



by Ellen Hopkins

## Tahoe **Style** Award: Achieving the **Dream**

**T**ahoe-style architecture is many things, some seemingly incongruent. It is luxurious but not pretentious, spacious yet intimate. It is creative and practical, worthy of guests, but focused on family. But most of all, it is in harmony with its unique setting, in sync with the environment. The home of architect Dennis Zirbel and his wife, Katy, is all this and more.

The home was designed by Dennis with considerable input from Katy, an aspiring writer who also manages his office. "We spent a lot of time considering the floor plan and all the little extras," Katy explains. "I wanted this house to be 'the last house,' the one we could live in for the rest of our lives."

That meant starting with the perfect lot. The Zirbels chose 20 acres of forested land at the far end of Glenshire's Juniper Hills subdivision. The property sits adjacent to Dry Lake with a view of Martis Peak. It is relatively isolated, from time to time requiring a four-wheel drive with good clearance to reach it in winter. The trade-off is beauty, serenity and unparalleled recreational opportunities right out the back door.

"We used to live on the other side of the gated access," said Dennis. "We often came back here to hike, cross-country ski and mountain bike. So when this parcel became available, we knew it was for us."

The Zirbels picked a building site that was oriented for sun and views, yet utilized existing disturbed areas to minimize



---

Viewed from its entrance, this charming family home sits solid on the land. Photo by Vance Fox

---

What is Tahoe Style? In the end, our judges pointed to the Zirbel home and said, **"This."**



Tall ceilings and plentiful windows create a magnificent bedroom (above). The great room (below) steps down from the front entrance. The window at top can be opened to connect with a kid's play space on the upper story or closed for generational privacy. Photos by Vance Fox



environmental impact. The house sits back from the lake, screened by trees. "All the existing vegetation was protected to a great extent," Dennis says. "Prior to excavation, we harvested native field stone for use in construction. All the stone you see used in the home, inside and out, came from the site."

A "green" approach to building employs passive solar elements, and a geothermal, warm-water ground source feeds the radiant heat system in the floor. A clean-burn fireplace supplements it. Walls are insulated with a cellulose material made from recycled newspapers. Doors and cabinets were finished offsite, reducing off-gassing.

Dennis said he wanted the house "to feel old instantly, as if it had grown up with the land. We searched for wood with an exist-

ing patina, sanded it slightly and left it in its natural state, without stain or seal." The reclaimed Douglas fir imparts the "rustic camp" ambiance the Zirbels were looking for.

At 3,000 square feet, the main house is anything but cramped. But rather than rely on a few oversized areas, it incorporates several smaller spaces to convey an air of intimacy. Dormers, nooks and window seats personalize each room. It is a home built for family, as the Zirbel boys, 11-year-old Zan and 9-year-old Jentz, will tell you.

Every room, upstairs and down, takes full advantage of the Sierra woodland vistas. The house centers around a fabulous great room, with lake and mountain views out tall windows. Walk through the front door and you're drawn across the foyer and down a

# Tahoe Style Award



The great room opens on one side to dining and cooking spaces and a family nook (far right).  
Photo by Vance Fox

couple of steps into the room (with hardly a sideways glance at the ultra-functional mudroom, located off to one side).

Dennis, who loves to cook, designed an exhibition-style kitchen that opens to both the great room and the formal dining area. "I like to socialize while I'm cooking," he says. Adjacent to the kitchen is a cozy breakfast nook and a "creative room" — a multipurpose den that houses musical instruments for the entire family, a computer and indoor games.

The master bedroom is situated on the ground floor, and like all the first-story rooms, opens to its own patio. Each alfresco area has unique qualities, including exterior window seats, an outside fireplace, barbecue area and hot tub with nearby outdoor shower. The outdoor elements all connect via stone pathways.

The upper floor mostly belongs to the boys. Each has a bedroom, and the two share an upstairs living room, which opens to the great room below through a paned-window. "We wanted them to have their own space, but didn't want them to feel isolated," explained Dennis. Finishing touches upstairs include an under-dormer wine closet, a hidden laundry chute and a charming, covered sleeping porch off one bedroom.

For aesthetic reasons, the Zirbels chose to detach the two-car garage. It has a large ground floor workshop and a second story workout room, which doubles as fully appointed guest quarters.

The Zirbel home took three summers to complete, with the last additions being a tennis court and a Peter Pan-like series of tree forts in the nearby woods, connected by zip-lines!

So what's on their plate for this summer? "Relaxing and enjoying the fruits of our labor," Katy answers.

**Year completed: 2002**

**Architect: Dennis E. Zirbel**

**Builder: Dennis E. Zirbel**

**Interior Designer: Dennis E. Zirbel**

**Landscape Architect: Tim McGowan**

**Square Footage: 3,000+**