

PASSPORT TO COUNTRY PROPERTIES



The winter living room in the South Kent home of Robert and Carol Lenz has the cozy feel of a deluxe ski lodge. Photos of the property courtesy of Klemm Real Estate.

Mission Accomplished

Master Architect Brings Owner's Vision to Life

Text by KATHRYN BOUGHTON

KIDS, COMPANY, AN AMERICAN LIFE-STYLE—they all demand space, and Robert and Carol Lenz planned for plenty of it 16 years ago when they purchased approximately 50 acres with a magnificent view in South Kent, Conn., and began the process of creating a dream home.

The quality they demanded was

exacting, and it was three years before their sprawling 19-room, shingle-style-and-stone estate was ready for their occupancy—and even then they hosted one of the benefit parties they are known for before there was any furniture in the house. “Everyone was outside on the decks and we had a Dixieland band, but there was no furniture inside,” Mr. Lenz recalled.

“We’ve had a lot of great parties here.”

The most recent had taken place only the weekend before this writer visited, when the Litchfield Performing Arts Association, of which Mr. Lenz is the board president, held an afternoon party at the property to raise funds for its Litchfield Jazz Camp, an offshoot of the popular and critically acclaimed Litchfield Jazz Festival, held each

August in Goshen, Conn.

The lack of furniture was quickly rectified, and the Lenz family was soon cozily at home in the 7,200-square-foot main residence, with its grandmothers' suite, six spacious bedrooms, summer and winter living rooms, hickory wood kitchen, mahogany paneled office space and amenities such as a wine cellar, gymnasium and sauna room. It was the right house for their lives at the time.

Mr. Lenz—the retired chairman of the ad agency Backer Spielvogel and former art director at McCann Erickson, who came up with, among other things, the well-known “Tastes Great, Less Filling” Miller Lite campaign—was just stepping down from a busy career in 1998 when he and his wife built the house. In addition to business associates coming to stay and fund-raising events, there were the comings and goings of their children and grandchildren.

And, then there was—and is—his art. Upon retirement, he resumed his



*Kathryn Boughton
Artist Robert Lenz at the South Kent,
Conn., property he has put on the market.*

long-interrupted love of fine arts painting and printing, working both in the Kent countryside and in the guest house cum studio that he constructed near the main residence. The University of Illinois painting and fine arts major has since refreshed his fine arts skills with studies at the Silvermine School of Art

in New Canaan, Conn., the Washington Art Association in Washington, Conn., and the National Academy of Design and the Art Students' League in New York City, and exhibits his work regularly at the Morrison Gallery in Kent. He has also warmed the walls of his home with his own works and those of favored artists.

“Our lifestyle has changed a bit since we built this house. When we moved in, we still needed the grandmothers' and the kids' bedrooms. Now, we need something smaller, more compact—and I would like to build one more time,” he said as he sat in the handsome office on the ground floor of his spacious home. “I like the idea of an open-space house, like a loft experience.”

“After a certain amount of time, it is just time to go, but we are not rushing into it,” he continued. “I expect it will take some time to sell this place [as it is listed at \$12.5 million] and the thought of dismantling it after more than a decade of living here—oh, my God!”

Still, Mr. Lenz termed his first expe-



An infinity pool with a view: it was the expansive viewscape from their hill that originally captivated the Lenz family.



Each room in the spacious home has a panoramic view of the valley below and of the surrounding hills.

rience of building a home “fascinating” and looks forward to repeating the process again, this time with an emphasis on green technologies and sustainability. “This is kind of a classic, traditional house built with first-rate materials—but technology has developed since we built it,” he said.

“I sort of designed this with my

architect,” he continued, saying that he had written a “review,” as if he were viewing the house he wanted, and gave it to his architect, the rough-hewn but brilliant Vito Fosella of Pound Ridge, N.Y., before the planning began. “After the house was done, I took it out and it was amazing. He drew all the plans by hand—he doesn’t use a com-

puter—and everything was there.”

He said his selection of the South Kent property had been at the urging of his architect. “Vito had studied with Frank Lloyd Wright and is a genius. He had gone all over with me looking at property, but he just had a sense about this place,” Mr. Lenz said.

It was not an easy property to develop, however, and the careful preparation of it took years. “First we had to renovate the house by the gates to live in while work was going on,” Mr. Lenz explained. “Then we had to build the driveway, which is three-quarters of a mile long. We had to do a lot of blasting so there was a lot of stone and guys would be chipping away at it and I would think, ‘Oh, my God, that’s going to be part of the house.’”

Because the land dips down, offering spectacular views of the valley and lake below, the men decided to minimize the house’s presence on the land by building into the side of the hill. “We built down rather than up,” Mr. Lenz explained. Also nestled into the hillside just below the house is an infinity pool and pool house.

Thus, the approach to the house at the end of the long, winding driveway,

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gives no hint of the size of the massive building. Similarly, it does not dominate the horizon from the other side. Selective cutting of the forest on the three acres surrounding the building further ensures that the house does not mar the viewshed from below.

Mr. Fosella turned to the Renaissance for part of his inspiration, according to Mr. Lenz, and used a grid system that "gives the building a sense of unity." "Every room is a multiple of seven and a half feet," he explained. "The rooms are the same size above and below. Another good thing about building that way is that it saves money."

Those saved dollars were quickly converted into special touches that make the home even more magnificent. "Vito is the last of a breed," Mr. Lenz said. "He didn't want this to look like an old house, but he wanted traditional values. Everything in the house is custom-made, every door and every window. And he did special things like that moulding"



Laurie Gaboardi
Peter Klemm of Klemm Real Estate.

—he gestured to the deep shelf moulding in the office—"and the pyramid ceiling in the master bedroom. All the brass on the doors was purchased from a dealer in London, England. That was my job, the one thing he trusted me with."

He noted that the tiles on the floor of the lower hallway are all French roof tiles and that the balusters on the stairway were all specially designed and

hand-turned. Some "beautiful oaks" were cut down when the land was selectively cleared and the wood was cut into 24-foot-long beams that were incorporated into the building. The sides of the tree trunks were cut into floorboards.

"The craftsmanship and quality of the materials is extraordinary," he concluded.

He said that he asked the architect to give the "winter living room" the sense of a ski lodge and that goal is reflected in the casual warmth of that room. He pointed out that the stones in the fireplace were all cut for assembly from materials taken from his land.

The "summer living room" located off the kitchen is light and airy. Such was the attention to detail that the kitchen side of the door between the formal dining room and kitchen is faced with hickory to match the cabinets, while the dining room side is mahogany. The dining room, which has a 18th-century feel with its touch of Wedgwood blue, is spacious enough to easily sit 28 for dinner.

While all the rooms have a view out over the valley, the ability to enjoy that view is enhanced by spacious decks on

the rear of the house. Indeed, in a previous interview, Mr. Lenz referred to the visual display from his property as "his favourite room."




A view of house and grounds from the valley side reveals how it has been nestled into the surrounding landscape.

"The view is wonderful because it is always changing," the artist said.

The Lenz home is listed with Klemm Real Estate, which has built a reputation for its luxury property sales and marketing throughout Litchfield County, Conn. Klemm serves all 26 towns and villages, as well as adjacent areas in New York, from its offices in Washington Depot, Litchfield, Lakeville, Sharon, Roxbury and Woodbury. Call 860-868-7313 or e-mail info@klemmrealestate.com to learn more.

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