Inspired by the original residence, the new house features two wings: one containing the in-law suite and kitchenette, primary suite, office, and garage; and the other with the recreation, living, and dining areas, as well as a family room, children’s rooms, guest room, and a mudroom area (right).  

Modern Adaptation  
ZeroEnergy Design puts a contemporary spin on a classic 1960s split-level home.
As an architect, the ability to pivot is key.

Case in point: what started as a renovation and expansion of a family’s 1960s split-level residence in Belmont, Massachusetts, evolved into a complete rebuild halfway through the project.

“The clients have three kids and parents who stay for extended periods, so the existing 2,660-square-foot house wasn’t meeting their needs,” explains architect Matt Genaze.
"IT'S IMPORTANT to find the right balance of openness and connection while providing degrees of separation and privacy."—Architect Matt Genaze

of ZeroEnergy Design. The home—which sits on a sloping site overlooking a Mass Audubon sanctuary—had undergone multiple renovations over the years, with two bifurcated wings, one containing the garage and the other the main house.

The initial two-phase plan included reimagining the garage wing to encompass a primary suite, an office, and an in-law suite with a kitchenette, and then renovating the other wing while the family lived in the addition. However, the clients were so thrilled with the newly constructed addition that they decided to raise the main wing and start fresh in order to maintain consistency and make the home as efficient as possible (it's fully electric and is outfitted with solar panels). "The result is more contemporary than the original, with an open plan, higher ceilings, and large windows and sliding doors," says the architect.

"There's nothing left of the existing house other than the design motives it forced us into," continues Genaze, who retained the split-level concept and a
similar footprint, with two wings connected by the main entry. The back of the home, where the in-law suite and the family room are located, sits a half-story below the front. The kitchen, living, and dining areas, in addition to the garage, comprise the front of the structure. If the kids are playing downstairs, they are still within earshot of the parents on the main level, but the space can also be closed off via a sliding glass door so noise doesn’t travel.

“It’s important to find the right balance of openness and connection while providing degrees of separation and privacy,” says Genessa. “We’ve created areas that can be used in different ways depending on the family’s needs.”

The materials palette of the 7,000-square-foot, six-bedroom house was kept minimal, featuring natural and...
black-stained cedar siding and fiber cement panels on the exterior, and white oak, steel, and slate inside. “There’s a slim margin of error in modern designs,” says Nick Falkoff of Auberdale Builders. “It’s critical to get the lines just right because there’s no trim to cover up errors.”

In addition to a clean, contemporary concept, a connection to the outdoors was a priority for the clients, so both the front and rear rooms have easy access to terraces. Genae collaborated with landscape architect Peter White of ZEN Associates to ensure the site and structure complement one another.

“The goal was to break down the barrier between inside and out,” says White. “We took advantage of the views...”
“THE GOAL WAS to break down the barrier between inside and out.”
—Landscape architect Peter White

of the conservation area in the back and planted evergreens in the front to provide screening from the street, which is about four feet above the front yard. The evergreens are punctuated by flowering deciduous shrubs and grasses for year-round interest.”

In the end, says Genese, “My hope is that the new design’s light, views, and airiness has a transformative impact on the family.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: For details, see Resources.