

# Rising to the Challenge

A Squirrel Hill home meets the demands of energy efficiency, handicapped accessibility, and environmental stewardship.

BY NANCY POLINSKY JOHNSON | PHOTOS BY MELODY FARRIN



The bright yellow color of the front door on the Weiss' home was not original to the Hugh Newell Jacobsen plan the couple used to design their house. In fact, the architect reportedly questioned the choice. But Amy and Lou liked its contrast against the white clapboard.



Vaulted ceilings and walls of windows throughout the house give the home a light, airy feeling that is enhanced by the clean lines and neutral tones of the furnishings. In the living room, an African textile hangs as art and serves to hide a flat-screen TV when not in use.

**B**uilding a home is challenging; just ask anyone who's done it. Then ask Amy and Lou Weiss about building a home with the goal of earning LEED certification. Plus making it handicapped-accessible. And meeting the requirements of a land trust regulating the property.

"It's really tough," says Amy.

"Building a 'green' house and an accessible house are a little at war with each other," says Lou. "LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) wants the house up off the ground so you don't get bugs. ADA (The Americans with Disabilities Act) wants you to be close to the ground. And [land trust regulators] come once a year to make sure we don't build anything we're not supposed to build."

But after living in their not-quite-yet-LEED-certified, mostly-ADA-compliant Squirrel Hill home for two-and-a-half years, the couple will tell you it was all worth it. Their sun-filled, modern home—meeting anyone's expectations for a Weiss house, because they are, in fact, part of the Weiss house home furnishings store family—is everything they dreamed it could be.

"We adore living here," says Amy. "We're still here, we are on vacation."

The story of their house began in 2004, when Amy and Lou purchased four acres of land on Beechwood Boulevard, most of it steep hillside running down to the Sunnyside at Frick Park development below, with the Monongahela River beyond. The land was once a slag heap and later a dump site—houses that were demolished to build the now-gone-but-not-forgotten Civic Arena are buried there, says Lou—and it had sat undeveloped for years.

Captivated by the site's expansive views of the Mon River valley, the Weisses originally planned to build seven townhouses at the top of the property, facing the river, retaining one for themselves and selling the others.



Amy and Lou Weiss in front of the front door of their Squirrel Hill home.

## Rising to the Challenge



**Above:** Along the back of the house, the dining room, living room, and master bedroom all have windows facing the valley view and doors accessing the patio.

**Right:** The expansive walls of windows in the main rooms of the house reduce the need for artificial lighting during the day, cutting energy use.



“Then I read an article in the *Wall Street Journal* about conservation [easements], and we donated our rights to build five of the seven houses to a land trust,” says Lou, explaining that he made a case for preserving the view of the valley where George Washington fought General Edward Braddock in 1755 and where the Homestead Steel Strike took place in 1892. Today, the view still includes some steel mill structures, but also features the modern-day Waterfront shopping complex, which offers up a twinkling light show at night.

In exchange for the land trust, the Weisses got a tax break on the property and proceeded with plans to sell a small portion of the land just large enough for the footprint of one house, and began mapping out their own dream house.

Their search for an architectural design that would reflect their aesthetic sensibilities and also take full advantage of the view led them to a 1998 *Life* magazine article that featured six celebrated architects invited to design their own versions of an affordable, 3-bedroom, 2-car-garage dream house and make the blueprints available to the public. Among those designs was one by renowned architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen that featured three sep-



Gravel surrounds the front of the house, requiring little of the maintenance or water required for a lawn, and American Hornbeams are among the indigenous trees planted on the property.

arate barn-like structures connected in the back, where the dining room, living room, and master bedroom all featured windows with rear views.

“We always liked this architect,” says Lou, pointing to a stack of old *Architectural Digest* issues the couple have saved over the years, each featuring Jacobsen’s work. “We liked his houses—with the clapboard, the barn, the simple shapes and stuff.” In fact, a previous house the couple built in ShadySide “was this kind of feel,” says Lou.

For \$500 they purchased the blueprints, and with the help of local architect Herb Seigle, they modified Jacobsen’s design to meet their needs while trying to remain true to the intent of the original plan.



Noguchi paper lanterns that hang above the dining room table have moved with Amy and Lou from house to house. “This is maybe our 12th house in 32 years,” says Amy.



"We expanded on it, finishing the basement below and adding a garage," says Lou. The couple also enlarged the kitchen, allowing for plenty of room for wheelchair accessibility, and they widened all the doorways in the house for the same reason. Lou has been living with multiple sclerosis, and while he's still capable of handling stairs, "who knows what the future holds?" he says. So all the handles in the house are levers, and light switches are positioned low.

Clean lines, white walls, and simple furnishings define every room in the house, creating a gallery-like backdrop for the Weiss' collection of art, which includes paintings, prints, lithographs, sculptures, photography, and textiles from around the world. And do we even need to say where most of their home furnishings come from?

In the kitchen, the backsplash is made of recycled aluminum salvaged from retired airplanes.



Among the unusual pieces of art throughout the house is this work by Robert Rauschenberg, with elements of Indian poetry displayed on different plates of removable glass. "You can pull these out and change where you put them, changing the way the image looks," explains Amy.



In the front entryway, a painting by Lou's father, Jack Weiss, has a place of honor on the wall. Like much of the artist's work, which is inspired by the architecture that surrounded him while growing up on Cape Cod, it features a simple barn. "Some people look at the shape and actually think he designed the house," says Lou.

## Rising to the Challenge



No longer partners in Weisshouse—Lou's sister, Stacy Weiss, is the "head Weissguy" there—Amy and Lou operate their own home-based business, Weisslines, which provides flooring and interior finishes for architects and designers. From his and hers office spaces—the former neatly organized and the latter "a cluttered mess," according to its occupant—they specialize in environmentally-friendly products like cork flooring and glass slabs made of recycled bottles.

Lou and Amy's work is, in part, what prompted them to strive to construct their home using materials and systems that would earn them LEED points, with the goal of accruing enough points to attain platinum certification.

Amy oversees the couple's business, Weisslines, from her home office, working at a "century table" table that features every year of the 20th century. "We used to share this desk," says Lou, recalling a previous home where they both worked together in one office. "We sat across from each other, except we were both the loudest talkers ever, so we stopped that."



Low-flow plumbing fixtures were installed in the bathrooms, reducing the amount of water used in the house.



An unadorned, egg-crate-style bookshelf built by Will Carpenter lines a portion of the hall leading from the master bedroom to Lou's office. "Sometimes it's harder to do something that looks so simple," says Amy. "When you do things more elaborate, you can hide your sins with moulding."

## Rising to the Challenge



In the garden, raised beds sit over an underground cistern that collects rainwater, and a large sewer pipe (under the flag) is used for composting. "In the summer, you can't fill it fast enough," says Lou.



A bench swing hanging from a tree in the backyard offers an ideal spot to enjoy the view of the Monongahela River valley below.

"Anything you can do to make a smaller footprint you should do," says Lou, pointing to the bible as another source of inspiration. "It says in Genesis you're custodians of the land."

Of the roughly 90 similar houses nationwide that have been built based on Jacobsen's *Life* magazine design—some of which Amy and Lou visited as they were making plans to build their own—theirs is the first to come to Jacobsen's attention as having been constructed with the goal of LEED certification. (Lou insists it's his own "sloth-like" behavior that is to blame for the fact that he has yet to finalize the application for approval.)

The steps they took to earn points range from relatively small and easy things like planting "No-Mow" grass in the backyard or installing LED lights in the bathrooms and closets, to much larger and more expensive steps like selecting flooring made of wood from sensibly-harvested trees and not shipped in from more than 500 miles away.

"They don't want you to use energy to get it here," explains Amy.

Their most expensive effort was installing an underground cistern to collect rainwater

from the roof to be used in toilets, hoses, and a drip irrigation system. According to Lou, the cistern cost about \$13,000 but earned them only four points.

"For four points, does it make sense? No," he says, in hindsight. "But we got so into the whole LEED thing, we became obsessed with it."

During the four years it took to plan and build the house, Lou became adept at things like calculating runoff water flow, and he found himself talking to **experts in all fields** related to building materials, like the head of engineering for a toilet manufacturer.

"Every component of the house becomes a LEED decision," says Lou. "That's why this house took so long to build."

"Some of it really seems like a game while you're doing it—to get the points," says Amy. "You want to try not to lose touch with *why* you're actually doing it: It's good to not screw up the environment."

One environmentally-friendly step that was a no-brainer for them was the installation of a backyard garden. Amy loves to cook, and she plans her summer and fall meals around what's ripe and ready for picking.

"I always wanted to live on a farm," she says, "but there was no way we were leaving. Lou doesn't go over bridges too often." Pointing to a storage shed adjacent to the garden, a shed built in the shape of a silo, she adds, "This was our compromise."

With the growing season approaching, Amy is eager to see fruits and vegetables come up in the garden once again, and she and Lou are looking forward to summer nights on the back patio, enjoying their view.

With all the challenges of creating their dream house becoming an increasingly distant memory, they only look *forward* now—to their own happy years ahead in the house and even beyond that.

"Hopefully, the next ten people who live in this house will enjoy it as much as we have," says Lou.

SA

The outdoor dining table and chairs are made from recycled milk cartons, and the silo-shaped storage shed features a small windmill on top that powers some of the outdoor lighting. "But not as much as we expected," concedes Lou. "We haven't figured it out."

