

STORY **LAUREL FORTIN** | PHOTOGRAPHY **SANDY MACKAY**

MASTERFUL CRAFTERS

When Renée Gurney and Laurens Wit put their heads together in 1997 to design the home that Laurens would build for them, they garnered not only architectural accolades for their design, but built one of the most energy-efficient homes in Grey Bruce.



It was an 1,800 sq. ft. home the couple could eventually add on to, and a place where they put their creative ideas and theories into practice.

Renée is an artist with family deeply rooted in Grey Bruce. Inside the home, Renée's woodcut and linocut prints are displayed alongside a collection by local fine artists, including **Jo Ann Sauks, John Miecznikowski** and **Horst Vick**.

Laurens is a self-taught builder from the age of 15, when he renovated his parents' home in Thornhill. **Laurens Wit Construction** has been erecting custom homes by referral ever since.

Together, the couple's design recalls the 1800s-era stone homes of eastern Ontario and Quebec. "We mimicked the old stonework and its imperfect patterns," explains Renée. "Stone homes were put up in a hurry by settlers who didn't have time to wait because winter was coming, and we found them beautiful."

When their family grew to include a son in 2000 and a daughter in 2002, they added on to the home. Each time, the Gurney-Wits experimented with design and aesthetic. Today, the house is a masterful blend of two historically simultaneous styles: the 1800s stone home with Arts and Crafts additions (the Arts and Crafts movement flourished from 1880-1925).

After 17 years the couple have put their 25-acre homestead on the market." Interested buyers will be thrilled with the workmanship and thoughtfulness found throughout.

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The Wit's custom built home, comprised of a stone house and a new addition, is situated on a hill surrounded by 25 sprawling acres on the outskirts of Owen Sound. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Renée and Laurens sit together on the original stone home's porch. **BELOW RIGHT:** Family and friends lounge on an expansive stone deck surrounding the pool.





ABOVE: The staircase to the lower level is built with spalted maple from the property. The spalting gives the wood a rich character, while the natural colour keeps the look modern. **BELOW:** The living room addition offers a view of the pool through a floor-to-ceiling, wall-length bank of windows, and is decorated with original art by local artists.

Plans for the stone farmhouse were designed by Laurens Wit Construction. The walls are thick and super-insulated, a feature Laurens offers to all his clients, more of whom are becoming interested in the advantages offered by this building technique.

“Our heating cost is \$600 a year, including our domestic hot water,” says Renée. The home has double-stud walls: one regular exterior wall frame and a second separate interior wall frame, insulated with fibreglass batting. The floor is a cement pad with radiant heating coils on both storeys, no basement. Laurens worked with **Ken Philp Plumbing & Heating**, which also took advantage of a heat recovery system. The home is otherwise airtight. They use wood to heat the boiler for the in-floor heating. Renée notes, “Our experiment proved that it pays to super-insulate a house. Even when the propane tank ran dry, our house would stay warm for two days; we never had to scramble to refill the tank in the middle of winter.”

Laurens apprenticed in Bavaria, Germany in his youth, where thick-walled homes had window wells that flared in an arch at the top to allow more light to filter into the rooms. He mimicked that style throughout the stone house.

When the main addition was built, including the great room, dining room and upstairs master suite, the couple chose an Arts and Crafts style, but gave it a modern edge, working with architectural designer **John Peirson**. For continuity, they carried stone and wood floors throughout the addition. Custom wood windows were produced by **VanDolder’s Home Team** in Owen Sound. The interior trim work also brought continuity to the disparate styles – the stone home trim is cherry and the main addition is a minimalist maple. The hardwood floors were sourced from **South Bruce Flooring**.

Exemplary of Arts and Crafts, Laurens incorporated several unique woods when designing the main addition. The stairs leading to the lower level are spalted maple planks, hewn from trees felled on the property. The wood was aged for several years until early signs of decay appeared, leaving interesting black veins throughout the grain. The handrail is crafted in cherry from a tree Laurens cut down at his parents’ farm in Massey. Cherry wood is so called for its rose hue, and comes from the hardwood black cherry tree, native to eastern Canada and the northeastern United States, rather than from the fruit-bearing tree of the same name, explains Laurens.

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TOP LEFT: The kitchen is a richly-coloured room, with exposed timber and antique décor, featuring a refurbished piano and a family clock from the 1700s alongside a dining table from Country Charm Mennonite Furniture. **LEFT AND ABOVE:** The cooking area showcases an eclectic collection of pots and pans and antique cookware alongside their children’s growth chart. **FAR LEFT:** A stunning white woodstove, salvaged from the St. Lawrence area, functions as a centerpiece in the living room.

BELOW: Light and airy, this childhood bedroom on the upper level of the original home is filled with books and toys. **RIGHT:** The spacious garage-turned-entertainment-area houses space for a game of pool and plenty of room for Laurens to work on his cars. **BOTTOM LEFT:** A country-style bathroom, complete with a sloped ceiling, wainscoting and a claw foot tub, is located on the upper level of the original home. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Warm wood tones infuse the master bedroom, which opens onto a small deck overlooking the patio below.



The lower level features a wine cellar and recreation room leading to an underground garage. The garage was built with pre-stressed concrete spanning 24 feet, and has in-floor heating, space for three vehicles and three additional heated outer bays. "We didn't want the garage to be visible on the house, so we dug out the grade behind and tucked it discretely underneath," says Laurens. The great room and a large outdoor patio, currently used as a basketball court, sit above (exterior stonework by Gary Emont).

The couple recently updated the main floor powder room and master en suite with Ledgerrock stone tile complete with marble accents (bathroom counters sourced at **Fulford-Kitchenware Bathware Hardware**). *Continued on page 24*



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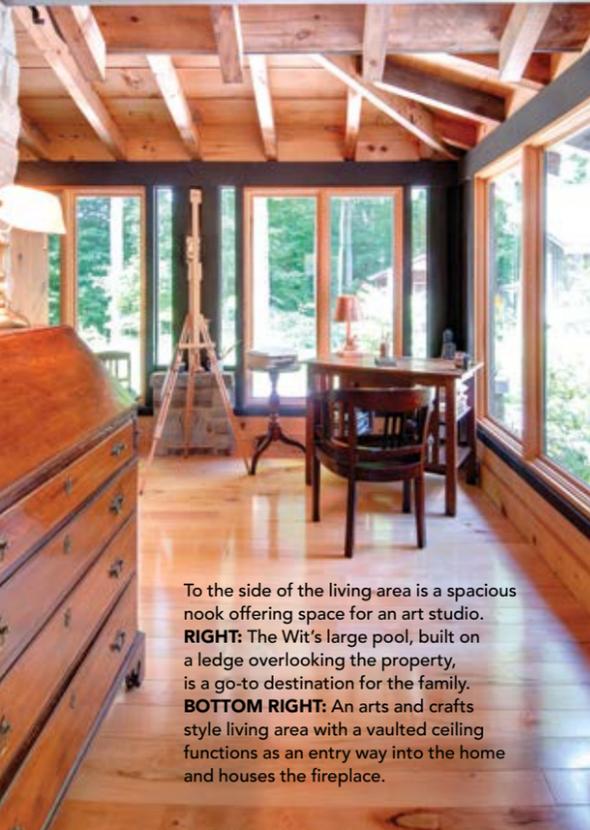
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To the side of the living area is a spacious nook offering space for an art studio. **RIGHT:** The Wit's large pool, built on a ledge overlooking the property, is a go-to destination for the family. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** An arts and crafts style living area with a vaulted ceiling functions as an entry way into the home and houses the fireplace.

LOCAL SOURCE GUIDE

The Antique Shoppe, Concrete Designs & Construction, Exquisite Wood Designs, Fulford-Kitchenware Bathware Hardware, The Fyre Place & Patio Shop, Gary Emont, Georgian Bay Fire and Safety, Greg Williamson, Grey Bruce Paint & Decor, GreyFair Flooring Inc., Horst Vick, Jo Ann Sauks, Joe Howell, John Miecznikowski, John Peirson, Ken Philp Plumbing & Heating, Laurens Wit Construction, Living Lighting, Macdonald's Brandsource Furniture & Appliances, The Master's Workbench, Meer Siding Windows & Doors, Moggie Valley Lumber, Owen Sound Excavating Ltd., Owen Sound Ledgerrock, Quality Air Systems, Renée Gurney-Wit, Ron Pringle Electric, Shawn Hillis, Smith & Hladil Home Hardware Building Centre, South Bruce Flooring, VanDolder's Home Team



The 2004 addition – an entry and sunroom – features a more traditional Arts and Crafts design, with a Japanese influence. An outdoor koi pond, which Laurens came home from work one day to find Renée spontaneously digging (with their son's help) is set below the exposed soffits typical of Arts and Crafts.

Inside, the four-season sunroom has a pine open-rafter ceiling (**Moggie Valley Timber Inc.**). The couple incorporated the fireplace design of Count Rumford of New England, who researched the efficiency of fireplaces in the late 18th century and determined that a tall, shallow, parabolic shape provided the most heat. "We studied the specs and then built the fireplace with **Owen Sound Ledgerrock**. It gives a lovely, tall, elegant flame," says Renée.

Outside, the home highlights a swimming pool and several outbuildings, including a pen for a pair of peacocks, a stable for two horses, and a garden-shed studio housing Renée's antique 800-pound printing press. "As hard as it might be to move Renée's press," says Laurens, "we're looking forward to a new build that will allow us to collaborate together again." **OH**

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