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RESTORATIVE POWERS

An architect/builder couple bring their 1960s contemporary home into the new millennium

WRITTEN BY ANNE FITTEN GLENN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID DIETRICH

YUMIKO AND TOM VIRANT BOUGHT THEIR FIRST HOME IN 2003, knowing it was a fixer-upper. The floor plan was awkward and the interior was a mishmash of remodels, but they didn't realize their plans for a small-scale remodel would evolve into a two-year, top-to-bottom renovation.

When the couple first saw the 1961 modernist-style house perched on the side of a mountain deep in the woods near Asheville, its good bones, affordability, lush surroundings, and location, excited them.

But it wasn't until Yumiko and Tom, an architect and contractor respectively who met as undergraduates, cut a couple holes in the ceiling that they discovered

the roof was in terrible shape. "At that point, we realized we either needed to get out or go all the way," Tom says.

Their love for the house won out, and they went all in.

"This midcentury style is so rare in Asheville, especially in North Asheville," says Yumiko. "We really wanted to save this house."

The boxy, flat-roofed contemporary shape of the home stands out from the mix of craftsman and luxury-style homes that dot Sunset Mountain, but it fits the couple's design aesthetics. Tom likes to use natural building materials, while Yumiko's architectural sense is rooted in her memories of childhood summers spent with her grandparents in Japan. Elements such as honey-hued wooden support beams and floor-to-ceiling windows that connect each room to the outside reflect their tastes.

The couple handled all the design and much of the labor on their 2,300-square-foot renovation themselves. Yumiko and Tom typically work together on residential



design and build projects through their businesses, Virant Architecture and Virant Design.

From the roof, to the electrical and mechanical systems, to interior walls, to the landscape, almost everything about the home was replaced or reimagined. Today, the interior continues to pay homage to the modern style; the austerity of its strong lines are softened with detail-conscious use of materials. Fixtures like a side-angle German-imported sink in the hallway bathroom or the countertop edge that flaunts its lamination (rather than concealing it), reveal the couple's appreciation for playful design. Outside, the bold decks with their industrial-style railings protrude over the dense green forest below.

"We're really aware of the seasons in this house. We're always watching the rain and snow and seeing new leaves open on the trees," Yumiko says.

The home has grown with them—from an ideal place for a couple, to a family home complete with a living room play area ideal for their two-and-a-half-year-old son. Though the renovation project may have been more extensive than they originally planned, they now have a home that only they could have dreamt up. "This house is part of our souls now," says Yumiko.

■ *The Virants initially planned to renovate the house while living there, but after some selective pre-demolition, they realized that would be impossible. They ended up tearing off the old roof and roof framing (below), gutting the interior (including the walls, electrical, plumbing and mechanical systems) and removing the outside decks. Although the footprint of the house stayed the same, both the interior and exterior were reduced to the studs.*

Overhead, commercial roofing membrane was used to waterproof the flat roof and exposed beams were added for framing support and aesthetic appeal. Cypress siding and cedar trim protect the home's exterior (both woods are naturally resistant to decay and insects).

The couple rebuilt and extended the decks, using cypress accented by recycled copper piping in the railings. To avoid blocking the view of the forest from the front downstairs bedroom and office, Tom cantilevered the support beams for the deck at an angle (far left).

Two large retaining walls were built to create a flat lawn area and enlarge the driveway (opposite).



■ *The flat roof is lined with a polyvinyl chloride membrane over rigid insulation. The gravel serves to protect the PVC from the sun and adds a natural look. The Virants originally planned to install a garden roof with a large deck in the*

middle, but they never got around to putting in the dirt, although the structure was designed to support the additional weight.

Though the home's footprint looks segmented from above, the floor plan offers a natural flow.





■ The dining room (right) opens to the kitchen and living room, and floor-to-ceiling windows on two walls flood the area with natural light. The couple moved and added windows so that the side of the house facing the forest is open to nature, while the home's front on Sunset Drive has minimal glass to maintain the family's privacy. They also added 13-inch clerestory glass windows around the entire first floor to further brighten the home and deepen the connection between inside and out. The home's perch on the side of the mountain, plus sliding doors on two sides of the house, open it up to cool breezes in the summer.



■ The layout of the kitchen basically stayed the same, though the Virants repositioned a wall to enlarge the room. They also replaced the long peninsula dividing the kitchen from the dining room with an island counter to create a better traffic flow. The white oak cabinets and all of the appliances are new, except the refrigerator.



■ The stairs leading to the home's lower level were awkwardly placed behind the front door. Thus, the door needed to be closed to access the stairs. Because of the position of the stairwell in the small hallway (below), you felt "like you were going to fall down a hole," Yumiko says. So the Virants reversed the stairs' direction. The stairwell now opens from the opposite end of the hallway between the master bedroom and powder room, and the steps themselves consist of open risers made from thick slabs of wood. The handrail was carved from maple harvested from the property.



Skylights were installed in the upstairs hallway and the master bath and closet to brighten windowless areas.





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ON THE JOB

Some of the companies that helped rebuild Tom and Yumiko's home

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GENERAL CONTRACTOR
Virant Design

STAIR HANDRAIL
Matrix Metalwork & Design

ROOF MEMBRANE
Bonitz Roofing

LUMBER
Westall Chandley Lumber Company

ICYNENE INSULATION
Green R, Inc.

WOODSTOVE & FIREPLACE
Wright's Hearth, Heat & Home

STONE STEPS
Carolina Native Landscapes

PLANTINGS
Tiller of the Soil



■ Tom and Yumiko liked the idea of built-in cabinets on the back wall of the family room, but they wanted to update the look to complement the modern décor. The countertop (left) on the cabinet is a laminate, but the couple used Baltic birch as the substrate and left the edges exposed. A wood stove was installed in the family room, which adds a cozy, natural warmth to the space.



■ Although the before and after photos of the home are startling, much of the renovation isn't visible. The baseboard heating system was replaced with radiant heat piping (above) under Ash hardwood floors. The system has six separate zones, giving the family control over which areas of the home are heated according to the time of day. The Virants also added air conditioning, though they rarely use it. The result is a home that looks like it was imagined in the 1960s, but offers the comfort and energy efficiency of a new dwelling.

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