bring those fish back up to the tree, it’s just thrilling.”

The experience

For Dykstra, there is meaning in being able to design space that really promotes the flourishing of the people who are using the architecture, and good design, intentional space, matters because at the end of the day, beauty matters.

“I think as humans, we are given the capacity to appreciate beauty, and we are given the capacity to creatively participate in that. If you think about the Vitruvian triad of firmness, commodity, and delight, there is something special about this delight aspect. We can build things functionally and we can build things durably, but there is something about the human soul that yearns for them to be built beautifully, and I think in this project, there was a particular interest to celebrate beauty and to celebrate art,” Dykstra said.

“For the interior, she masterfully composed and assembled this curated collection, really taking inspiration from nature—the textures, the colors, specimens from the natural world whether it is antique prints of fish or wallcoverings that allude to the sedimentation of the geology on-site—and there is a rich layer of meaning and inspiration that inform the interior design. I think when the architecture can let that stand front and center, rather than calling attention to itself, then you have a building that knows itself and lets its purpose shine through,” Dykstra added.

To the homeowners, it is a retreat, a place of solace, and a celebration of both art and landscape.

“I’m really happy with the way it turned out,” she said. “When people visit, I want them to have a memorable experience, which is not only about the things we do, we eat, and we drink, but also how did it feel, how did it look, and how did it smell. All of that is very important to me.”