Clean, modern, white walls perfectly complement the beautiful structural staircase.
Renovated Ranch Resurrected into Modern, Energy-Efficient Marvel

Story by Jessica Rivest
Photography by Matthew Williams
The owners of this 1950s renovated ranch-style house were concerned about their carbon footprint and wanted to create a space that was not only beautiful, but also extremely energy efficient. A worldly, professional couple from Melbourne, Australia, who are passionate about gardening and science, they wanted a home that would marry their ecological awareness with their desire to have a striking living area. They worked with Ann Sellars Lathrop and Howard Lathrop from Sellars Lathrop Architects to create this magnificent home in Westport, CT. The couple now split their time between their energy-efficient Westport residence and a home in Oxford, England, where they went to graduate school.

The perfect setting was key for the clients, so they chose this home for its great location and stunning views. The house faces south, is directly on the Saugatuck River in Westport, is within walking distance of downtown and has a fantastic view of the Saugatuck Rowing Club. The overarching goal in this project was to create a clean, modern living space with an Energy Star rating that was as close to net zero as possible—not an easy task, being it was a 1950s ranch-style home. Energy Star-certified buildings meet very strict energy performance standards set by Environmental Protection Agency. These buildings use less energy, are less expensive to operate and generate fewer greenhouse gas emissions. But Sellars Lathrop Architects was up to the challenge: the firm had completed several major renovations that had received Energy Star certification, and knew it could tackle this one. “This experience alone allowed us to meld the new and the old in an economical and efficient manner,” says Ann Sellars Lathrop. “We have also designed modern-style residences, which require an approach that is different from the design of traditional styles. There are no moldings to cover up misalignments. It is the combination of those two skill sets that helped create this project.”

The clients had many ideas they wanted to include in the design. “They wanted a compact house with a large, central living space for entertaining with dramatic views of the river,” says Ann. “They wanted the interior living spaces to connect directly to the exterior living areas.” To achieve that goal, the firm completely removed a 1980s addition from the south half of the house and placed a large double-height room in the center of

The beautiful gardens are watered by rain collected from the roof and stored in a 2,600-gallon cistern.
The back of the home faces the river. The floor-to-ceiling windows provide amazing views.
the structure, which has a balcony connecting the second-floor rooms. The layout of the home is well designed: all rooms face south with access to the beautifully landscaped garden, and all are filled with natural light. The west side of the house features the kitchen and dining area on the first floor, and the master bedroom on the second floor. There is a guest room on the east side of the house on the first floor, and a study on the second floor. The south-facing rooms have stunning views of the rowing club, a historic bridge and the illuminated highway bridge beyond. The living room is striking with impressive 20-foot-high ceilings and floor-to-ceiling glass windows. The lower portion of the living room completely opens with bifold doors to provide a dramatic passage to the outside. Ann notes that the master bedroom is extraordinary as well. “The south wall of the master bedroom is all glass with sliding doors that lead out to a deck to the south, which is perfect for sunbathing,” she says.

The entire home is exceptional in both design and energy efficiency, boasting many features to minimize the clients’ carbon footprint. There is an energy-efficient, air-to-air heat pump heating and air conditioning system, as well as a large solar array. This means almost completely free energy from the sun. The beautiful gardens are irrigated with the use of a 2,600-gallon cistern that was installed to collect rain from the roof and to water the landscape. The entire house was made airtight with foam insulation and proper window sealing. Fresh air is circulated through the house with Energy Recovery Ventilation units. All these energy-efficient updates have made energy costs minimal since the house was completed.

A project of this scale is bound to have some setbacks. The first and major one occurred even before construction started: it took five months to get a variance from the Westport Planning and Zoning Commission. But Sellars Lathrop says the contractor, Bill Towle, was flexible and creative in solving construction issues, which always come up with an extensive renovation. Once the variance was granted, construction started in April of 2015 and was completed in November of 2016. The primary design challenge, notes Ann, was to visually unify the existing dated and somewhat awkward building with a modern and contemporary south façade. “To solve this dichotomy, the south side of the house departs from the original and has its own active, vibrant expression,” she explains. “It is painted a rusty steel red, while the rest of the house is a dark charcoal gray. The south face is almost all glass, while the rest of the house is primarily all solid wall.”

Ann says that working with different clients is what makes her job so enjoyable. “We have been blessed to have wonderful, creative clients,” she notes. “Some have been more traditional; others were seeking a more modern environment. Rarely are circumstances the same.” These particular clients wanted a clean, modern design that might be seen in England, Europe or California. They did not want frills and were interested in a practical approach to the design that emphasized the space, light and view more than the applied decoration. Their desire for that look can be seen in the interior spaces, which feature the bare essentials of white
wall, natural wood and glass. “The cli-
ients are adventurous and artistic and
wanted whimsical art pieces within the
neutral white walls. This project was a
real silk purse out of a sow’s ear,” says
Ann. “With the imaginative landscaping
by Ian Barker, an Australian landscape
designer, and the desire of the clients
to have art around them, the whole en-
vironment became much more than we
imagined when we started.” Ann says
the home has many unique features,
including a desk, designed by her firm,
that hangs from the ceiling when it is
not being used. An impressive piece of
art is also featured in the home: an im-
age from a watercolor that the client
owned was enlarged 600 times to create
an eight-foot-square collapsing paint-
ing. The dramatic sliding mural sits in
an opening in the wall above the stairs,
and was created from three sheets of
one-inch-thick acrylic. The stairs them-
selves, another unique and artistic fea-
ture, appear to cantilever from the wall
and support a floating glass rail. The
kitchen is home to a massive Z-shaped
sculptural counter that is constructed
like a surfboard—a plywood form with
a fiberglass covering. It runs across the
kitchen counter, turns vertically and
then continues across the ceiling for a
total length of 20 feet. The garden fea-
tures a sculpture commissioned from
Jon Pompea that was made using a steel
beam salvaged from the demolition of
the addition.

It has been said that when you love your
job, you will never work a day in your
life. This rings true for both Ann and
Howard. Their passion for architectural
design is apparent in every project they
do, and each brings a breadth of experi-
ence to the table.

Ann studied city planning and social
policy at the University of California,
Berkeley, but realized just before gradu-
ating that her real passion was architec-
ture. Being at Berkeley in the 1970s also
awakened a commitment to sustainabil-
ity and improving the environment. She
realized the built environment could
have radically different effects on people,
and her goal then became how to ma-
nipulate the built environment to enrich
people’s lives. Ann received a Master of
Architecture degree at the University of
Pennsylvania, and has worked with internationally acclaimed architecture firms. She says a natural progression was to go from large commercial scale to more intimate residential scale, and she enjoys improving energy efficiency and using smart building practices. Her objective is to create high-quality design solutions with elegance, character and style.

Howard has always been interested in art, sculpture, design and making things. He knew as a teenager that his passion was architecture, and at 18
years old he went directly to architecture school. He enjoys the fact that architecture is a tangible activity. “You create something real that exists,” he says. “As a young teenage carpenter, to see a wall go up that you had built was exciting. I simply decided I would rather design the wall as op-
Stunning artwork was enlarged 600 times to create a sliding art wall.
posed to building it.” Howard was also interested in society and how it is organized. He found that architecture combined his interest in art with creating places where people live, labor and function. After working with internationally acclaimed firms on projects all over the world, Howard gravitated to a more local level, designing everything from a piece of hardware to custom residences.

Resources

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