

# UNREAL ESTATE

**THOUGH HOUSE-  
HUNTING IN  
NEW JERSEY  
CAN POSE A  
CHALLENGE, FIVE  
HOMEOWNERS  
FINALLY FOUND  
THEIR DREAM  
HOMES—EVEN  
IF FRIENDS AND  
NEIGHBORS ARE  
STILL DOING  
DOUBLE TAKES.**

by Kara Higgins



Curving walls make decorating this home in Glendora a challenge, but the owners (OPPOSITE PAGE) wouldn't have it any other way.



## THE COOKIE JAR

### Glendora

**W**HEN PHILADELPHIA NATIVES TINA BERMAN AND HER HUSBAND, Robert, were planning their engagement, she offered him a challenge. "I said, 'I'll live in the suburbs, but if and only if you can find a cool place,'" she recalls. Robert came through when one of his employees tipped him off to a curious little house that had gone on the market in Glendora. Shaped like a stone cookie jar, it seemed fitting for the artistic couple, who own and design much of the merchandise for Rasta Imposta, a costume shop in Runnemede.

"People say, 'It's perfect for the two of you. Not everybody could live in a place like this,'" Tina says. And the house does have its drawbacks. The second bedroom is barely bigger than a walk-in closet, so guests slept on inflatable beds before the Bermans converted their garage into a den and guest room. Hanging flat objects like picture frames on the inward-curving walls is impossible. And most contractors won't even offer estimates for work on the oddly shaped abode. "Nothing in this house is easy," Tina says.

Now that the renovations are almost done, the Bermans can focus on aesthetics. They've decorated the house in an eclectic mix of antique and contemporary. Tina currently is focusing on the kitchen, building on its 1950s style with a Formica table and chairs. She's considering painting the walls green, maybe with a pattern of cherries. "You might as well be as silly as you can while you live there, because you're not going to be there forever," she says. She and Robert likely will move if they have kids, but they hope to keep the house even afterward. "Everybody loves it," Tina says. "They think it's like a fairy-tale house."

go unnoticed on Dock Road, a winding street lined with modest former fishing shacks and quaint beach cottages. El-Zoghby's previous next-door neighbors put their house on the market as soon as they saw the beginnings of his creation. (As it turned out, a fellow architect moved in.) One



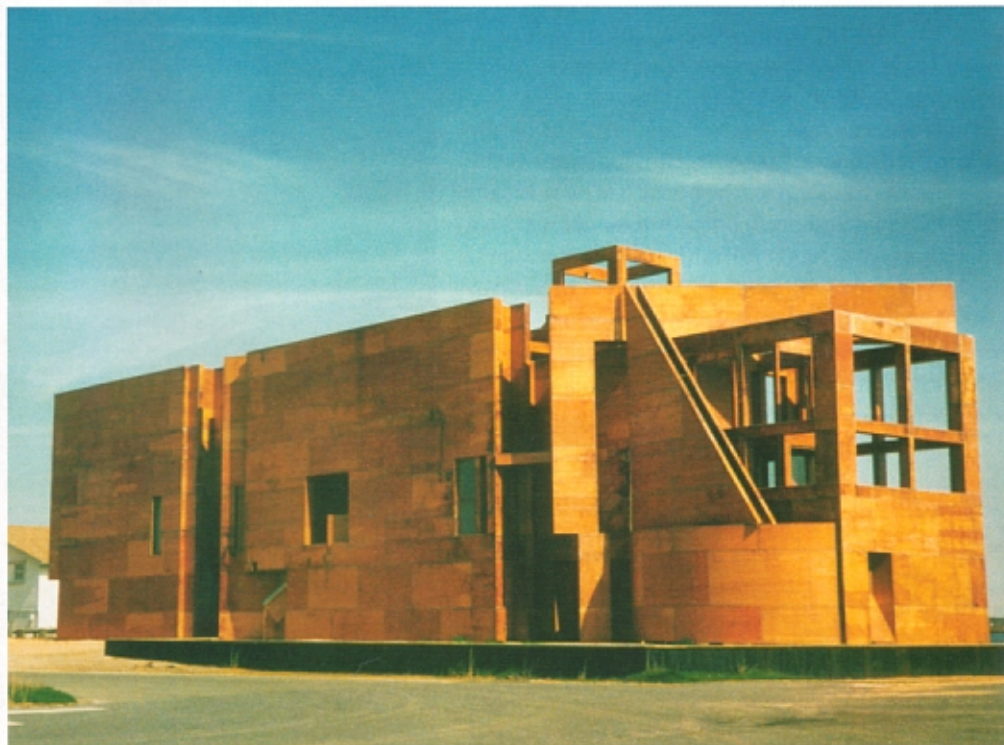
## UNFINISHED BUSINESS

### West Creek

**G**AMAL EL-ZOGHBY, A PROFESSOR OF ARCHITECTURE at Pratt Institute, decided to design and build his dream home in West Creek, but he may have been more interested in the dream than the house. "People say, 'What is this? It doesn't look like a house,'" El-Zoghby says. The 3,100-square-foot, 2-bedroom, 4-bath plywood fortress looms over Little Egg Harbor Bay in West Creek, but it bears no resemblance to other beach mansions. Just finding the front door necessitates some detective work; it's hidden at the top of a staircase. Windows are few and far between, except in a small sunroom with a panoramic bay view. Throughout the house, El-Zoghby has incorporated principles of astronomy, music, and philosophy; two diagonal windows are aligned with the angles of the sunrise and sunset during the vernal and autumnal equinoxes.

Then there's the plywood—brown sheets covered in a protective fiberglass coating. "I wanted natural wood grain and the effects of nature on the house," says El-Zoghby. Neighbors might have preferred vinyl siding, but, El-Zoghby says, "When the sun rises, the house glows. I never wanted to hide this material."

A plywood home doesn't







contractor suggested that El-Zoghby go back to school and learn what a house *should* look like. But a woman walking down the street told El-Zoghby that his home reminded her of a grand cathedral. "We've gotten these extreme reactions and everything in between," he says. "We have heard every possible response."

If anyone understands his vision, it's his wife, Martha Steinberg. "She is a great cheerleader," he says. "It's quite an overwhelming space," El-Zoghby says. "Here, it is just you and the horizon."

## A VIEW FROM THE TOP

### Eagleswood

**A**FTER A MAJOR STORM BLEW THROUGH EAGLESWOOD last year, town residents had one question: What about the chair? It had toppled in the high winds, but owner Sue Ward quickly rescued another from the trash, repainted it, and had it returned to the perch atop the fifth floor of her Main Street home.

Whether she likes it or not, the unexplained chair has become a local landmark. Inside the 1-bedroom, 1-bath house, up is the only way to go.

Above the basement is a living room, then a bedroom, then an attic, a small landing in the tower, a bell, and, finally, the chair. Ward herself, who never actually has lived in the house, hasn't ventured that high.

The dramatically sloping roof originally was used to house a water pipe for the Holgate section of Long Beach Township, just across Manahawkin Bay. When Holgate switched to a modern water tower, a merchant marine bought the old tower and converted it into a house. Inside, the structure still bears the graffiti of the kids who once climbed the water tower. As for the chair, "There's a lot of stories going around," Ward laughs, "a lot of them involving drinking and acrobatics." The most credible theory she has heard is that the merchant marine used the chair as a makeshift ladder while building the house, and stuck it on the roof when he finished.

Ward came across the building in 2001 while looking for commercial property for storing the trucks for her tree service. The house had been vacant for seven years and needed major renovations. "We did a lot of work to get it livable again," Ward says. She rents it to her son, Nathan, who lives there with his wife and their two dogs. Although the small home gets cluttered, it has its advantages, like the natural light that shines into the bedroom through seven windows. "When you wake up, you can see the sunrise," Nathan says. Although he expects to move out in a few years, the house probably will stay in the family. "We don't have any plans to sell it," says his mother.



PHOTOGRAPH: WEST CREEK—GAMAL EL-ZOGHBY; EAGLESWOOD—COURTESY OF SUZANNE WARD.





## A SLICE OF THE PIE

### Bordentown

**D**EVIN ROWE MOVED FROM MANHATTAN TO NEW Jersey, assuming he would just be hopping across the Hudson. But when he started looking at prices, he realized that moving farther south would be worth the commute. He scoured the paper and came across a 3-bedroom, 1½-bath attached home in Bordentown. When he first visited it, though, he had reservations. "When you look at it, you think, *How could someone live there?*" he says. It is, after all, one of the narrowest homes in New Jersey, standing three stories high but just ten feet wide.

It turned out to be the perfect size. "It's deceptive," Rowe says. Inside, there are a foyer, living room, and kitchen on the first floor; an informal living room and two bedrooms on the second floor; and another bedroom on the third floor. "Coming from Manhattan, it offers a lot of space," Rowe says. "For me to have a TV room that's not my living room...it's a big deal."

There's one major advantage to living in such a notable house. "If I call the local pizza place, I just say, 'It's the small house on Mary Street,' and they know where to go." And for the former city-dweller, the location couldn't be better. "I don't know if this is a long-term solution," Rowe says. "But right now I'm happy to walk out and see the constellations in the sky."

## FIT FOR A KING

### Clifton

**E**VERY TIME THOMAS DEGEN AND HIS WIFE, Marjorie, drove to Rutt's Hut for one of its legendary deep-fried hot dogs, they eyed the brick castle on Delawanna Avenue. When a for-sale sign appeared on the front lawn, they immediately called the Realtor.

They knew they would buy the house as soon as they set foot inside. "We fell in love with it," Degen says. Built in 1929 and inspired by Eastern European castles, the 4-bedroom, 2½-bath house boasts chestnut floors and woodwork.

Two suits of armor stand sentry near the front door, both gifts from friends. After all, when you move into a castle, what else would you expect as a housewarming gift? But the menacing guards don't keep away visitors. "When we first moved in, we couldn't get any sleep," says Degen. "People were always coming over to see it." The house is an even bigger hit on Halloween. "Some of the kids are actually afraid," he says, "but other kids just come barreling up to the front door." So far, though, the Degens have refrained from the previous owner's Halloween tradition of hanging a "body" from the turret.

For the couple, living in the castle has been a fantasy come true. "We absolutely love the place," Degen says. "It's in amazing shape. This will be around for 100 years." That's good, because, he says, "I'm not moving."

*Kara Higgins is a writer who lives in Piscataway.*



PHOTOGRAPH: BORDENTOWN—BROOKS CRANDALL; CLIFTON—THOMAS DEGEN