



# A New Perspective

A garden folly adds another dimension to an historic property in Nashville, TN.

**PROJECT:** RESIDENCE,  
NASHVILLE, TN

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ARCHITECTURE INC.:  
BROWN DEER, WI; WADE W.  
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**T**here was nothing much remarkable about the Georgian Colonial house, which had been built in Nashville's traditional and tony Belle Meade neighborhood in the decade after World War II was history. And that is what bothered the owners, who longed for an architectural element or ornament of note on their 10-acre property. Such an addition, they reasoned, would offset their two-story, 7,000-sq.-ft. house, which, through the decades before they bought it, had been extended and altered in erroneous and erratic ways. While they were searching for a solution that would bring the house up to date by perusing the past, they turned to the landscape for solace.

That is how they came to commission a folly. "They wanted a destination room for gatherings and personal contemplation that had a different feeling from the rest of the house," says Wade W. Weissmann, AIA, president and lead architect of the Brown Deer, WI, firm that bears his name. "It became a cornerstone of a larger landscape plan we designed that created an outdoor courtyard and included redesigning two façades of the residence and adding outdoor space for the active family."

The one-room, 525-sq.-ft. folly, which was constructed for \$1.15 million, was sited between the formal lawn and the pool area, a position that turned it into a gateway between the two disparate and distinct spaces. "The owners, who are well

The garden folly features Tuscan stone pilasters and entablature, reclaimed brick infill, a copper mansard roof and wood- and-glass doors and windows. *All photos: Wiff Harmer*

Right: The pool side of the folly features the fireplace and chimney, which break the perfect square geometry of the structure. The chimney pot adds height and gives the folly a time-worn look, which is what the owners requested.

Below Right: The swimming pool's bottom was painted dark blue to enhance the reflection of the folly.

educated in design and history, actually asked for a folly," Weissmann says. "They didn't want it to be a pool house or a cabana. Historically, follies had no function. They were architectural ruins that were decorative only. But this isn't a period piece; it's designed for modern living and balances livability and artistry."

Modern living for this particular family meant creating one single yet gracious space that had multiple uses: study, media room, dining room and gathering room. "It was to be a room for all seasons," Weissmann says. "And it was to be historically accurate and somewhat whimsical in its detail." The mission was to create a dynamic and dramatic design that looked as though it had been built centuries before the main house but that didn't overwhelm the existing architecture. "We looked to the Southern antebellum Georgian style that's predominant in the neighborhood," Weissmann says.

To make the folly the center of attention without overwhelming the property, Weissmann's team created a courtyard that has axial connections to the main house that are defined by a variety of garden elements that form an exterior courtyard. These include a small frog pond, a stone bench, walks of sheared trees and hedges and a square lawn. "A folly is, by definition, an indulgent endeavor, and our greatest challenge was finding a place for restraint," he says. "We looked for restraint in the scale of the building and in the simplicity of its program."

This was particularly difficult because the main house is horizontal, has low ceilings and a slightly pitched roof, and the owners communicated a desire for a tall ceiling in what they envisioned as the most romantic piece of their newly designed landscape. "Since the folly and the house were meant to work in harmony," Weissmann says, "our design began with the primary structure in mind."

To exaggerate the height of the outdoor living areas, Weissmann's team chose flat roofs concealed by parapets that had higher ceilings. "These encroached into the second-floor space but remained below the second-floor window sills," he



says. "Thus, the elevations of the new additions could create some precedent for the folly elevations."

An octagonal dome literally raised the copper mansard roof off the brick, stone, metal, wood and glass folly. "This allowed the massing of the folly to be consistent with the house's loggia while giving drama to the spaces within by visually expanding the space beyond the parapet walls," Weissmann says.

Another way Weissmann bridged the design gap was to save the formal elements for the front of the folly in homage to the house and to break the building's perfect, square geometry in the back by allowing the fireplace and chimney to rise above the roof to satisfy code and ventilation requirements. "This way, the chimney helps the folly engage the landscape by interrupting



The front of the folly, which faces the house and formal area of the garden, gives the illusion of a perfectly square centralized building.



The custom triple-hung windows and glass-filled doors allow in a lot of natural light, blending the vision of indoors and outdoors. The restoration glass speaks of the past.

the enclosure fence that was put up for the owners' show dogs and by serving as a backdrop for the pear-tree espalier," he says.

To make the folly live in the 21st century while keeping its columns and stonework rooted in the 18th, Weissmann retained the traditional Georgian proportions through "small plan offsets that helped to create elevational boundaries with better proportions while keeping the plan at an optimal size. By clipping the interior corners to conceal utilities and condensing the openings of the elevations, we further refined the folly's scale."

Ridley Wills, owner of the eponymous Nashville-based design-build firm that constructed the folly, says that its "complicated craftsmanship" and clever concealment of systems infrastructure allow it to be "the gem of the garden."

The geothermal system, which supplies heat and air conditioning, has no ugly condenser in sight – it's in the crawlspace and is accessed through a hatch door in the stone floor that's hidden by a rug. Interior downspouts carry water through the walls, spilling it out through bronze spouts at the base, and the folly's few electrical fixtures are bolstered by abundant natural light from clerestory windows and custom doors that create a glassed-in greenhouse effect.

"It's a piece of delight," Wills says. "It's a tiny, intricate building, but it has all the systems of a house but only in one room." The fact that it's in the middle of a garden, he adds, makes it seem as though it "grew" there from the seed of a thought.

Although the folly revels in the details, they are simple ones that lie on the informal side. The windows, for example, are triple-hung and transomless to lend a casual air. "We had to make the walls thicker to accommodate the sashes," Weissmann says,



Internal downspouts at the corners of the folly wash the water to the ground, giving the illusion that the single-room building is a thing of the distant past.



The curves of the custom Spanish cedar doors and frames echo those of the Indiana limestone capitals.

There's little need for electrical lighting in the folly: Natural light pours in through the doors and windows.

“thereby adding to the folly’s substance and creating a greater level of historical character.”

The custom doors stand tall to accommodate quarter-round insets in their capitals, and the wooden paneling on the walls and ceiling is a chic, down-to-earth knotty maple. “Although tall and dramatic in space, the folly is warm and has a richness that is more often found in historic, time-honored buildings,” Weissmann says. “The mix of formality and informality, restraint and indulgence allows the folly to live in the whimsical tradition of garden architecture while dutifully honoring its surroundings.”

The floor plan provides the ultimate in flexibility: The fireplace, bar and appliances are in the apse, leaving the central space clear for a variety of activities. “One of the things I love about this folly is that it’s not a period piece,” Weissmann says, adding that the owners have furnished it with Biedermeier pieces from their collection. “There’s a TV above the fireplace in plain view. We made no attempt to hide it; it’s in a frame so a painting can be placed there in the future if the owners so desire. There also are automatic ‘phantom’ screens that are activated at the push of a button to keep the insects out.”

The marriage of the past and present is a running theme in Weissmann’s work. “In this case, we made it work beautifully,” he says. “What’s more remarkable is that the folly can be the center of attention or it can be benign and beautiful sitting in the landscape as events unfold around it. It’s my hope that the folly, which is timeless and durable, will remain to be passed down through the generations even if the house does not.”

The folly, in all its glory, remains a symbol of the best architecture that history has to offer. To make sure no one forgets, Weissmann painted the bottom of the swimming pool a deeper blue so it could reflect this fact into the future.



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The stone floor continues the garden theme inside, and the knotty-maple woodwork, locally sourced, hints a formal informality. A model of the folly, constructed in basswood, provides another homage to the past.



The octagonal dome showcases the round clerestory windows that resemble portholes.