

# MAIN LINE TODAY

## Ageless Architecture

An affinity for coastal design enlivens a Wayne abode.

BY TARA BEHAN PUBLISHED OCTOBER 20, 2008 AT 03:57 AM



Jenkintown-based architect Mark Asher grew up spending summers with his family in Ocean City, N.J. Even as a child, he paid close attention to the houses in town. Little did he know that, decades later, he'd be designing the sort of Shore homes destined to be admired for generations to come.

When Asher struck out on his own 16 years ago, his first commission was the Ocean City Yacht Club, then a new clubhouse for the Avalon Yacht Club. Soon after, requests started coming in for homes in Avalon, Stone Harbor, Longport, Cape May and other Shore spots. He even opened a second office in Stone Harbor to accommodate the increased business.

"Many of my clients' primary residences are on the Main Line or in the western suburbs," Asher says. "So the idea that they can see me comfortably in both places is really a nice thing."

*The home's gracious exterior has a turn-of-the-century, resort-style feel. Photos by John Lewis*

Asher says his homes are designed with "a craftsmanship and richness in detail, enabling them to age gracefully, gaining character and beauty as years pass."

"Our firm's design ideology, inspired by new urbanist philosophies, is characterized by new buildings that not only respect historic vernacular but also have a deliberately gentle impact on streetscape and community," he adds.

His commitment to beautiful designs that complement the surrounding area has led to a loyal client base. "We look at designing a home as: 'How can we make this town nicer?' Not just: 'How can we give you a huge house with six bedrooms and a big Jacuzzi tub?'" he says. "It's the idea of making the town nicer that really infuses the work we do."

One couple was so impressed with the Avalon house Asher designed for them that they asked him to do the same for their primary residence on the Main Line. They'd previously lived on a 4-acre property in Malvern. But after their three children left the nest, the couple needed a more manageable, low-maintenance alternative. They lived in Wayne when they were first married, and they've had a fondness for the town ever since. "I like the idea of being able to walk into town with my husband to go to dinner or see a movie," says the owner.

Since they weren't interested in renovating an older home, the search was on for a place to build a custom

home based on their wants and needs. After months of waiting, they found a '60s-era brick split-level teardown in the center of Wayne. "It wasn't a home that fit in with the grandeur and the beauty of the other older homes in the neighborhood," says Asher.

It was Asher's mission to design something that fit seamlessly into the neighborhood. His first step was photographing the nearby homes. "Every house has an impact on every other house," he says. "I was looking to find the right DNA to extract from the neighboring houses to make a house that would repair the fabric of that street."

The other homes in the neighborhood were in the Colonial, Federalist and Shingle styles, reflecting Wayne's origins as a country getaway. "There's almost a resort-style, turn-of-the-century feel—like homes you would see on the New England coast," says Asher.



As an architect, Asher always strives for a well-proportioned result using all of the right materials. "The goal is not to have a house that's going to hit you over the head," he says. "I don't want you to drive down the street and see a Disneyland ride. It should be a simple thing well done."

As a result, the new three-story Colonial with beige stucco exterior and black shutters has the same modest sophistication of homes that have been in the neighborhood for a quarter-century or more. That same attention to detail is reflected in the interior plan. Deep windowsills in the living and dining rooms, transoms above the entry to both, and a double-arch entryway leading to the back of the house help make an immediate impression. "Most people would expect a traditional center-hall Colonial with a two-story foyer and a winding staircase greeting you when you walk in," says Asher.

Since the more formal rooms are in the front of the house, and the kitchen and family room are in the rear, the main staircase was moved to the back, as well. "No one really uses the front door of a house on a daily basis, besides a mailman," says Asher. "So having the staircase in the back lends itself to a more livable plan."

[A double-arch entryway leads to the back of the house.](#)

Media interior designer Mimi Boston Johnson worked with the owners to create the home's aesthetic. In the foyer, she opted for neutral wallpaper with white flowers and green wisteria leaves on a light-blue background.

The dining room is filled with the work of renowned furniture maker Lou Irion (formerly of Berwyn, now in Delaware). His classic cherry dining table and sideboard boast simple, clean lines.

Living room highlights include a fireplace, custom built-ins, and two sets of French doors with views of the terrace. An impressive walnut grandfather clock in a nearby hall is another Irion original.



The kitchen gets the least amount of natural light, so the owner selected crisp white cabinetry to keep the room bright. Panels disguise the refrigerator, and the base of a granite-topped island was painted with a light caramel glaze to bring more color to the space. Decorative artist and portraitist Ellen Cooper applied the custom glaze on the island, doing the same to the bookshelves in the library.

The living room features a fireplace and custom built-ins.

As a nice, homey touch in the kitchen, three blue stools—each bearing the name of one of the couple’s children—are lined up against the island. “I considered replacing them for this new house,” says the owner. “But everyone talked me out of it. Now our grandchildren will use them.”

Off the kitchen is an intimate family room with a vaulted ceiling and wood-burning fireplace. A door leading to the terrace allows access to a bubbling fountain in the back yard.



To encourage visits from the kids, the owners have three bedrooms in addition to the master suite. In lieu of a two-story foyer, the home has a second-floor sitting area at the top of the stairs. Affectionately termed “the baby loft,” it was a popular place to rock their first grandchild to sleep. The space has shelves filled with children’s books, and the couple plans to make it into a play area for the grandchildren.

There’s also space for an elevator. “We don’t have it installed, but it is ready,” says the owner. “If my husband or I needed an operation down the road, I didn’t want to have to move out of the house.”

Crisp white cabinetry keeps the kitchen bright.

Crisp white cabinetry keeps the

Whether they’re spending weekends in Avalon or at home in Wayne, the couple is always in an Asher home. “Mark got the design exactly right,” says the owner.

That goes for both.