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into the woods

Architect Ben Ames builds a secluded house with an emphasis on nature and light

When describing the home he designed for a pair of empty nesters, Ben Ames speaks of the Japanese principle of *Shinrin-yoku*, meaning “forest bathing.” The house “opens up to the adjacent C&O Canal, allowing the forest to envelop it,” he explains. “It’s also built for a couple who loves to entertain.”

Conceived as a narrow, trapezoidal form, the house occupies a quarter-acre lot. The exterior blends sustainable materials: Prodeema, a wood surface encased in thermoplastic film, and Viroc, panels made of compressed pine particles and cement. L-shaped, coated-steel forms frame each volume. The result is a textural structure that exudes organic warmth.

Inside, an open floor plan encompasses a foyer, kitchen and living and dining areas where guests can congregate. “We warmed the great room with natural elements evocative of the forest,” says Ames. Tongue-in-groove bamboo clads the ceiling and walnut accents unify the spaces. A wall of glass brings nature indoors.

The living area and master suite open onto a back deck that spans the length of the house. Upstairs, two guest rooms, a bath and a den are accessible via a glass-and-steel balcony overlooking the living area.

An open staircase with walnut treads and a laser-cut guardrail encapsulates the home’s connection to nature, creating a mesh pattern resembling branches in winter. “The staircase bathes the interiors,” says Ames. “Its filtered light is directly related to the filtered light of the forest.”

Architecture: Benjamin Ames, AIA, Amestudio, Arlington, Virginia. Interior Design: Jamie Merida, Denise Perkins, Bountiful Interiors, Easton, Maryland. Contractor: Karl Voglmayr, Washington Landmark Construction, Washington, DC. Landscape Design: Shannon Russell, A New Leaf Garden Design and Restoration, Bethesda, Maryland. Text and Styling: Charlotte Safavi. Photography: Robert Radifera.





BEN AMES'S TRADE SECRETS

- High ceilings help make a small floor plan feel larger. In this project, a two-story great room lends the main living area a sense of spaciousness, despite the home's compact, 2,200-square-foot layout.
- Simple finishes, whether white drywall, walnut elements or striated marble, help unify spaces while keeping the focus on panoramas outside your windows.
- White, clean-lined kitchen cabinetry recedes from prominence.
- A wall of glass doors and windows lets the interiors "spill over" into the exterior, making rooms feel more expansive. A second set of doors to a deck or terrace increases circulation and adds to the sense of indoor and outdoor spaces being one.
- A screened side porch opening onto a back deck will increase your living space with minimal effort and expense.