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The new 1,900-square-foot home on Indian Lake in the Adirondacks replaced a 500-square-foot bungalow that was structurally unsound.

REAL ESTATE | HOMES

For This Trio, A Grand Finale by a Lake

Phil Consalvo created a \$1.2 million home in New York's Adirondacks for singer Rob Maher and dancer Deborah Allton-Maher, friends he met at the Metropolitan Opera in 1991

By [Nancy Keates](#) [Following](#) | *Photographs by Oliver Parini for The Wall Street Journal*

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When they first met, they had vastly different roles: One was a Nubian slave, one an Egyptian priestess and one a nobleman soldier.

Now, more than three decades after that encounter on the set of "Aida" at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1991, the slave and the priestess (singer Rob Maher and dancer Deborah Allton-Maher) are married and the soldier (actor and architect Phil Consalvo) has just designed them a new house on Indian Lake in the Adirondacks in New York state.

All three say it was their background collaborating as artists that enabled them to work through contrasting visions, producing a home that is part Japanese tea house, part homey cabin—original in its design yet in tune with properties around it.

“We had a similar understanding of the creative process,” says Consalvo, 58. He says they talked through every decision based on an understanding of how each input and element would play out, the way a dancer would with choreography or a singer would with breathing.

The 1,900-square-foot house, which cost about \$1.2 million to build, takes the place of a 500-square-foot bungalow Maher and Allton-Maher bought in 2015 for \$249,000. They tore down the bungalow after two years because it was structurally unsound and slowly sinking into the lake. The new build is a second home for the couple, who live in Oak Hill, N.Y.

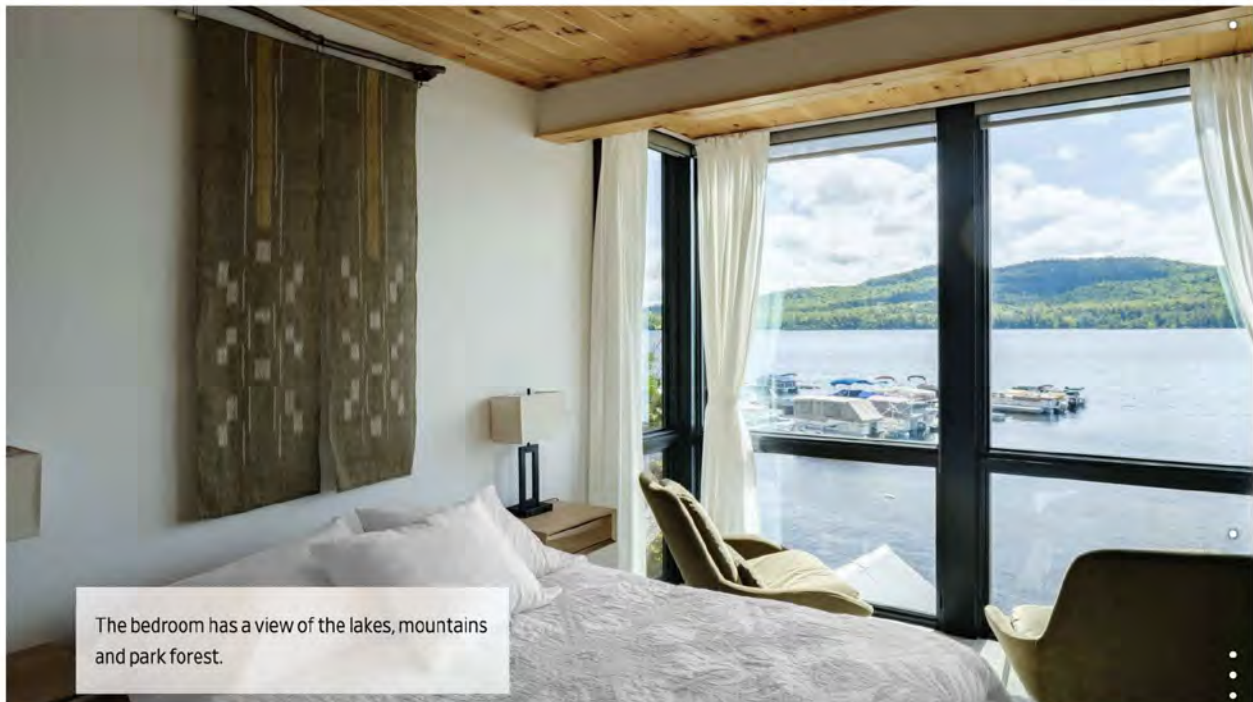
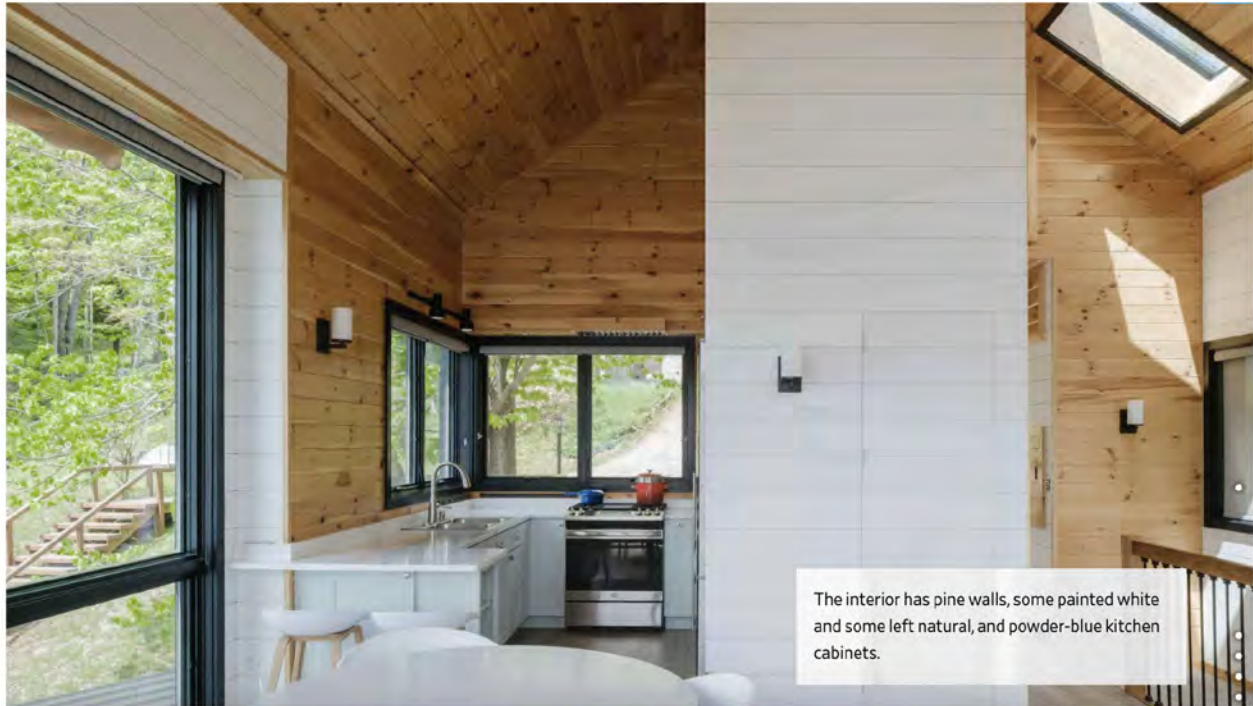


Rob Maher and Deborah Allton-Maher hang out with their dogs, Ludlow and Posy.

The primary design hurdle was the couple’s vastly different ideas for what type of house they should build for their retirement. Allton-Maher, 68, envisioned something cozy, like the cabin in the movie “On Golden Pond”: a rustic, New England-style wood structure with a front porch. Maher, 66, who has visited many temples in Japan and loves Japanese woodblock prints, wanted a modern Japanese tea house, with simple lines.

“I don’t think you get further apart than that,” says Maher. “We had to come to a consensus. We’d never built a house together and this was our one shot.”

Consalvo collected images of the “On Golden Pond” house and Japanese tea houses and sorted through what was appealing and what wasn’t for each style. After many hours of conversations and about a dozen sketches, they agreed on a blending. The exterior, with its pitched roof and stone foundation wall, fits into the context of the Adirondacks. The use of burned-wood siding, common in Japan, and the clean outline of the exterior lends a Japanese angle.





The property has about 1,000 square feet of outdoor living space, including a covered boathouse, a covered porch and a large deck.



The materials and finishes are traditional, with wood and wrought-iron railings, a stone fireplace and a wood mantel, but the lack of clutter and the light from skylights and large windows give the home a modern feel.



The house is on a steep slope, reached by car down a driveway from the road and on foot from the street by a long set of stairs, which also go down to the beach of the lake.

The mix continues inside. The materials and finishes are traditional, with wood and wrought-iron railings, a stone fireplace, a wood mantel, pine walls (some painted white, some left natural) and powder-blue kitchen cabinets. But the lack of clutter and the light pouring in from skylights and large windows makes it feel more modern. Consalvo calls a bumped out space in the back a “bento box” because of its shape. It is all glass and glows at night when seen from the lake.

Outside, there is about 1,000 square feet of additional living space, including a covered boathouse, a covered porch and a large deck. The couple has an Adirondack guide boat, a pontoon boat and two kayaks. Views across the lake are of the mountains and forest of Adirondack Park.

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The house, now one bedroom with 2½ bathrooms and an outdoor shower, stuck to its original footprint of 500 square feet, building up rather than out for more room. That means almost every inch of space has a purpose, whether for storage or for housing mechanicals, such as a dumbwaiter that helps the couple deal with the three levels. Putting large windows on the south-facing lake side added to sustainability, says Consalvo.

Sited in the middle of trees, the house is on a steep slope, reached by car down a driveway from the road and on foot from the street by a long set of stairs, which also go down to the beach of the lake. The home took five years to build, finishing in the spring of 2022.

Both homeowners had previous experience with big home projects. Allton-Maher, who studied dance at the Juilliard School in New York, graduating in 1976, bought and renovated a sheep farm on 34 acres near Oneonta, N.Y. in 1991, going there for summers and some weekends while employed as a dancer at the Met. She sold that property in 1997 and bought a 450-square-foot lofted studio on West 71st Street in Manhattan, then graduated from Fordham University School of Law in 2001 while still working full time as a dancer. Consalvo renovated that studio for the couple in 2013; they sold it in 2017.

No Wasted Space



Almost every inch of space has a purpose, whether for storage or for housing mechanicals; one of the 2½ bathrooms; an outdoor shower.

In 2001, Allton-Maher retired as a dancer at the Met and went on to become the associate director at the American Guild of Musical Artists, the union that represents singers, dancers and staging staff at the Met and nationwide. She and Maher, who chaired the union’s negotiating committee for singers for a stint, got together in 2004 and married in 2006 on the Franco Zeffirelli-designed set of “La Traviata” on the Met stage.

Maher, who graduated in 1980 with a music degree from Mississippi State University and a masters in vocal performance from New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, joined the Met chorus in 1990. He first renovated a house in Ridgewood, N.J., with his first wife in the 1990s; he then gutted and renovated a historic house he bought in Easton, Pa., for his parents.

Growing up, Maher moved a lot, but he remembers how each house in each state affected him, including a Midcentury Modern in Virginia that he said made him feel special and classy, and a shotgun-style house in Mississippi that made him feel grimy and embarrassed. Those experiences guided his determination that architecture play a key role in the house in the Adirondacks, a location he knew from decades of camping trips.

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Unlike their experiences at the Met and as union negotiators, where the atmosphere often got melodramatic (“Everything’s an opera,” jokes Maher), Indian Lake is a stress-free zone. “This is our escape,” says Allton-Maher.