

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

AN ART-FILLED COUNTRY RETREAT

With a nod to Philip Johnson's Glass House, architect Joel Barkley merges transparent curtain walls and rustic timber in a barn-inspired home for publishing executive Robert E. Abrams and his wife, Cynthia Vance

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Around 25 years ago, Manhattan art collector and Abbeville Press publisher Robert E. Abrams purchased a 41-acre parcel one hour north of the city on which to build a country home. With panoramic Currier & Ives views of gently rolling hills, the property was enthralling—and daunting. “The spot was so gorgeous, my biggest fear was that I’d screw it up,” says Abrams, the son of pioneering art-book publisher Harry N. Abrams. Unsure of exactly what type of structure he wanted but unable to leave the

site alone, Abrams started planting the first of more than 500 specimen trees. “By the time we were ready to proceed with the house, we had an arboretum!” says his wife, Cynthia Vance, an actress and a children’s-book acquisitions editor at Abbeville. “When we were married, in 1998, we had our rehearsal picnic on a deck specially built on the site.”

It would be another decade before the real building began. In the interim, Vance and Abrams bought a neighboring home to use as their weekend retreat, deciding the other land would be ideal for a capacious guesthouse, one that could also serve as a gallery and storage facility for their extensive collections of art and books. They hired Joel Barkley, a partner at Ike Kligerman Barkley Architects, a firm based in New York City and San Francisco, to develop a scheme tailored to both the topography and their needs. The trio spent nearly five years conceiving—and discarding—plans. “We have a beautiful portfolio of unbuilt houses,” Vance jokes.

Eventually they arrived at the concept of an “art barn” that would honor the pastoral setting and provide generous spaces for showing large paintings and sculptures, predominantly works from the 1960s through the ’80s. The initial challenge, Barkley says, was to devise a structure that had abundant windows for viewing the breathtaking scenery but could also maintain a climate-controlled environment hospitable to displaying art.

As part of their research, the architect and clients paid a call to Philip Johnson, the giant of American modernism, at his iconic Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. The visit had a profound impact on Barkley. “I love see-through houses,” he says, “and we had the perfect opportunity to design one.”

Barkley’s final plans called for a three-level, 10,000-square-foot timber-frame barn structure topped by a low-pitch gable roof. The architect inserted “a little bit of the Glass House right in the middle,” he notes, by putting glass curtain walls on the front and rear façades.

Approaching the house from the drive, visitors cross a bluestone forecourt that leads to the dramatic transparent entry, where the view extends straight through to the back lawn, dotted with sculptures and framed by distant hills.

When you step inside and move around the loftlike space, with its honey-tone ash floor and Douglas-fir beams, your eye skips from sculptures by Isamu Noguchi, George Segal, and Marisol to paintings by Morris Louis and Larry Rivers without ever losing sight of the landscape outside. “It offers the best of both worlds,” says Barkley, who points out that the design “broke the box, like Frank Lloyd Wright advocated,” by pushing some of the windows into the corners and maximizing wall space for art.

Visible from the entry, on the mezzanine above, are walls lined with Jim Dine paintings and Andy Warhol silkscreens. But it's not obvious how to reach the second floor, where two airy bedrooms are located, because the staircase is tucked behind a massive stone fireplace. ("You're not invited to the bedrooms unless you know the way," Barkley says with a laugh.) Instead, visitors are immediately drawn from the ground floor down to the lower level by a tapered staircase whose forced perspective was inspired by the Laurentian Library in Florence. "That was Bob's idea," says Barkley. At the bottom of the steps is a treasure trove of a library, devoted exclusively to Abbeville titles. The light-filled space—with views of the back lawn—doubles as an anteroom to an underground art-storage area outfitted with sliding hanging racks and rolling units. Says Abrams, "We're able to come down here at ten o'clock at night to look at paintings."

Vance and Abrams, who have a young son, hadn't planned on living upstairs from their collection. But just as construction on the barn was being completed, the couple decided they would move in and put up guests in the neighboring house instead. They also rethought the placement of bookcases being crafted for the main floor, realizing the shelving would disrupt the symmetry of the space. But that meant finding a new home for all of the books that had belonged to Abrams's father. "We parked them in the garage," Barkley says, explaining that the bookcases fit perfectly into the detached rustic-modern structure with a silo-like stone tower, the latter now a reading room.

To help make the barn feel homey, Vance and Abrams called in Clodagh, the Manhattan interior designer who had worked with them on their Tribeca loft. "She sprinkled her fairy dust and did her feng shui," Vance says appreciatively. "She is very concerned how a space can meet and feed your emotional needs." The designer arranged the furniture and art so that the couple's son would have a sense of freedom. "A little boy can run around without feeling like he is trampling through a museum," Clodagh says.

While the paintings and sculptures were the barn's *raison d'être*, the power of the architecture itself is undeniable. "Even without the art," Abrams says, "the place is absolutely incredible."

[Click here to see the slide show of this art-filled country house by Joel Barkley.](#)

