

# One-Year Wonder

*Constrained by geography, topography and chronology, a Madison couple pull off a not-so-minor miracle*

By DUO DICKINSON

When they decided to relocate to Connecticut from Chicago, Greg and Limor Makoul thought they wanted to buy and renovate a classic Connecticut antique. “We had rehabbed two 100-year old houses in Chicago — pretty much by ourselves — and were looking to do the same here,” recalls Greg Makoul. “Got excited about a couple of possibilities, but they fell through.”

But they found a bargain in the worst housing market since World War II. That bargain was near the beach in Madison, but the home was no antique — it was an awkward and small 1960s “contemporary ranch.”

So knowing they could never “build the land” from scratch, they gulped, hired me as their architect (objectivity alert there) and jumped in with both feet. The Makouls opted to build new, replacing the ranch. Even at a bargain price, the site was by no means free, and new construction has nearly unlimited potential to have costs exceed budget.

But this project had the double whammy of the tightest of schedules — just over 12 months — courtesy of their grammar-school aged daughters, Zoe and Laine. The Makouls secured a one-year rental and boldly dedicated themselves to getting moved into their new home (on a

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People who live in glass houses: The backyard view of the Makouls' Madison home shows how the maximum height and maxed-out coverage to comply to a variety of setbacks can become an artfully ascendant house. The multiple overhangs shade and protect south-facing windows, the screen porch (right) makes summer living delightful and the tapestry of woven siding enriches the evolving shape.



Set at a literal bend in the road, this home's central entry acts as the balancing point for an active shape derived to avoid any and all variances.

HVAC system, be naturally vented, and accept natural light for winter heat while still providing shade against unwanted solar gain.

The house took about three months to design, draw and get a building permit and about ten months to build with a schedule very much predicated on brinkmanship.

Notwithstanding the code and scheduling constraints, the house also accommodates a ground-floor suite for a visiting parent. In addition a space for music practice was created for the Makoul girls. An outdoor gathering space was a must, so a civilized screen porch was dynamically set off to a side, invisible from indoors during winter months, but still just a few steps from the kitchen. Integrated into the open living/

dining/kitchen area is a built-in wine closet, a tribute to the couple's love of vino.

The home's setback-limited perimeter had its precisely confined ground-level footprint relieved by ten-foot ceilings. Windows are oversized, and many have operable transoms — operable to reduce air-conditioning use and maximize day lighting to minimize electric use.

Considerable money was saved using simple flat-stock trim. A rock found on the site became the fireplace hearth. Salvaged beams from the Madison firm Wood, Steel & Glas were used to create trim, columns and the fireplace mantle. These were meshed with other natural woods and complemented by stainless steel pieces and parts.

The first floor and hallways are graced with dramatic solid birch flooring and stair components. The third-floor office employs interior windows to separate HVAC zones and share light. It is oriented at the right spot at the right height to grab a winter glimpse of sunlight on waves of Long Island Sound (if you squint). Strategic skylights backlight and vent spaces throughout the second floor and attic.

A two-car garage wing connects to the house through a back door and mudroom ensemble. Above that wing is another byproduct of a tightly defined perimeter: a second-floor family room that takes advantage of the available cathedral ceilings. A walk-through laundry, elevated master suite and master bath with vaulted



The stairway addresses the front door and integrates the wonderful birch flooring with trim, treads and risers cut to the curving shape of the cost-saving side wall.

tight site with a very specific cost) before middle school happened.

First, they needed to pick a contractor immediately. After interviewing a few who I trusted to be honest, fair and fast-working, they picked Matt Fogerty who fulfills all of those characteristics. Second, since their site was in a flood plain, had wetlands on it, was undersized from the existing zoning requirements so if any variances were required, the one year timeline would not be met. This meant every aspect of the design of their home had to produce an "as of right" (the legal term) building.

The first step in playing by all the rules was to verify that the house that had to be removed was eligible to be demolished without a 90-day hold triggered when an "antique" is to be razed. A little research and the small placeholder home was history.

The Makouls careful planning allowed for every setback to be met, height restrictions adhered to, and the small site's tight coverage limits to be complied with. The

100-foot setback to the wetlands also had to be respected although a slight encumbrance by the screen porch received "administrative approval" so that it would not hold up the project.

The half-acre site was just big enough to build the four-bedroom, three-bath house they envisioned. Despite these limitations and the installation of a new code-compliant septic system, a new home was built that is quite spontaneous in its evocatively expressive form and detailing.

The resulting 3,700-square-foot house adheres to the code definition of a "two-and-one-half-story structure," but still provides sufficient attic space for storage (important because the site's flood-plain location prevented digging a full basement) as well as a wonderful attic office for Greg.

Beyond these hard-edged requirements to leverage a timely occupancy, the Makouls wanted a home that limited future costs. So the home was designed to be super-insulated, have a geothermal-assisted, multi-zoned



Not so much a screened porch as an 'outdoor room,' this space has careful detailing (incorporating custom crafted stainless steel brackets, ground concrete floors and clear fir structure) and vaulted scale to make it a seamless transition between 'in' and 'out.'



A kitchen designed to accommodate family members entering (rear right door leads to mudroom), snack-seeking kids (the built-in fridge right), seated socializers (the island) and lots of cook-friendly counter space. This open area is top-lit from transoms connecting to the screen porch and gives instant serving access to that porch (left).



Master bedroom. Elevated from the rest of the second floor, the setback-conforming exterior walls provide a natural focus for the bed. The transom windows allow for cross-ventilation and day lighting.

ceiling are all interwoven in a naturally flowing ensemble of spaces.

Recalls Greg Makoul: "Our daughters, Zoe and Laine, were involved at every step [of the building process] as well. They decided to put a window in the wall between their closets."

The exterior is a dance of shapes, lines, materials and windows incorporating wood shingles, tongue-and-groove boards, Azek trim and asphalt shingles. The shape both bends and steps, creating overhangs that protect windows and provide shade. Eaves are broad to protect the home and are celebrated with trim.

In this tight neighborhood visible garage doors are not always welcomed by neighbors. But angling them toward a bend in the road, shading them with a metal rooflet and rendering them in clear-finished mahogany transformed a necessity

into an asset. Similarly, the crawl space access door (a "Bilco" in common parlance) uses carefully joined trim and sheet-metal detailing in tight coordination with the evolving trim and siding design.

But it is the entry roof that creates the visual focal point for those viewing the house. It was created using a cantilevered roof with curved surfaces and has a natural wood ceiling over two-sided steps. These expressive gestures beckon visitors and shelter them.

All this integration of materials, shape, space, light and function does not happen by chance. Explains Greg Makoul: "We talked a lot about materials, light and feel. We would send drawings back and forth, which led to some stunningly cool solutions. We have a not-so-big, not-so-normal house — and we love it." ❖



before & AFTER



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The living room area of the open first floor employs salvaged wood trim and columns, transom windows and a rock hearth found on site to enrich and focus a flowing space.