

Naturally Modern: A Fulton Neighborhood Renovation

Every house has its story. This story begins with a one thousand square foot house, vacant and neglected for quite some time, sitting on a lovely lot in the heart of the Fulton Neighborhood. Built in the 1950s, the house had Mid-Century modern features: a flat roof, vertical redwood siding, a low profile, and rectilinear lines. Both inside and out, its simple elegance had long since given way to neglect. Sadly, as it came on the market, it was widely assumed that the next owner would tear it down and start over. That didn't happen.

The new owners had been residents of the Fulton Neighborhood for a dozen years. About to become empty nesters, they were looking to downsize...and stay in the neighborhood. High on their list of priorities were relatively low maintenance, efficiency (both with respect to space planning, and to energy consumption), a main level master bedroom, a reliance upon natural materials, and a simple, yet sophisticated aesthetic. Their new home, they hoped, would feel timeless and foster a sense of belonging to the neighborhood.

After careful analysis, a strategy began to take shape in which the new owners could meet their objectives in a cost-effective manner without tearing down the existing house. The biggest challenge was to find a way to increase the square footage from the existing 1000 square feet of legitimate finished living space to something approaching 2400 square feet, all the while remaining sensitive to the importance neighboring sightlines, light access, and human scale.

The original house had a basement, also about 1000 square feet. If that space could be converted to comfortable, code-compliant space, the new owners would be well on their way to meeting their square-footage requirements. The solution was to convert the basement to a walkout. That conversion solved another problem as well. The backyard dropped steeply away from the house, so steeply, in fact, that the yard was not usable. By pulling earth away from the house and redistributing it around the yard, not only was the lower level exposed to southern light, but a relatively level and very private backyard was created. More than anything, that simple move made this project viable. What was once a dark and uncomfortable basement became premium living space, and an unusable backyard became an important adjunct to the living space.

Even with the walkout conversion, some additional square footage was required to bring the new owners' program to life. A two-story, 360 square foot addition on the rear of the house allowed for both a light-filled and generous master suite on the main level, and an equally spacious guest suite below. A new copper-clad front entry provided both architectural interest and relief from what had been a rather two-dimensional, monolithic front elevation. Small bump-outs in both the living room and the family room below helped define seating arrangements and allowed for the comfortable placement of furniture. A new deck and screened porch add texture to the rear elevation, and provide additional living space in nice weather. Finally, an attached two-car garage was added. By canting the garage a few degrees from the house, it was possible to enter the garage from the side and eliminate the garage doors from the front elevation.

The new owners embraced the concept of dual-purpose spaces as a way to reduce square footage requirements. A single entry closet/mudroom is shared by those entering the front door as well as those who come in through the garage. Powder rooms double as guest baths on both the main and lower levels. And the laundry room serves as a craft room, as well.

As the renovation began to take shape, it became apparent that landscaping would be a very important element of the design. Situated on a relatively well-traveled street, the new owners were concerned about privacy. A poured concrete wall, 80 feet long but only 18 inches high was installed across the front yard. It was surrounded by a bed of prairie grass. The result is an architectural element that creates the idea of separation between public and private without creating a literal barrier. A row of arborvitae provide separation from the next door neighbor, and new maple, birch, and evergreens surround the backyard and provide an almost north woods sense of privacy.

The finished product is an empty nester home that represents a commitment to the Fulton Neighborhood and all that it stands for.