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Florida Rooms

By PILAR VILADAS

When David Horvitz and Francie Bishop Good decided that their 10,000-square-foot McMansion in Fort Lauderdale was too big (their four children had all left home), they began looking not only for less space but also for more design. "We wanted something manageable, something pretty, something that wouldn't be ostentatious," said Horvitz, who manages a private investment company.

"And," added Bishop Good, an artist, "we wanted great modern architecture."

Their search eventually led them to Deborah Berke, a New York architect who is known for her understated approach to modernism as well as for her lack of the egotism that so often afflicts members of her profession. Horvitz and Bishop Good liked the egalitarian atmosphere of Berke's office and the fact that she asked questions like "Where do you put your keys when you walk in the door?"

For her part, Berke (with her associates Robert Schultz and Margaret Gorman) wanted to design a house that took full advantage of the couple's property, nearly one acre on a gently sloping site on one of the canals off the city's New River. She came up with a terraced house on two levels that step down to a lawn, which in turn leads down another level to a dock where the couple keep their boat.

From the street, the house gives almost nothing away. Its facade, of coral stone from the Florida Keys, mahogany and stucco, seems slightly fortresslike, guarding its privacy. Once inside, however, a visitor is drawn through the entry on the house's upper level (which includes a guest room, Bishop Good's office and an exercise room) and down a short flight of steps into a light-filled arrangement of art-filled rooms (living and dining rooms, media room, kitchen, master bedroom and Horvitz's office) that culminates in views of sun and water. The interior design was done by Caroline Wharton, also of Berke's office.

The canal side of the house is as open and expansive as its street side is solid and protective. But glamorous as it is, the house's canal side offers only select views of the water, not the kind of sweeping panorama you'd see in a real-estate ad. "Everybody thinks that all-waterfront is a good idea," Berke said, "but living on a canal is like living on a street."

Berke's strategy produced some striking views of the water, including one that is framed by a breezeway that connects the main house and a two-bedroom guest house. But it also left enough wall space in the living areas for the couple's extensive collection of contemporary art, most of it by women.

While the house, at 6,000 square feet, is not exactly compact, the couple find it much more serene than their former home -- so much so, Horvitz added, that his wife now hates to leave. "Deborah's ruined me for travel," Bishop Good lamented, but only jokingly.

