



*On a mountainside near Asheville,
North Carolina, a vacation home brings together three
generations of the Nederhoff family.*

FAMILY TIES

BY LORNA WILLIAMS

Three generations of Nederhoffs spill down the spiral staircase of their pyramid-shaped vacation home near Asheville, N.C. Top to bottom: Brad and Geri Nederhoff, Brian and Shari Nederhoff, David and Lisa Viertel and daughter Angela, Brad and Geri's daughter Laura, Luke Viertel, and grandparents Shirley and Dale Nederhoff. (Photograph by Frederica Georgia)

FROM A DISTANCE THE house — a pyramid perched on the side of a mountain — looks like a giant Christmas tree ornament. At dusk, when the light



shines eerily through the slanted windows and the four-sided skylight at the top, it seems almost extra-terrestrial. ¶ Wolf Laurel, N.C., a resort area near

Asheville, is dotted with conventional vacation cabins and lodges, so “the pyramid house,” as everyone calls it, stands out. Who built this strange house, a passerby might wonder. A science fiction writer? An eccentric mathematician? The leader of a religious sect? ¶ The answer is, none of the above. The aggress-

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GORDON SCHENCK

sively futuristic form was designed by a father and son, architects both, as a means to a traditional end: bringing together their far-flung family at holiday times. Here is the story of how the Nederhoffs came to build their special home away from home.

DALE AND SHIRLEY NEDERHOFF WERE BORN IN Iowa, and their three children, Lisa, Brad and Brian, were born and reared there, too. The three grew up in the house their architect father had designed in Dubuque, but eventually, as children do, they moved away, married and had children of their own. Lisa, a physical therapist, still lives in Dubuque, with her husband and two children. Brad, who also became an architect, lives near Boston with his wife and daughter. And Brian, who moved to Tampa, Fla., in 1986, two years after his parents had moved there (Dale was offered a job he couldn't refuse), became a computer consultant and still lives in Tampa with his wife. Yet despite the long distances — 1,400 miles from Tampa, 1,200 miles from Boston — for many years the family continued the grueling trek back to Iowa to spend Christmas and other holidays with relatives.

Then, on Christmas Day three years ago, the Nederhoffs were stranded at one relative's house near Wellsburg, Iowa, during an ice storm. "Freezing rain coated everything with half an inch of ice," Dale recalls. "The roads were impassable." The 11 members of the Nederhoff clan and 14 other guests had to spend the night in a little house designed to sleep only six.

"The storm made us realize this was crazy, driving over a thousand miles to one of the coldest places in the United States to be together," says Dale. There and then, the Nederhoffs decided to build a new family gathering place, more or less in the center of where they all lived — and in a warmer climate.

"We pulled out a map and drew circles on it,

A wooden bridge (below) leads to the front entrance. The house enjoys impressive views of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Great Smokies to the west and south. Note the four-sided skylight at the apex of the pyramid.



equidistant from Boston, Tampa and Dubuque," recalls Brad, "and the arcs intersected in the Appalachians of western North Carolina, near Asheville." Drawing circles on a map might seem an arbitrary way to choose a site for a vacation home, but not to the Nederhoffs. They built their new house approximately where the circles met — on the side of Wolf Laurel's Big Bald Mountain, 27 miles from Asheville — even though none of the family had ever set foot in North Carolina before.

Dale and Shirley discovered Wolf Laurel on their first trip to the Asheville area, five months after the big ice storm. They found that the resort had lots to offer besides geographic convenience: golf and



tennis in summer, skiing in winter, proximity to Asheville and its airport, and bracing mountain air. They liked the idea, also, of spending summer holidays in the mountains as a change from Florida, which they find hot, humid and flat. Lisa and her husband, David Viertel, were enthusiastic about a mountain location because Iowa, too, is flat, and they liked the fact that the Appalachian Trail passed directly over the top of Big Bald Mountain. Brad and Brian looked forward to skiing at the Wolf Laurel Ski Resort. And all of them were eager to celebrate winter holidays in North Carolina, a state that, compared with Iowa, enjoys temperate winter weather.

EVERYONE WHO SEES THE HOUSE ASKS THE SAME question: Why a pyramid? Brad says that the four sides coming from opposite directions and meeting at the top correspond to the four sides of the family coming together, but he concedes that he didn't think of that neat parallel until *after* Dale had envisioned the pyramid form.

Dale, for his part, can't say exactly why he chose that particular shape. First, he says, he toyed with the idea of building an A-frame house. Then, because an A-frame has a restricted, one-way view, he considered adding a second A-frame structure at right angles to the first. "As I rotated that idea in my head, I came up with a pyramid," he explains.

Comfortable leather-upholstered sofas surround the fireplace (not shown) in the Nederhoffs's living room, above. Sliding glass doors in the rear lead to an L-shaped deck. The dining area (foreground) has a pass-through to the kitchen.

The rest of the family accepted the radical design without a murmur. "Everyone wanted the place to be extraordinary because this is not a year-round house, but a holiday house," says Brad. Another factor that drove the design was compatibility with the environment. "We wanted to create a building that would blend in with the existing terrain," Dale says.

The finished house fits its steeply sloped mountain site admirably. Already, the cedar shingles covering the tapering sides have weathered to a soft silver-gray patina. A wooden entry bridge leads to a front door tucked into a sheltering niche in the northeast corner of the pyramid. The square base of the house is oriented diagonally to the road, to make the most of breathtaking views of the Smoky Mountains and the Blue Ridge Mountains to the



From the L-shaped deck (above), which reaches out over the side of Big Bald Mountain, a viewer has the illusion of floating in space. Right: At nightfall, the house could almost be mistaken for a landed space ship.

south and west. From every level, the eye takes in miles of woods and fields beneath the line of those distant hills.

At 1,550 square feet, the house is not large for 11 people, but the interior spaces are so ingeniously arranged that they seem bigger than they are. Every room spins off a central spiral staircase that visually links the three floors and leads up to the four-sided skylight at the top. In addition to the living room and dining room, there are three bedrooms, three bathrooms, a small, efficient kitchen and, directly under the skylight, a sleeping loft.

All of the bedrooms, as well as the dining room, have sloping walls and windows that lend an attic-like charm to their clean, contemporary spaces. The living room, however, has conventional vertical walls and sliding glass doors that open onto an expansive deck. (Even architects sometimes have second thoughts; the original plan calling for slanted walls in the living room, too, was changed when the Nederhoffs realized they'd have nowhere to hang pictures.)

Wrapped around the southwestern corner of the house, a 450-square-foot deck serves as a huge outdoor living room in spring, summer and fall. Although the L-shaped deck appears to float in space, it is anchored by triangular trusses that form an upside-down pyramid, repeating the shape of the main structure.

PAYING FOR THE HOUSE HAS BEEN A JOINT VENTURE. The family shared the purchase price of the one-acre lot (\$21,000) and construction costs (\$90,000), with Dale and Shirley chipping in 40 percent of the total and the children 20 percent each. To help pay the mortgage, the house is rented 80 to 90 days a year.

Furnishing the house was a joint effort, too. Somebody (no one remembers who) drew up a master shopping list of everything necessary to equip the house — from living room sofas to bed linens to knives, forks and spoons — and divided it four ways. Each branch of the family took one part of the list, armed with a set of color chips of the predominant colors (burgundy, deep blue and gray) used throughout the house.

All would be ready, thought the Nederhoffs, for a Thanksgiving family reunion in November 1990. The contractor had assured them the house would be completed, and everyone made plans to be there. But the contractor failed to keep his promise, and the Nederhoffs ate their turkey at a rented house up the hill from the unfinished pyramid.

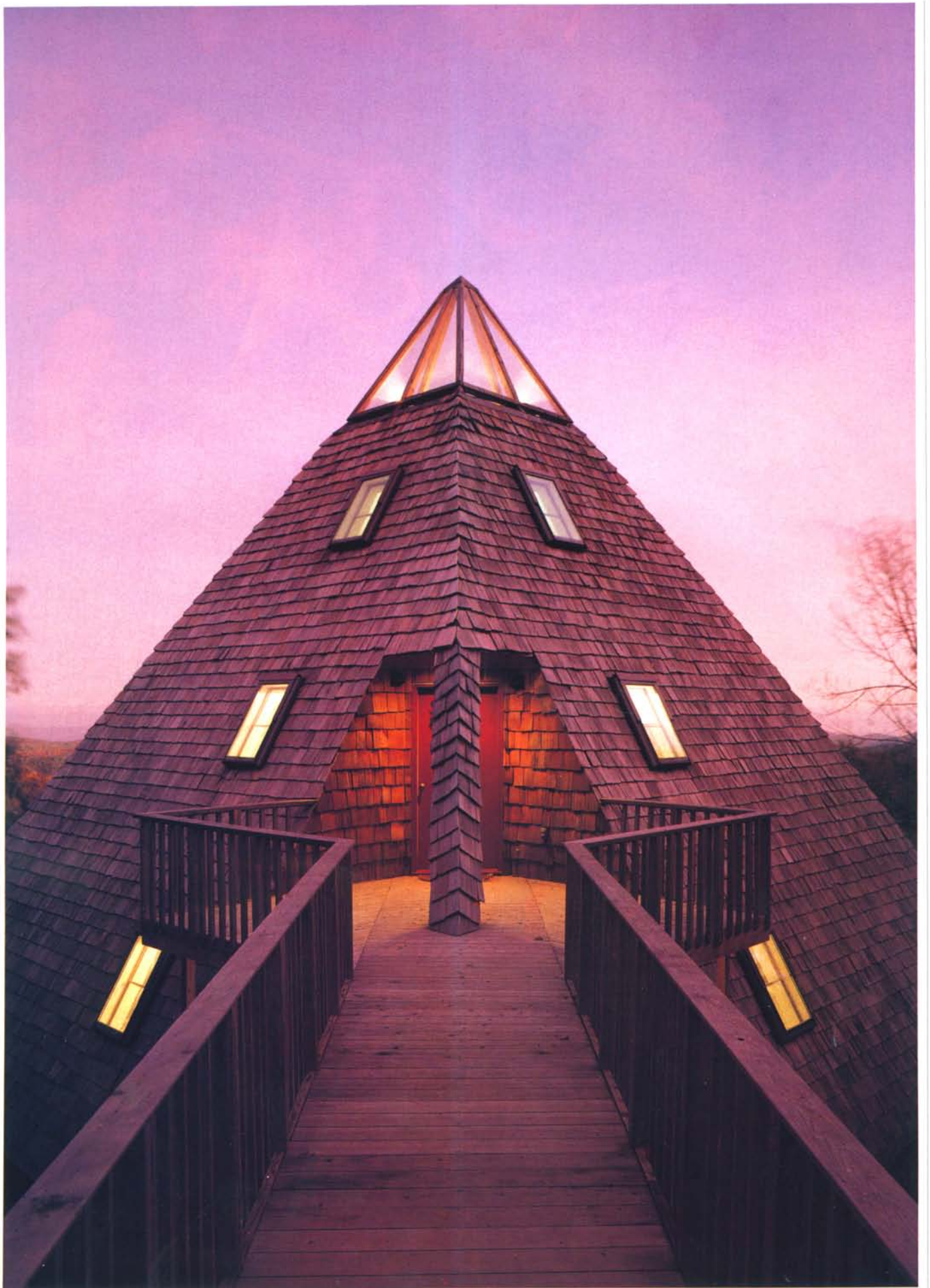
Three months later, the house was at last completed. On Memorial Day weekend of 1991, the family gathered there for the first time to celebrate the holiday and their new vacation home. Everyone stayed five days, and all agreed the house turned out even better than they expected.

"We all lead such busy, stressful lives and this is a wonderful place to relax, to gather our thoughts and renew family ties," says Lisa. Brad points out that sharing comes naturally when everyone owns part of the house. "Because it belongs to all of us, there's no pressure on any one couple to feel responsible for looking after the others," he says. "We all share cooking and housekeeping chores."

Although the Nederhoffs have met at the house twice a year since it was completed, they have yet to spend Christmas there. "We all have jobs, and last year not everyone could get enough time off to make the day's drive worthwhile," explains Dale. (Even though the new house is closer to home for everyone except Lisa and David, it's still a long way — 700 to 800 miles.)

This year, Lisa and Brad's wife, Geri, who are both expecting babies next February, preferred not to travel in December. So the family gathered at the house in early October to celebrate for the first time what Dale calls "leaf season."

"Perhaps next year we'll all be here for Christmas," Dale says. But it doesn't really matter exactly when they visit their holiday house, he acknowledges. "It always feels like Christmas when this family gets together." ♦





HOUSE OF COUSINS

OVER THE NEXT DECADE or so, if all goes according to plan, there will be three sets of cousins making memories in the hills of western North Carolina. Once or twice a year, the Nederhof and Viertel cousins will



come with their parents from Massachusetts and Florida and Iowa to a jointly owned vacation home near Asheville, N.C. (see Lorna Williams' "Family Ties," page 36). And while the parents and grandparents sit around chatting about who's growing up too fast and who's going to need braces and other incredibly boring adult stuff, the cousins will strike out to explore the strange, wonderful world of Big Bald Mountain. Or so I imagine.

I imagine they'll find the perfect sled run — steep and smooth at the beginning and then flat for a bit and then, *zing*, down again and off to the right and into the creek if you're not careful. Or maybe they'll build a fort. A perfect fort. A beautiful, impregnable fort with a secret entrance and a place in the middle where you can stand straight up without bumping your head.

Or maybe they'll stumble across a tiny cemetery, way back in the woods and so old you can barely make out the headstones — though one of the epitaphs says, very clearly, ALVA MAE HENDERSON, DEVOTED WIFE AND MOTHER, 1829-1874. So the cousins form the Secret Society of Alva Mae, whose members can safely share their deepest, terriblest secrets. The password is "Devoted Wife and Mother," and if you break the Vow of Secrecy, you will be haunted forever by Alva Mae herself. . . . But nobody can think of any really terrible secrets to tell, so they figure next time they should bring a snack.

And so it goes with cousins — those mysterious, compelling creatures from

somewhere else, those auxiliary siblings who are both more interesting and more menacing than your own brothers and sisters, those intimate strangers you latch onto in strange surroundings and in the common fight against parental injustice.

And so it will go, I imagine, as the extended Neder-

hof family grows and prospers — two more cousins are due in February — and gathers for the holidays on Big Bald Mountain. It's a splendid house they've built there, a bold, shingle-clad pyramid jutting from a steep hillside. "At dusk, when the light shines eerily through the slanted windows, it seems almost extraterrestrial," writes Mid-Atlantic Living editor Lorna Williams in her story on the Nederhofs' vacation home.

But what is truly splendid about the house — what caught Lorna's eye in the first place — is its purpose. It is a reunion house, equidistant from Dubuque, Tampa and Boston, and built for the sole purpose of bringing a family together. It is a gathering place.

It is a house of cousins — one of those mystical places where the sleds are faster and the forts are stouter and the spooks are spookier. It's where you go for your lifetime membership in the Secret Society of Alva Mae. ♦

Tim Sayles
Editor