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HOMES

Two Couples Loved Visiting Each Other. So They Decided to Move In Together.

Two sisters and their families now share a \$10 million home that overlooks Camelback Mountain in Arizona

By [Candace Taylor](#)

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Sisters Melanie Folz and Mary Heitmann have always been close. But over the years, when Ms. Folz and her children visited the Heitmann family at their house in Arizona, “there weren’t enough bathrooms” for all five of the sisters’ children, explained Ms. Heitmann’s husband, Mike Heitmann. “The kids would be arguing about who got to shower first.”

While that is a standard gripe from families sharing close quarters, their solution to the problem was anything but: Ms. Folz and her husband, Roland Folz, decided to custom-build a sprawling house in Paradise Valley, Ariz., specifically designed for both families to live in. “We wanted a big place where the cousins could be together,” said Ms. Folz, 53.

Completed in 2017, the resulting stucco, glass and steel house spans about 10,000 square feet with seven bedrooms—including two master suites—plus a pool cabana that doubles as sleeping quarters. And there are 12 toilets. “Now everyone has their own bathroom,” said Ms. Heitmann, 55.

Sister Act

These two siblings and their families share a home in Arizona



The home has two master bedrooms at opposite ends of the house. STEVE CRAFT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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The Heitmanns live full time in the two-story, modern house, which has views of Camelback Mountain. Mr. Folz, 55, lives primarily in his native Germany, where he is CEO of a fintech bank, while Ms. Folz spends half her time in Arizona and half at their home in Berlin. When Mr. Folz retires, he and his wife plan to move full time to the Paradise Valley house.

As for the couples' children—now all college age or older—the house has enough space for all of them to visit for vacations and holidays. Their parents designed the house with a plethora of amenities intended to lure them back home as frequently possible, and keep them coming when they eventually have children of their own, Mr. Folz said. Outside there is a tennis court, a hot tub, and an infinity pool with a rectangular fire feature jutting into it. Inside there is a home theater, a wine room, and even a man cave with a bar and

golf simulator. A secret passage leads from one of the bedroom closets down to the man cave.

“If you have a house that has those types of toys, the children will likely come and visit,” Mr. Folz said.

The Folzes footed the roughly \$10 million bill to build the house. “I believe that in the long term, family is what matters,” said Mr. Folz. Of his in-laws-turned-housemates, he said, “we’re lucky to have them.”

Ms. Folz and Ms. Heitmann are the youngest in a family of five siblings. Growing up in a small town in South Dakota, the sisters shared a bedroom and were “very, very close,” said Ms. Heitmann, a high-school chemistry teacher. They both attended Creighton University in Nebraska, where they had the same group of friends. “We have disagreements now and then, but it’s always really minor,” said Ms. Heitmann. When the sisters started dating their future husbands, Mr. Folz and Mr. Heitmann also became close friends.

Mr. Heitmann, a 55-year-old environmental consultant in Phoenix, said the Folzes are “easy to get along with.” He likes to go golfing with Mr. Folz, and “Melanie is my gym buddy.”

That closeness continued when the couples had children—two for the Heitmanns, and three for the Folzes. “The cousins all grew up together,” said Ms. Folz. “They really are like siblings.”



Mr. Folz uses the man cave to display one of his cars.

PHOTO: STEVE CRAFT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

When the Folzes moved to Germany, Ms. Folz and her children visited the Heitmanns every summer, spending four to six weeks at the Heitmanns' house in Chandler, Ariz.

Despite the shortage of bathrooms, the two families enjoyed the time together so much that they began to consider living under the same roof. "We always got along well," said Mr. Folz. "At some point we said basically that we want to age together for the long term, so we tried to figure how we could best implement that."

They looked around for houses to buy, "but none were suited for two families to live in one place," said Mr. Folz. So they enlisted Erik Peterson of Scottsdale-based PHX Architecture to design a custom home for them.

Mr. Peterson said he was surprised at the request. He'd designed homes for couples living with an aging parent, but he had never built a house for adult siblings to share. "We were nervous at the beginning," he said.

Surprisingly, the process went very smoothly—more smoothly than normal, in fact. "I think it was one of the more civil processes we've ever had," Mr. Peterson said. If the two couples disagreed, he said, "they never did it in front of us."

Mr. Heitmann confirmed that the process was free of conflict. It helped that all four were generally on the same page aesthetically, preferring minimal, clean lines and neutral colors.

Mr. Peterson communicated primarily with the Folzes while designing the house—usually remotely via GoToMeeting, since they were in Germany for much of the process. But when they were in town, Mr. Peterson had in-person meetings with the Folzes and the Heitmanns, and all four gave their opinions.



The home's pool and backyard space. The families chose this property to build their home because of its views of Camelback Mountain.

PHOTO: STEVE CRAFT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A challenge was finding the right piece of land in Paradise Valley, an affluent area they liked for its quiet and residential character. The couples wanted a hillside lot that would provide a view of Camelback's dramatic craggy peaks, but they also wanted a parcel flat enough to build a tennis court for their active offspring. They found an appropriate site spanning about 1.2 acres, which the Folzes bought for \$2 million in 2014. The site had an older home on it, which they demolished to make way for the new house.

The house is designed to give each family plenty of privacy, but also has large common spaces where everyone can spend time together, Mr. Peterson said. To that end, the master suites are at opposite ends of the house, and each has its own sitting room.

"If you need some space, you can always get away," said Mr. Folz. "That's probably the key to success."

Each of the "kids" has their own bedroom and en-suite bath in the house, except for 26-year-old Kyle, the Heitmanns' oldest, who prefers to sleep in the cabana, where he has his own kitchenette.

There are plenty of places to congregate: a large kitchen with two islands ideal for preparing Thanksgiving dinner, family rooms upstairs and downstairs, and multiple patios by the pool. There is a pool table outside the wine room, and the home theater has tiered seating for movie nights.

The whimsical man cave is paneled in shiny silver aluminum and blue tufted leather for a retro look, Mr. Folz said. The room has a bar, pinball machines and a full-size golf

simulator, along with a space where Mr. Folz displays one of his cars. Behind a hidden door is the passageway to one of the bedrooms, which also serves as an emergency exit.

With the Folzes spending much of their time in Berlin, Mr. Peterson wanted to ensure that the house doesn't feel too big when only the Heitmanns are home. He placed the master suites on the upper level along with the kitchen, family room and a garage; additional bedrooms, movie theater and wine room are all downstairs.

"The upper level has everything you need for one family," he said. The result is "a really nice flow," Ms. Folz said, "so even if it's just a couple of people it's not overwhelming."



Mike and Mary Heitmann, and Melanie and Roland Folz

PHOTO: STEVE CRAFT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

HOW THEY KEEP IT RUNNING

Here are the ways that the Folzes and the Heitmanns work together while living together.

- Jointly running the house involves daily dialogue between the two couples by WhatsApp and text messaging. “We’re constantly in communication,” said Ms. Heitmann.
- The couples set up a house email account that all four have access to, which they use to schedule contractors, for example.
- When it comes to money, the Folzes pay for major expenses and the couples take turns paying for smaller things, like groceries. “We don’t count every nickel and dime,” said Mr. Folz. “To me, more important is that we have a lot of fun times with the family.”
- They have a weekly housecleaner but if there’s a major task to be done, “we all just jump in and do it,” Ms. Folz said.
- The Folzes are on the deed to the house and the Heitmanns aren’t. That keeps things simple, they said. The Heitmanns don’t pay rent, and the couples don’t have an exit plan for selling the house.

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