As singer Ben Folds might say, John Nastasi is rockin' the suburbs. The architect's sleek, intelligently designed homes have been popping up across the state and beyond -- alternatives to McMansions that might just quash that movement.

Nastasi, originally from Jersey City, returned to the Garden State after studying at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and completing a post-undergrad internship with the New York City architecture firm of Ellerbe Becket. He opened his firm, Nastasi Architects, in Hoboken in 1991. The eight-person office has commissions nationwide -- and two large developments in Hoboken -- but at the moment, Nastasi is most interested in the suburbs. With the number of modestly-sized houses decreasing in favor of McMansions in New Jersey and nationwide, Nastasi says suburban communities "really need some TLC."

"Traditionally, architects have focused on urban commissions," Nastasi says. "Suburban homes have been left to developers and builders, and they've become a parody of old ideas -- there's no culture of aesthetics."

Nastasi hopes to change that. One example of his fresh take on suburban dwellings is the Woodcliff Lake home of Arpie and Gregg Najarian. Commissioned to...
do a full renovation of the house and add a new wing. Nastasi updated and opened up the existing living and kitchen areas and designed a glass and steel structure that looks ready to take flight. He calls the project "the suburban prototype." The streamlined design reflects his inclination toward modern architecture, and offers the residents -- a young family of five -- the extra room they need.

The Najarians discovered Nastasi when Gregg, who works in commercial real estate, came across the architect's work in Mercedes' Momentum magazine. "His work was more like sculpture or an art form," says Arpie, a fine artist and graphic designer. "He had a great vision for our home, and Gregg and I both love modern architecture and new materials and really wanted to be a part of this."

Rather than tearing down the existing home and building a larger one in its place, Nastasi decided to build onto the house and work with the land and environment as it was. "Tearing down to build these McMansions is just so wasteful," he says. "We end up with big hollow boxes."

Interested in modern design, complex geometry and materials, Nastasi saw the Najarian project as an opportunity to put some of his ideas into practice. During a mid-career "retooling" at Harvard, where he earned his master's degree in 2003, he began experimenting with digital fabrication of complicated models.

He and his design team developed an intricate digital model of the Najarians' home, and with it, they were able to make precise decisions based on environmental criteria. A great deal of physical and logistical information about the site is contained within the digital model of what architectural education should be about in the future."

Nastasi, who resides on Manhattan's Upper West Side with his wife, Annmarie, and their sons, 8-year-old August and 6-year-old Giancarlo, calls these new projects "smart homes for smart people."

The Najarian home is positioned to take full advantage of the winds, with windows and eaves placed to achieve maximum ventilation and glass pieces planned out to allow natural light but not admit too much heat. "The form isn't arbitrary," says Nastasi. "It is what it is because it's linked to the environment."

"I love that when you're in the house, you can still feel like it's part of the outside and when you're outside, you can see in," says Najarian. "It's really extended our living space inside and out."

Because of all the measurements that were generated in the
digital model, the construction of the Najarians' addition resembles the construction of a pre-fabricated home. "New ways of manufacturing make these complex geometries more readily available," says Nastasi. "The components come to the site pre-measured and cut, but these structures aren't like any existing pre-fab homes I've seen -- they aren't just a box."

Nastasi says home building hasn't evolved in the same way other areas of design have. The automobile industry has advanced to the Prius, but home design seems to have stalled somewhere around the Pinto. Nastasi would like to change all that.

"There are subtle curves and angles in this home that take their cues directly from the environment," he says. "This (the Najarian home) feels more like a sunflower or automobile than it does a box."

You might think a home with such an intricate design would cost a fortune to build, but Nastasi says his firm is completing projects for the exact same amount it would cost to build comparable structures the old-fashioned way, without environmental considerations. And that's good news, since word seems to be spreading fast about Nastasi Architects and its suburban prototypes.

After a story about the project appeared in a recent issue of Dwell magazine, the firm had an influx of potential clients. "Now we think we have about 15 serious commissions," says Nastasi.

From New Jersey and New York to the Sierra Foothills in California, where the firm has been asked to build three of these smart homes on adjacent lots, the idea is catching on. Asked whether he thinks this could overtake the McMansion movement, Nastasi says, "Judging from the response we've had, I think there is definitely a culture out there that wants a house that is more intrinsically linked to its landscape and environment."

But his work isn't all about the suburbs, or even all about houses. Nastasi has two big projects in the works in Hoboken, where Mayor David Roberts has referred to him as "the Leonardo DaVinci of the city" for his architectural contributions. The Water Music Arts Center and Museum Place, both Nastasi-designed, are planned as environmentally friendly mixed-use buildings. Museum Place, which will house the Hoboken Historic Museum on the bottom two floors and 42 residential units above, will have the same carbon footprint as a standard 11-unit building. The project could be the first mixed-use building in the country to receive LEED certification, a federal benchmark that indicates a building is environmentally responsible.

With so many projects looming, there is little doubt that Nastasi's star is on the rise. The innovations and strides he and his team are making are sure to rock the suburbs, and cities, for years to come.