

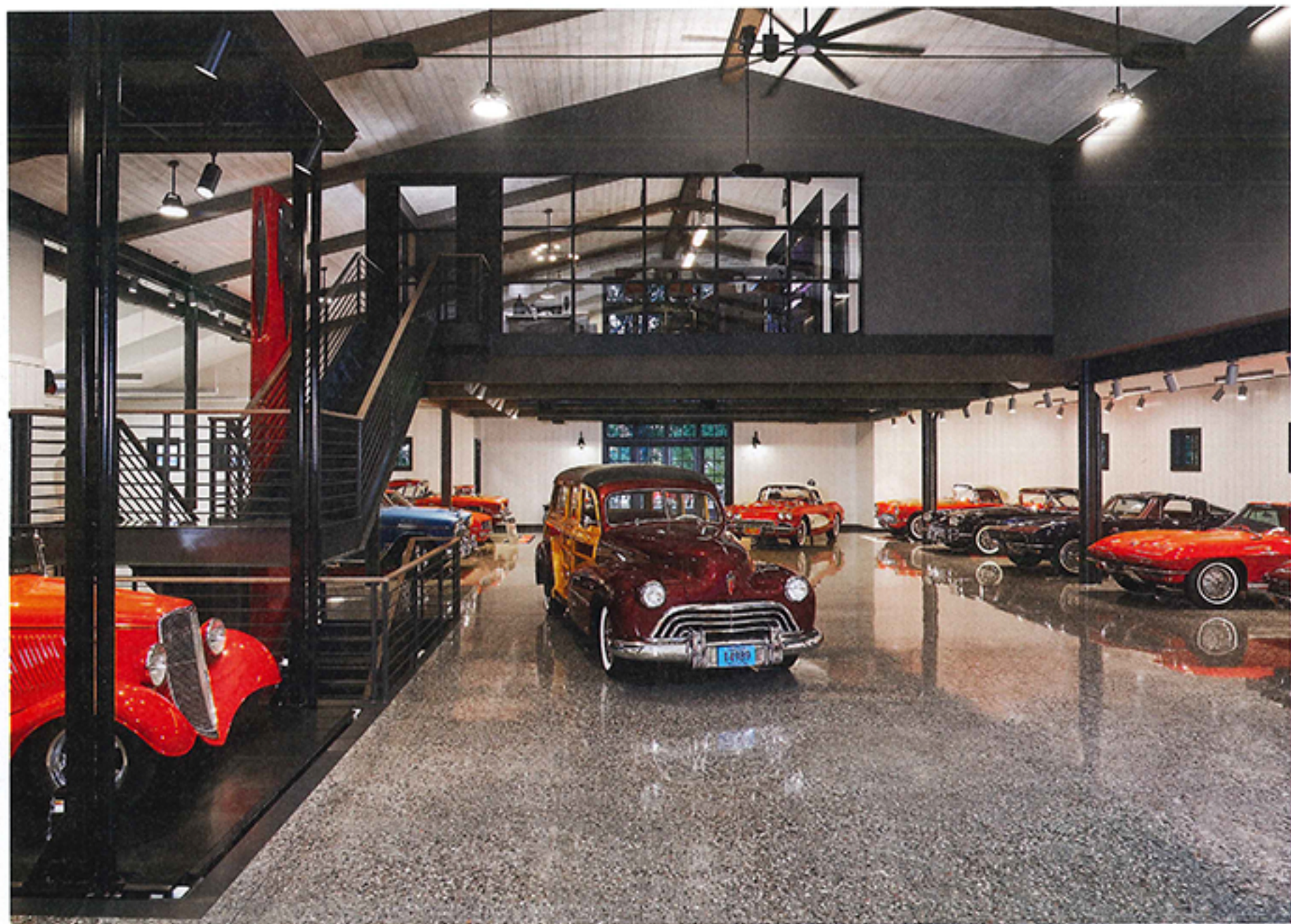
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Showroom retreat

Text: R.J. Weick

Tucked into the towering oak trees on the western edge of a waterfront property, this carriage house-inspired building reimagines the automotive garage vernacular as it blends traditional architectural language with contemporary details distinctive to its owners' affinity for cars and for entertaining.

Its design speaks to the existing home on-site, where form and style reflect inspiration taken from the roughly 8,500-square-foot residence originally built in 1921. And its intentional positioning establishes a harmony in overall composition, allowing the historic residence to maintain its function as focal point in the landscape. There is a rhythm and

scale to the overall building, informed by its surrounding landscape and artful function inside, where the display of an automotive collection and curation of waterfront views transforms it from a simple garage to an experiential showroom retreat.

"It is my one hobby that I have—cars—other than work. I collected my first car back in 1985 and I continually have added to what I've bought over the years and it got to the point where I had cars at three different buildings. They were just stored, per se, and I didn't really use them, see them, or work on them, and I got to the point where I was out of space," said Chris Witham, owner of the roughly 50-vehicle automotive collection.

"For convenience and use, I really wanted to do it here. My goal was to have all the cars in one location, make a spot where it was fun to have friends over and entertain, and enjoy it, make it convenient to spend time over here," Witham added.

To realize this vision, Witham engaged the creative and technical expertise of Via Design Inc. of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Scott Christopher Homes, a custom home builder with locations in Grand Rapids and Pentwater, Michigan. It is a team that has collaborated with the Withams in the past, having both worked on the renovation of the 101-year-old historic home on the waterfront property nearly a decade ago. Via Design was





also involved in a commercial project with the client, who is the owner of Motion Dynamics Corporation in Fruitport Township, envisioning work spaces for the company's manufacturing office. Witham said when they went back to the team at Via Design to share his vision, they captured it on paper in its first iteration.

"They did a color rendering and it's like, 'that is exactly what I want,' and that is really how it got started with them. There might be minor details, but fundamentally, what they put on paper the first iteration is what we ended up with," Witham said.

Brian Barkwell, AIA, principal architect at Via Design, said the Withams looked to their team to consider potential spots on the site and develop an overall design that was intentionally scaled to not overpower the main residence while still having the flexibility to accommodate a growing collection.

"It was a real challenge to house this very special collection of cars for the client. He clearly is passionate about this and for us to

create a showroom, storage pavilion, for these works of art of his and do it in such a way that the scale of this building was appropriate to a residential setting, I'm really proud of how we accomplished that," Barkwell said. "But frankly, just how thrilled the client is to walk in and to see this space, and you can just feel his love for these cars and this setting, is really a pleasure."

Via Design is a full-service architecture, interiors, and furniture design firm backed by an experienced team of creative and licensed accredited professionals, serving both residential and commercial clients. Initially established as an interior design firm in 1989, Via Design has since developed into a robust studio providing comprehensive design solutions and services such as: interior design, master planning, architectural, sustainable design, furniture and product design, and furniture procurement, among others. The firm also serves as a resource studio, featuring an extensive architecture and interior design library, and offers one-of-a-kind detail, finishes, and prototyping through its team at Via Studio.

For Valerie Schmieder, ASID, IIDA, ASFD, NCIDQ, founder and principal interior designer at Via Design, it was a great opportunity and exciting challenge to work with the owners again on this particular project, navigating the nuances of designing a structure that would be contextual for its residential neighborhood.

"Our primary goal as designers is to meet the expectations, and then exceed them, for our clients. I feel like we did that here," Schmieder said. "It was such a pleasure for us to work on such a unique, very customized project, I mean there is nothing like this in the world. It is a one-off with a very unique setting and I think we met our clients' needs."

In developing that first iteration, Via Design looked to the setting itself to ensure the building would become a part of the overall composition on the site. The waterfront property, a roughly 13-acre parcel on the shores of Muskegon Lake, features a formal drive court, flanking columns, and a sprawling residence with a heavily wooded area to the west of the

home. Schmieder noted one of the biggest challenges was coming up with a design that could hold at least 50 cars without becoming a disruptive intervention on the site. The solution not only leveraged the axis of the drive itself to orient the structure's entrance in line with the courtyard and placed the building amid the old oak trees, but also took advantage of a lower-level carved into the property.

"There are two levels of cars and there is access to the lower level, but hiding that access and burying half of the cars underground helped keep the building's scale down. It also has a car lift in the building, so you can actually drive on that lift and it will drop down to the lower level, and back up and out again. The overall scale of the building to me was the biggest challenge and fitting it in a location that also didn't disturb the neighbors," Schmieder said.

"I think the style of the house we went for is kind of carriage-house appropriate. The traditional nature of the building held with the traditional house, but it still has some



contemporary detailing to it, and especially when you get to the inside, it is much more contemporary. But the outside and the dark color was done very deliberately, so that it is hiding in the woods. With the house being all white, when you drive up to the house, it still takes your eye as the dominant feature," Schmieder added.

Barkwell noted the architectural vernacular also took additional cues from the main residence to establish a relationship between details on the new structure with the existing home, looking to exterior wall heights and dormer elements, among other components.

"We didn't want to get taller than that on the façade that faces the front and we also wanted to introduce dormers. The dormers related directly to the scale of the house and we were able to pull the roof down lower on one side and that allowed us to double stack cars on part of the [structure] so the client could have more automobiles in and keep the overall volume down," Barkwell said.

"The arc of the eyebrow [dormer] is in

direct reference to the front door arc of the main residence. When you have a structure this big, you have a lot of roof, and the slope of the roof again relates back to the main house. We also introduced this horizontal detail to break up that huge expansive roofing and it added a nice touch," Barkwell added.

At roughly 17,300 square-feet, the structure's footprint is deliberately tucked into the tree line and as Witham noted, the whole goal at first was to remove the minimum amount of trees as possible to avoid having it feel like it was simply a big building on a flat piece of dirt. Though the team had to remove a few more trees as the project progressed, it was important for the clients to maintain as many of the roughly 200-year-old oak trees as possible.

Drew Terwee, client development specialist at Scott Christopher Homes, said they spent a lot of time developing mock-up boards—big panels of different colors—and staking and adjusting corners of the building on the site itself since it was such a large structure. Entrances were carefully thought



views was the number one priority in placing the home close to the lake. This building still has a cool view, but the location balances that with not taking over the landscape."

Scott Christopher Homes is a custom home builder specializing in new builds, renovation, home maintenance, and custom cabinetry and furniture work backed by a team of talented craftsmen with a build philosophy focused on honesty and a client-focused process.

"To me, good design creates a space that evokes a feeling. It leaves you wanting to take in the visual intricacies of the exterior a little longer or gives you a welcoming feeling of wanting to go inside; that is good architecture and design to me," Terwee said. "A lot of the homes we do become works of art in their own right. The challenging part is to do a big building and have it feel inviting and comfortable, the way [Witham] wanted. Many times, you go into a building like this and it feels like a big barn."

The intentional design of its exterior and landscaping—completed by Gary Kappes of Kappes Landscapes in Grand Rapids—carries into its interior spaces as well where a roughly 7,700-square-foot lower level and 8,200-square-foot main level ascend into a rich, contemporary mezzanine entertainment area. Dormers and windows placed on the exterior

out, allowing for an access drive to the lower level on the far side of the structure, as well as a grand, front pedestrian entrance. The exterior shade of gray was chosen to blend into the shadows cast by the large trees.

"You have to be conscious of the way it

looks," Terwee said. "We didn't build this sticking out over the ledge so you stare at it from the lake. When you walk outside, even at the lower level, you have peeks of the lake, but it keeps that cozy feeling, versus other projects we have worked on where maximizing lake

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are informed by how and where the cars are parked on the main level to align with the artful display within, and even the smallest of details were carefully thought out, such as turning radiuses to move cars at any given time, ceiling heights in the lower level to accommodate cars on lifts, the tiles located underneath each tire of the vehicles, and the warming trays beneath the front and rear axles.

"It is heated, air conditioned, and humidity controlled on all three levels. We installed an elevator to be able to get cars from the basement to the main floor. That was a bit of an engineering feat to pull that off," Witham said.

"There were certain goals for the layout and being able to pull any car out at one time and not have to move other things around. That was one of the main design criteria of how things were laid out," Witham added.

Terwee also noted the fact that the interior is as open as it could possibly be added another layer to the heating and cooling component of the project, especially when con-

sidering the height and location of the mezzanine entertainment space.

"Heating and cooling can be a challenge in a big building. If you don't go into that aspect with technical ingenuity, you could run into some big issues. Even as we got to designing the mezzanine, the idea came about to enclose it in glass. If you didn't, and it was a hot day, the rising heat would overwhelm the space. On the main floor, it could be comfortably cool, but you could be sweltering upstairs, which could lead to humidity issues with the furniture and even the floor," Terwee said. "That had to be thought through as part of the design, not just how it looks visually, but how the space performs."

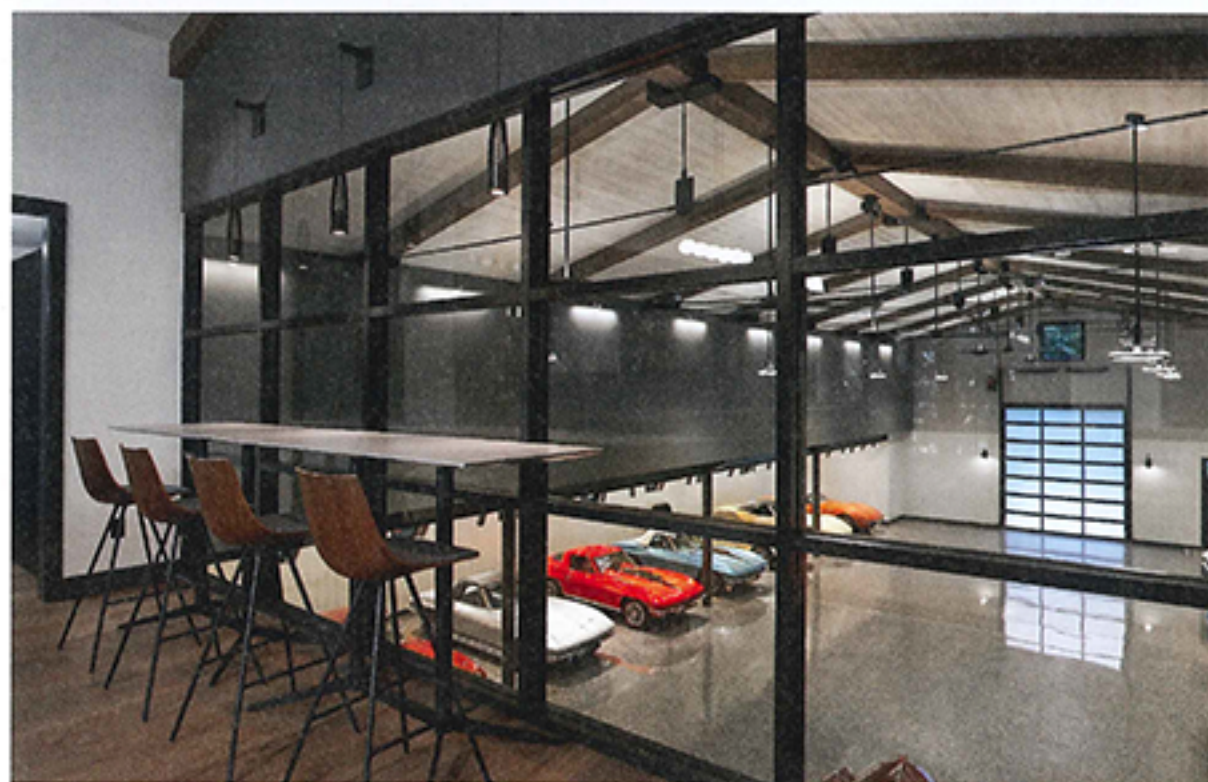
While intended to showcase a car collection, the building also serves as a space to entertain. Schmieder said as the building began to grow and take on more life, the entertainment aspect evolved from a simple bar lounge into a glass-enclosed mezzanine level complete with views to the cars below and the lake outside. Rich, traditional elements meet

contemporary in a curation of clean lines, an antique rug, custom-designed bar surround, sculptural fireplace, artwork TV, and bold pop of Corvette-inspired red on the interior cabinet doors. Other interior elements feature textured pine wood on the ceiling, Herman Miller furniture, a small office that doubles as a guest suite complete with a murphy bed and full bathroom, and a historic bar that served as the centerpiece of the mezzanine. Refurbished by Scott Christopher Homes, the approximately 130-year-old bar was initially from Detroit before it found its way into a restaurant in North Muskegon.

For Witham, whose passion for Corvettes was ignited at a young age, it is in the feel of the building and its ability to reflect the cars in a way that showcases them as pieces of art rather than just serving as storage that stands out to him.

"I love the floor. I love the lighting. I like the feel of it. It doesn't feel like a storage barn. It is comfortable and it is easy to have people over here," Witham said.

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The collection itself, which arguably extends to the commissioned, sculptural monolith inspired by a Chevrolet Corvette detail that spans all three levels next to a floating, metal staircase, features 22 Corvettes among the full 50-vehicle portfolio.

"When I was probably four-years-old, my parents gave me what was known as a Cox Car for Christmas. It is a gas-powered car that was hooked to a string and went around in fast circles. It was a red Corvette and that is really when I started to like them. The first Corvette I ever owned was a 1985 Corvette that I bought in '85 and I still have today," Witham said. "There are certain vintages—the oldest one is a 1957 and the newest one is a 2021—and the goal is to have unique, nice low mileage examples of the different Corvettes they've produced."

There is a 1959 and 1961, a 1963 and 1964, and a 1967 and 1968. There is also a 1990 with 25 miles and a 2009 with six miles, and while there are striking examples of automotive design and ingenuity among the collection, such as the 1962 Corvette Gasser "built in the style of Drag Race Legend" John Mazmanian, featuring 750 hp street driven on 93 octane pump gas, and a 2021 Corvette Stingray, complete with mid-engine design and zero miles, others such as the Volkswagen Golf lend a more personal touch. The latter of which is the restored first car his son drove, since for Witham, the collection is more than art, but a legacy he intends to pass down to the next generation.

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