



Perfect *PANORAMA*

A striking, modern abode by
Christian Zapatka takes
full advantage of dramatic
Potomac River views

By JULIE SANDERS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GORDON BEALL



“Come in, you have to see this,” beckons architect Christian Zapatka, standing at the door



Previous spread: As seen from the back, the house offers views of the river through windows in nearly every room. These pages: The front façade (above) shows the front door within an indentation that acts as a porch. The entry opens to a hallway (opposite) boasting walnut floors and a stairwell made of pine blocks, glass and steel. On the top level of the central vault, the home office (top) opens to a rear balcony that recalls the deck of a ship.

of a recently completed project in McLean, Virginia. He and the homeowner are positively beaming with anticipation as they draw their visitor through the front entry and around the corner to where the living room lies. As they do, a view of the Potomac River opens up that, literally, takes your breath away. The house is sited on a ridge 200 feet above the water, and the river vista, framed by foliage, dramatically unfolds in rocky outcroppings, churning currents and green, undulating shorelines.

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 ARCHITECTURE: CHRISTIAN ZAPATKA, AIA, FAAR, Christian Zapatka Architect PLLC, Washington, DC. BUILDER: DOUG BLAUER, OC Builders Inc., McLean, Virginia. LANDSCAPE DESIGN: BRETT LEIGHTY, Area Landscaping, Inc., Fairfax, Virginia.



No wonder the homeowners, an aviation entrepreneur and his wife, wanted a house that would focus on the view. They were already living on the two-plus-acre property in a 1970s-era abode when they hired Zapatka to design a new home that would do justice to its remarkable locale. “The original house had no relationship to the landscape, let alone the view,” Zapatka says. “We created a series of rooms strung along a viewing platform. Every main room has a view of the river.”

During the design phase, the idea was raised of using arches as a structural device. Zapatka decided to make them “volumetric, like vaults. The vault is so timeless—Roman but also very modern,” he says. “And of course, airplane hangars are vaulted.” It was the perfect motif for the homeowner, given his line of work.



From the living room (right), the river vista stretches ahead. A niche by the dining area (top) offers a lounging spot for reading or taking in the views. The kitchen (above) features striking, strong-grained macassar cabinetry and a table by the island for casual meals.



The finished structure incorporates a major and a minor vault connected by a linear, one-story volume. From the front, the house appears to be a single story with a two-story center volume. At the back, however, the ground slopes down and three glass-walled stories are visible: the basement, the main level and a third story, which is contained in the center volume. Balconies on the main level evoke the decks of a ship.

While the original house was situated back from the ridge, Zapatka sited the new one along its outermost edge. “There was a lot of shoring up,” he says. “Serious foundation work is keeping this all in place.”

A metal roof conveys the hangar motif, and stucco clads the exterior. “Stucco is solid and doesn’t distract the eye from the composition,” Zapatka observes.

Inside, the owners specified a single-level layout that would enable them to age in place. They also requested a beautiful, functional kitchen and an open floor plan. “This is the house we’ll be in forever,” says the wife. “We wanted to do it right.”

In fact, the only structural element that breaks up the open plan in the home’s public areas is what Zapatka calls a “central core” containing a fireplace and a shaft for a future elevator; it also anchors the staircase. “This is a tried-and-true planning device in modern houses,” explains the architect. “Not only does it provide circulation and space for utilities, it also acts as a divider instead of conventional walls.”

A pine-block, glass-and-steel staircase leads to a second-floor office, where the central vaulted roofline stretches overhead, flanked by a catwalk overlook-



Suede sofas by Swaim, long owned by the clients, and a coffee table from Design Within Reach are a perfect fit in the living room (left), which was designed to accommodate the clients' furniture. The room is flanked by two balconies, one of which is pictured above.

ing the entry. The stairs also lead to a lower level, which houses an exercise room and guest suite.

The open plan encompasses the front hall, living room and dining area, with the kitchen as a focal point. "We wanted the kitchen to be a showpiece," says the husband. High-gloss macassar cabinets are paired with black-granite countertops, and the island has an attached macassar table for casual meals.

High up on one wall of the dining area, a series of clerestory windows offers glimpses of sky and trees without detracting from the windows across the room that frame the river views. Below those small windows, a long, built-in macassar beverage bar provides additional storage.

To the right of the front hall, a gallery leads to a guest room as well as the master

suite, which accesses one of the balconies. From the gallery, French doors also open onto a small front porch facing the driveway that enjoys the afternoon sun.

The home is furnished with a mix of family heirlooms and new, modern pieces. "Christian just had to make sure the living room was big enough to hold my sofas," recalls the wife. "That was the only requirement."

Zapatka's decision to conceal the view from arriving guests "was critical," he says. "Don't give it all away. You want a hall where you can greet your guests and be with them for a moment. Then you come around the corner and that's when you say 'wow.'" ❖

Photographer Gordon Beall is based in Bethesda.

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From the front hall (opposite), stairs lead down to the lower level and up to the husband's office. Beyond the stairwell, a gallery opens to a small porch (above). The master bath features a Calacatta marble-clad shower and floor (top and right), along with custom cabinetry.