

kitchen makeovers | the 12 tastiest dishes in seattle

SEATTLE HOMES & LIFESTYLES™

remarkable
remodels!

* ADD SPACE, INCREASE VALUE, SAVE MONEY

\$3.95 April 2004



A Wiesner Publication
seattlehomesmag.com

better garden borders | what's new in tile
at home with photographer art wolfe

Mercer Island residents bring their '60s tract

WRITTEN BY BETSY WALTER PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE KEATING



ARCHITECTS LANE WILLIAMS AND BRIAN SWEENEY RECONFIGURED THE MAIN FLOOR OF THIS MERCER ISLAND HOME, CREATING A LARGER ENTERTAINING AREA AT THE REAR, ORIENTED TO THE BACKYARD AND A COVERED PATIO. THE COLORFUL ARNE JACOBSEN "ANT" CHAIRS FROM INFORM, (206) 622-1608, REST ATOP A PLASTIC FLOOR MAT FROM T & A SUPPLY, (206) 242-3270.

house into the 21st century



Suburban
renewal



For a generation of postwar families aspiring to home-ownership, the suburban tract house once embodied the American Dream. Forty years ago, developers translated that dream into a one-size-fits-all blueprint featuring adult territory (formal living and dining areas front-of-house), kid territory (family rooms back-of-house) and Mom territory (the kitchens where, apart from family breakfasts and neighborly coffee breaks, "entertaining" was not only impractical but socially unthinkable).

Times change, and so do dreams—or at least lifestyles. In a redesign that is radical inside and conservative outside, a Mercer Island couple have fast-forwarded their Nixon-era special from the

sixties to the aughts, boldly gutting the interior with a plan tailor-made to suit their own young family, while giving the vintage exterior a revitalizing but sympathetic face-lift.

A professional couple with modern tastes and an active social life, the owners felt the existing floor plan was out of sync with their needs. "The rooms were either too small or too large," says the husband. "We wanted a house that reflected how we really live, where space would be allocated proportionately to the way we use it. We also needed a house that was kidproof and splatterproof—a house that retained its original character but also allowed us to inject our personality."

Methodically researching architectural firms to find a good match for their ideas, the couple selected Seattle-based Lane Williams,



BEFORE



AFTER



OPPOSITE: THE CRAMPED KITCHEN (INSET) WAS EXPANDED USING SPACE BORROWED FROM THE LIVING ROOM. PORCELAIN FLOOR TILES DEFINE THE WORK AREA, WHICH IS BRIGHTENED BY A FLUORESCENT LIGHT TROUGH AND SANDBLASTED GLASS TILES FROM AMBIENTE EUROPEAN TILE DESIGN, (206) 524-2113. ABOVE: THE NEW DIVIDER WALL SEPARATING THE KITCHEN AND LIVING ROOM INCLUDES A DESK AND STAINLESS-STEEL DOORS THAT CONCEAL THE AUDIO COMPONENTS. THE DIVIDER FALLS SHORT OF THE CEILING, CREATING THE ILLUSION OF GREATER HEIGHT. JYM BAR STOOLS AVAILABLE TO THE TRADE AT DUGRAF ASSOCIATES, (206) 281-9366.

impressed by the architect's design for his own home, which the husband characterizes as "suburban, with a modern character."

Williams was a good listener, too, and quickly identified the central issue: The couple didn't necessarily want a bigger house, just a better layout. That desire for quality over quantity, Williams notes, is part of a growing trend espoused by architect/author Sarah Susanka in *The Not So Big House*. "We understood from the start that the remodeling would not focus on adding a lot more space," Williams says, "but using the existing space more efficiently."

Williams brought in his longtime collaborator, architect Brian Sweeney, to take primary responsibility for the project, and the owners selected builder Bob Setting to handle the construction. Sweeney

started by observing the family to determine the patterns of the household, the traffic flow and in particular how the two sons moved around the house. "Brian came to really understand our daily dynamics," says the husband.

His wife puts a finer point on it. "He discovered that here, the party always starts in the kitchen."

Sweeney responded with a design that centers on one large kitchen/entertaining space at the back of the house. The wall dividing it from the living room in front was removed and a new "divider wall" inserted. Sweeney shrank the formal living room to a cozy sitting-room size, with the reclaimed space allocated to the new open-plan kitchen/dining room. (One dimension that couldn't be altered was the



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER RIGHT: THE HOMEOWNERS PRESERVED THE HOUSE'S FORM BUT UPDATED ITS APPEARANCE WITH PAINT, NEW WINDOWS AND BLACK HARDIPANEL SIDING AROUND THE TOP FLOOR; AN ART STUDIO WAS ADDED AT THE FAR LEFT. UPLIGHTS IN THE FRONT WALK LEAD VISITORS TO AN ENTRY DELINEATED BY CONCRETE WALLS. THE TWO-STORY STAIRWAY INSIDE IS A VAST IMPROVEMENT OVER THE DARK, CRAMPED ORIGINAL. OPPOSITE: MIDCENTURY MODERN FURNITURE POPULATES THE LIVING ROOM, WHICH WAS REDUCED IN SIZE AND FITTED WITH A LOW MANTEL TO MAKE THE CEILING FEEL HIGHER.

stingy 8-foot ceiling. To create the illusion of height, the architect cut the divider wall a few inches short of the ceiling; the new granite mantel over the fireplace was set low into the wall to strengthen the illusion.)

The expansive new kitchen/entertaining area is both pragmatic, with tough stone and steel surfaces, and playful, its white walls punctuated by contrasting blocks of paprika, avocado, warm gray and mustard paint. The ambience of the eat-in entertaining area says "Hey, we're casual," but the precision-planned beech cabinets with acid-washed glass doors, the massive honed granite work island, the stainless-steel counter tops and high-end Gaggenau range hood say "But we're definitely not country." Oak flooring, continued from the living room, is inset with charcoal porcelain tiles that define the

kitchen's work area. It's an interesting study in comfortable chic. Still, the owners report they kept a lid on the budget. Says the husband, "We went for things that looked right, not necessarily the most expensive options."

The children are never far from the central kitchen hub, with their own activity rooms at either end. "The kids can't hide from you around here," says their mother happily. A former laundry room has been turned into a TV room and play area. Off the opposite end of the kitchen, the owners added an art studio where the boys can splash around with paint and clay and get creatively messy.

All along the redesigned back of the house, windows frame varying views of the garden. The large but charmless yard was reclaimed by



landscape designer Jean Albrecht, who leveled the existing design—“two mounds of dirt and railroad ties”—to create a magnificent grassed terrace that doubles as a kids’ sports field and a smart outdoor entertaining area.

Upstairs, the architects demolished a bedroom next to the staircase, opening up the stairwell with a light-filled landing. The children’s bedrooms were made smaller to compensate, and the upper floor was expanded along the existing roofline. With that one small addition, and a smart rejigging of space, the owners actually increased the number of upstairs rooms from four to five.

As radical as the interior remodeling may be, the exterior was treated with respect and restraint. Horizontal bands of new windows

“We wanted a house that reflected how we really live, where space would be allocated proportionately to the way we use it,” says the husband.

add a contemporary look without distorting the original façade, while concrete walls direct your eye to the front door, where previously the only obvious entrance was through the garage. Uplights punched into the front walk reinforce the sense of procession.

“At first glance, this house is instantly identifiable as a suburban ‘60s house,” says Sweeney. “But then you look again and discover that there’s more to it.” ■

Betsy Walker is an Australia-based journalist who divides her time between Sydney and Seattle.