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PAGE 14

THE
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ISSUE

CUBE STAKE

GUILFORD
ARTIST'S HOME
IS ITSELF A
WORK OF ART.

PHOTO MATHEW CARBONE

Family CUBED

A Guilford artist's home is itself a work of art



The artist Nicola Armster silk screening her increasingly popular t-shirt designs.

By DUO DICKINSON

Homes almost inevitably reflect a family's values. Those who are happy in the simplest of abodes clearly have more pressing agendas than domestic expression. Those who obsess over every decorative touch find their voice in the place where they hang their hat. Every home embodies a family's sense of itself, its past and its future.

Architect Wilfred Armster has designed buildings all over the United States, including many homes that fulfill his visionary insistence on expressing the essential realities of any built form. Armster quotes the German philosopher Goethe whose last words were reputed to be "More light!" in his seminal desire to let natural-light predominate in everything he creates. "Light changes everything," he exclaims. Long before it was fashionable in *haute* architecture to create very expressive abstract shapes Armster knew that "Buildings speak for themselves. Every building should be a piece of sculpture."

A tiny new home in Guilford manifests many of Armster's legacies: absolute integrity of material expression (in this case raw wood, concrete and steel), dynamic geometry (here a cube) and, of course, light. But more, this latest house Armster designed for one of his children perfectly synthesized the personal and professional — not

only for the architect, but for his client — daughter Nicola.

The Armster family has had more than 40 years of living their values in home creation. Sarah and Wil Armster had five children and the family has worked together in any number of efforts to build domestic bliss as the children pirouetted away from their seminal Guilford homestead. Wil credits Sarah has the designer of a family bond that has led to every Armster home being built with the help of almost every Armster.

Wil and Sarah were well ahead of the "green" curve as they have owned the recycled and plantation-grown wood mill Wood, Steel & Glas Inc. in Madison for decades. One son, Klaas, has directly followed in that family focus starting several companies specializing in reclaimed or sustainably harvested woods, including WoodPlanet.com. Another son, Sven, designs and builds in Westchester County, N.Y. But this story focuses on their daughter, Nicola Armster.

The site Armster *filie* selected was right next to the family home in Guilford on Mulberry Point. There was a classic garage foundation that served as a defining perimeter: a square, 20-plus feet in each dimension that naturally progressed its two-dimensional promise into a cube. But that should not be a surprise, as this home's official name is "Cube House VI." It succeeded homes designed by Armster in



Steel, wood, color, craft, art and celebrated objects in a double height living space combine the architecture of Wil Armster and the joie de vivre of his daughter Nicola

marketing in the last year — but last month received worldwide recognition as a featured artisan/product on the juggernaut website Etsy.

In her profile on Etsy, Nicola celebrates the home that started as her studio, factory and shipping facility: “I love to draw cute animals and print them onto clothing for my shop, Nicola and the Newfoundlander,” she wrote. “I also make fun, functional pieces for the home, like clocks, robot planters and switch plates using reclaimed wood that my brother Klaas collects. The house has huge windows so me and my dog Otter watch owls, deer, fox, stray kitties and woodpeckers while I work.”

It’s not just Nicola’s work that has received recognition. Last year Cube House VI won an Connecticut AIA Residential Merit Award from the Connecticut chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA/CT). As a piece of architecture, the house is both powerful and subtle. Its tiny (940 square feet) profile is not

only sculpted by Wil Armster’s visionary expertise, but its realization is imbued with the depth of craftsmanship and material expression that takes abstraction into the palm of your hand.



There are essentially three levels (plus a few sub-areas) in the house. The entry level is accessed walking through a concrete pier and the wall at the cube’s corner and directly accesses the living space, the open mechanical systems (heating, plumbing, etc.) the one bath and the kitchen. A raised dining/sitting platform launches a stair to the fully open studio floor overlooking the lower level, where creating, producing, storage, shipping and display inject urgency into a carefully composed place. Another stair leads to the second “box” which rests atop the first — the cube — and houses the bedroom.

This simplest of compositions — box on cube — has its wall opened by massive “cut-out” windows, carefully proportioned double-



The small kitchen has its custom concrete countertop overlook a see-thru stair and a lofted seating area that can double as dining space.



The small bathroom uses a custom concrete top and vessel sink with wood, windows and art to make intimate space.

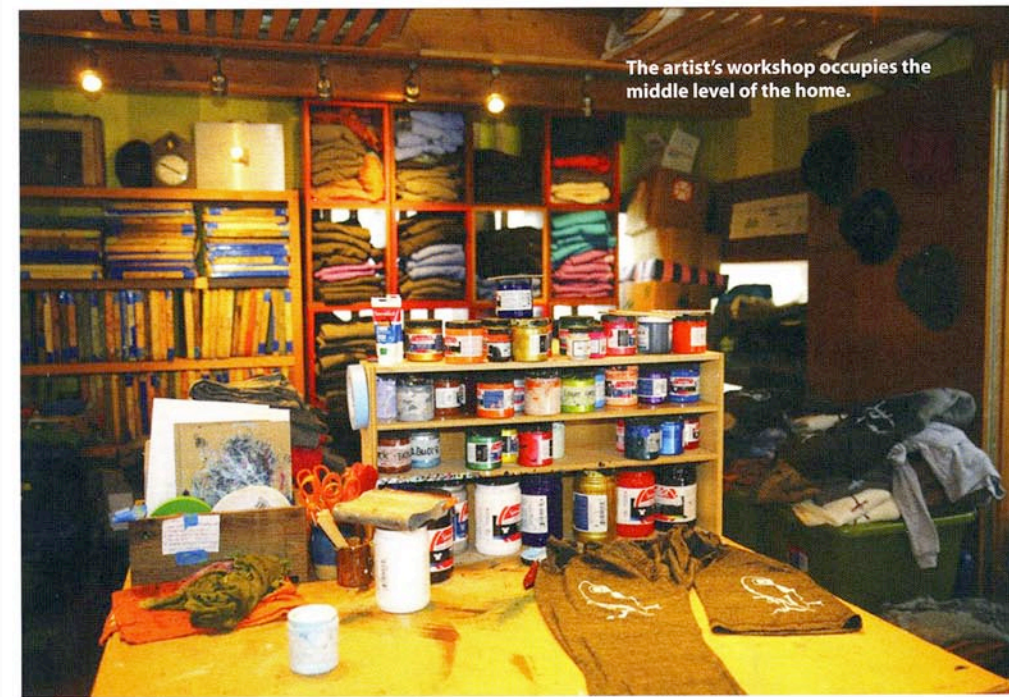
Indiana and for a magazine and, also not surprising, for his other daughter, Heidi.

Nicola Armster offers up a straightforward (and few-holds-barred) account of the design of her home: “My pop spent about a year or two delaying a design for my house/studio because he can’t make decisions. Then one fall I got food poisoning pretty badly and ended up in the hospital for a week. On the third or fourth day, my pop came in with a model of my house. I loved it! I fell in love!”

Designing a perfectly conceived home was challenging enough, but building it on the budget of an artist proved even more daunting for the artist herself, Nicola.

“The design was beautiful but a bit beyond my budget at the time so we split it in half and decided to build the cube studio first and then add one more floor for the bedroom so I could live there, too,” recounts Nicola. Ultimately the entire project came at significantly under \$200,000 in total costs.

The multiyear build-out was mostly done in-house, with brothers Sven and Klaas contributing labor, but just as everything else typically evolves, the artist became an entrepreneur. Nicola Armster’s work creating clothing and objects both useful and beautiful has had an amazing surge of success via direct



The artist’s workshop occupies the middle level of the home.

height spaces, windowless walls, rampant color and the unabashed materiality of wood, concrete and metal fully present inside and out.

Raw wood is everywhere. The framing is reclaimed Western hemlock and decking is reclaimed white cedar. The flooring is a

combination of reclaimed yellowheart and purpleheart. But all this wood visually “pops” because there is contrast, inside and out, with the other materials in the house. These include polished concrete floors, oxidizing steel structure, metal railings, lighting and, of course, Nicola’s

artwork. The exterior’s narrow horizontal cedar slats/battens/clapboards are similarly highlighted by the concrete armatures that support the lofted bedroom box and the ever-changing outdoor environment of green or autumnal foliage or winter snow.

The framed, precisely defined glass openings reveal the kinetic interior at night, but more, fulfill Nicola Armster’s deeply personal relationship with the embracing natural harbor of her Cube.

“From the very beginning, the house has been a vessel for my work,” she says. “Living kind of fits between the work. When I cook or eat, I am surrounded by drying silkscreens lining the kitchen floor. When I sit down on the couch, I am surrounded by boxes of colorful clothing with my cute animal drawings on them.”

The decision to divide the project into a work cube that ultimately supported the bedroom box was not just an economic necessity, it was an acknowledgement that even a driven artist needs relief from focus.

“This one space is my escape from work — it’s like waking up in a treehouse,” she says. “I look out onto my yard full of wild birds and squirrels. I’ve seen fox, deer, coyote, raccoons stealing from my bird feeder, osprey carrying fish, woodpeckers killing my big maple, a hawk killing a tiny bird



Custom windows located at a height that fits your eye- both to see out and present its own exhibit.

and an owl staring me and my bowl of oatmeal down.”

As with all projects on a very low budget, Cube House VI benefited from an owner-operator who assume the role of general contractor and did all the shopping. “I went down to the restaurant supply stores in NYC to get my kitchen sink because I need deep sinks to wash out my silkscreens,” the artist explains. “I have about 50 overhead lights in my studio so that it I can work at any hour of the day or night. The floor is made of a soft wood since I’m on my feet when I print.”

Just as Nicola Armster spends hours actually producing her art, there was a group of dedicated craftsmen (including a relative or two) who spent many months actually building her father’s dream: “My huge work table is made from the most beautiful pieces of maple I acquired from a small mill in Vermont,” she explains. “It was built by Breakfast Woodworks and Gil Murry. Gil and I worked together on the interior — he spent about eight months on my house. The kitchen came about six months later, which my other brother designed and built, including poured concrete countertops and custom cabinets from red birch. The stairs were made by Bob O’Shea, a longtime employee at my parents’ lumber mill, Wood, Steel & Glas. Each stair tread is a series of strips of hardwood glued together.”

The fusion of work and home life is the Armster way. The creative minds of the entire family accrue to an industriousness that means the cobbler’s children do have new shoes — or in this case the architect’s children have finished homes. But the miracle of building dreams is not just about materials, engineering, or even about sweat equity: In the case of homesteading, it’s about the love a family has.

Wil and Sarah Armster have created a lasting human legacy that transcends both the tangible value of building and the aesthetic nourishment of art: The commitment of diverse households to come together to create in common purpose — ultimately expressing a close family’s love.

It’s hard to design and build anything. It’s far more complicated to design and create with and for your children and siblings than enjoying the professional distance provided by working for strangers. The fact that the Armster family is sustained and survives a wide range of shared endeavors is a reality often overlooked as possible in our culture where people fly off to jobs, wherever they may be. The Armsters live their missions, creative and constructive. That allows their love for one another to keep them in a tight orbit, living within 80 miles of one another at the farthest — or next door, as Nicola is to her parents.

At 39, Nicola Armster has come into her own as a business owner, and is in full flower as an artist. The recognition and success has come from a place of strength and confidence that is clearly a genetic gift from her parents. At the heart of a life where work and home are literally fused in one place is the simple accommodation of what gives joy: “My bedroom is painted orange and full of my big collection of funky clothes and boots. I often wake up early, lay in bed with my Newfie and enjoy the view for a very long time. It makes me very happy.”