





# WATER BY DESIGN

*Living in lakeside minimalism* | BY GERRI LEWIS | PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE FREIHON  
STYLING BY ROBIN CURNAN AND SUSAN BUZAID OF OLLEY COURT, RIDGEFIELD



**MODERN PATH**  
Architects Warren and Mai Arthur created space that reflects her interest in a minimalist indoor décor and his interest in creating a low-maintenance accentuating landscape.



SEVERAL WORDS COME TO MIND WHILE RELAXING ON THE DECK OF WARREN AND MAI TSAO Arthur's Lake Mamasco home. Simplicity for the landscape with its neatly pruned hemlocks and crush of juniper bordering the lakeside retreat; minimalism for the less-is-more attitude found both inside and outside the house; and serenity for the feelings that overwhelm the moment one steps through the arched gateway into this mini-compound.

The house is made up of two small cottages built on a sliver of land only 58 feet deep and wedged between the road and the expansive lake beyond. A courtyard and garden bridges the guest quarters to the main house and both are hidden behind a privacy wall creating a cozy retreat with a magnificent view. Each home has its own private deck, but a shared space offers another natural mahogany escape perched so close to the water's edge that you feel as though you are actually afloat along with the kayakers who frequently paddle by.

The Arthurs first met while studying architecture at Columbia University. Together they built both a marriage and a career as designers and architects and they seem the perfect balance for each other. Warren pours tremendous energy into the exterior and the landscape, something he says people in their own homes often overlook. Mai, of Chinese descent, focuses on interiors and lighting. "When the Chinese greet visitors, it is often from a formal reception area, and they are not immediately invited into the inner rooms," says Mai as she serves sweet iced tea on a steamy summer day. "The home unveils itself gradually—the better you know someone, the more inner layers they get to see."

The Arthurs' cottage isn't large enough to offer a variety of rooms as guests work their way up the relationship ladder, but the couple translated this attitude into hiding what they didn't want visitors to readily see, the inner day-to-day workings of their home. A line of doors blends so invisibly into the walls that it comes as a surprise when they are popped open to reveal a charming powder room, a no nonsense laundry area, and additional storage space.

If Mai is the Yin whose strength lies on the inside, than Warren is the Yang, balancing how the outdoors interacts with the home design. He prefers evergreen plantings that look natural and understated, even if they take some pruning effort. Rhododendrons add color along the stepped down deck and a centerpiece of alium adds a brilliant purple to the mix. Because Mai prefers simplicity, Warren says there are very few plant varieties in the expansive garden. This reinforces the less is more design and keeps from interfering with the main focus, the view. And, as an added bonus the deer do not like the Arthurs' selections. "The deer used to walk across the ice in the winter," says Warren. "Now we've added a buffer of juniper that keeps them out."

Thirty-five years ago when the Arthurs answered a newspaper ad for a cottage with a "water view" in Ridgefield, they didn't know what to expect. The price was very reasonable, but as Warren said, there was a reason for it. The former summer cottage was dated with antiquated plumbing, no septic, and took in little of the spectacular lake view. The Arthurs set about streamlining the cottage and opening it up to the outside. When their neighbor decided to sell the cottage next door, the Arthurs leaped at the opportunity to redesign the two homes into one compound.

"The design needed a lot of thought," says Warren, a man with the kind



**INSIDE AND OUT** A sunken living room holds a built-in leather topped sectional, a glass coffee table, and not much more. A 60-foot wall of glass does all the decorating that is needed by bringing the spectacular view inside. They wanted a "wow" effect.



**LESS IS MORE** The landscape is simplistic with its tiered and neatly pruned hemlocks. A crush of juniper borders the lakeside deck. A round window has recently replaced an old wagon wheel which had spokes removed. White walls and carpet offer a streamlined décor, even in the library.



of laid-back attitude that suggests nothing much ruffles his feathers. “All the buildings along the street are in a row and we didn’t want ours to be jarring or an intrusion into the streetscape—we wanted to feel that nothing popped out and that the rooflines blended in.”

But the Arthurs also wanted the house to have a “wow” factor. They had their hearts set on a contemporary interior with lots of glass. They selected a New England saltbox with cedar siding, a style that would allow for their contemporary vision. They lined the front of the house with floor-to-ceiling leaded-glass windows rescued from Stamford House Wrecking. They admit that the antique windows aren’t the most energy efficient, but they were unique and beautiful and it was love at first sight. The back of the house is lined with a wall of more-energy-conscious glass and sliding doors.

Although the Arthurs completely demolished the house, they kept within the existing footprint; something Mai says was so difficult and costly that they would have rethought the plan had they known. “I think we hold the record for the number of zoning board of appeals visits, says Warren with a smile as he points to a small octagonal addition that now holds the dining room, the only thing they added to the original footprint.

It was a complicated process to design a home with such limitations, yet one that would fulfill all the couple’s needs. During their multiple trips to Planning and Zoning and after many conversations with the building department, Warren says they became very educated on what they could and couldn’t do. Undaunted yet accepting of the restrictions, the Arthurs used their combined training to turn their challenge into a timeless home that looks as appropriate today as it did over 30 years ago when it was built.

a lovely lake house with a “wow” factor



**ABOUT THE HOUSE**  
Floor-to-ceiling leaded-glass windows and doorway are the focal point of the front of the house. The kitchen, installed 35 years ago, is a timeless space with a streamlined stainless-steel cooktop and sleek laminate for the cabinets.



The interior is efficient and understated. A white-carpeted, white-walled décor runs throughout the house. Off the entry an archway reveals a small alcove with a glimpse of a baby grand piano. Just steps from the front door, a sunken living room holds a built-in, leather-topped sectional, a glass coffee table and not much more. A 60-foot wall of glass adds all the decorating that is needed by bringing the spectacular water view indoors.

An adjacent library/game space with a glass-top table has a large round window to draw in more light and view. “When we first did this they didn’t make round windows, so we had to use an old wagon wheel and remove the spokes,” says Warren. After time the wood on the wheel rotted away and has since been replaced with a signature window.

The kitchen, while small by today’s standards, works well, according to Mai, and looks as if it was installed yesterday. The cooktop, built directly into the sleek stainless countertop was something of a challenge because as the couple found out, they needed additional ventilation to get the pilots to ignite. Rectifying the problem was just another step in the Arthurs’ ongoing quest to achieve the look they desired. Like all of the rooms, the kitchen is oriented toward the view. The octagon-shaped dining room beyond is encased in windows, creating the effect of eating in an outdoor garden.

Upstairs are two bedrooms, one of which Warren uses as his study. Mai’s study is a step-down alcove off the master suite. A master

bath has a step down tub again oriented toward the view. An upstairs bathroom in the main hallway has ultra-tall ceilings (the high side of the saltbox) and a spectacular oversized mirror, which creates the illusion that the room is much larger than it is. The only disruption in the white canopy is occasional artwork and the arched doorways made from the cedar siding on the exterior. Because there is no attic or basement, every bit of space is used in inventive ways. The pillars that hold the outdoor gateway arches have hidden doors that open to reveal rakes and other outdoor tools. Even the gas tank is housed in an oversized pillar that doubles as a stand for a bowl-shaped sculpture.

With their less-is-more attitude the couple has created a serene hideaway, one that not only encompasses the view, but reflects the attitude of these two minimalist personalities who want to enjoy the beauty of their surroundings with little disruption to the landscape. In that vein, the lake house designed by architects Warren and Tsao Mai Arthur is a double wow. ■



**PEEKING OUT** An arched entry opens into the mini-compound and offers a buffer from the street, just inches away. Natural cedar allows the home to blend into the lake community.