

# A Work in the Woods

A young family remakes a '60s Woodbridge ranch house into something extraordinary

 **ATHOME**



BY DUO DCKINSON

PHOTOS: BY ANTHONY DECARLO

We all have to live somewhere, but families typically demand more of their homes than do singletons or empty-nesters. Matthew and Laura Stansel discovered that creating a family and a home simultaneously (as most families do) can have a lot of unexpected realities.

When they married in 2003, their careers were already established, and the focus became creating a home that could nurture children. They found a classic Westville house, were blessed to have a daughter a couple of years later. Then, four years later, twins arrived.

That was in 2008, and despite the fact that the housing market was in full juggernaut mode, the Stansels knew that the tripling of their offspring called into question just how they would live for the duration of their child-rearing years.

Today an information security analyst for the Yale New Haven Health System, Matthew had grown up in Woodbridge in a notable home. "At age seven, my family moved into the Stern House in Woodbridge — designed by Charles Moore in 1970 during his tenure as dean of the Yale School of Architecture," he recounts. "I loved the house from the outset: full of light, multiple intermingled levels connected by flowing stairs, long, converging hallways — reminiscent of an M.C. Escher drawing.

"There were many adventures to be had as a young boy in this house," Matthew Stansel adds. "No doubt living this contemporary home had a major impact on my aesthetic during these formative years."

The living space uses plate glass to frame views, veneered plywood to create indirect lighting on the ceiling, and the white walls that allow artful furniture to fully express their presence.





Matt and Laura Stansel with family, art and light in their new Woodbridge home.

Fortuitously for their marriage, Laura Stansel is her husband's aesthetic soulmate.

"I have always loved contemporary architecture," she says. "Growing up in Trumbull in the 1970s and '80s there was a boom of new contemporary homes built. I admired the feeling of space, the connection with the outdoors and the minimalism."

It's self-evident to this couple that a home has an abiding impact on the children who grow up there. Certainly for Matthew Stansel, a modern home cemented his perspective on what "home" meant.

"I wanted to combine the notions and themes I enjoyed as a boy," he explains. After a period of house-hunting what they found was a classically undervalued property in Woodbridge. "Contemporary" houses in many New England communities command a smaller market than their "traditional" counterparts, and even in the gushing market of 2008 a 1960s "contemporary ranch" nicely set on a leafy Woodbridge lot was available at an affordable cost.

So they bought it, moved in and, one month later, Laura gave birth to twins. A couple of years of upbringing revealed that one of the twins had a genetic metabolic disorder that fundamentally

impacted their vision of what shape their new home should ultimately assume. "We decided we would be spending most of our family time at home as travel is quite difficult," she says. "We wanted the house to be an inspiration for the children. We needed an environment that would be both stimulating and safe."

Beyond these new requirements, all work done had to reflect the vision that made them purchase the home in the first place — a modern nest in the woods. The house sat at the top of a modest rise, set high enough to require access up a flight of stairs to get to the living floor from the level of the driveway/garage access, but also to capture sunlight and summer breezes.

Although the home as they found it had open spaces, skylights, strip windows and the clean lines that made it fit a Realtor's "contemporary" designation, the home's 2,500 square feet was clearly inadequate for a family of five growing beyond the baby-raising years. Given the house, their family, their site and their sensibilities, the Stansels knew that a complete renovation and additional square-footage needed to be part of their master plan.

Of course, what any good "Modern-ization" needs is a talented architect, so the Stansels set

out to find one who had Modernist street cred — but found much more than that. Jeff Kaufman is the principal of JMKA architects, with offices in Westport and Greenwich. He's won awards for his work — but more importantly, he won the devotion of the Stansels. "Working with Jeff Kaufman was an amazing experience," says Laura Stansel. "Right from our initial meeting, we really felt he understood our point of view."

But architects need to know a client's point of view if their designs are going to work beyond the visual. So the Stansels set about articulating their fondest dreams with a simple list that included ample glass walls, minimal exterior maintenance, a fireplace surrounded by glass, a sewing/music room and a workshop for Matthew.



More than an overarching aesthetic of Modernism as the glue that bound these disparate desires were several imperatives. First, one organizing and architectural theme was getting energy and light with south-facing windows featuring deep overhangs to prevent overheating.



The kitchen shows how stock Ikea cabinetry, augmented by expressive hardware and custom solid-surface countertops, can obviate any sense of limitations imposed by a \$13,000 budget.



The bones of the original home remain in the center lower floor of this entry view - the metal clad bay focuses attention to the entry below - which leads to the main occupied floor one flight up., and strutted columns expressively support new second floor space.

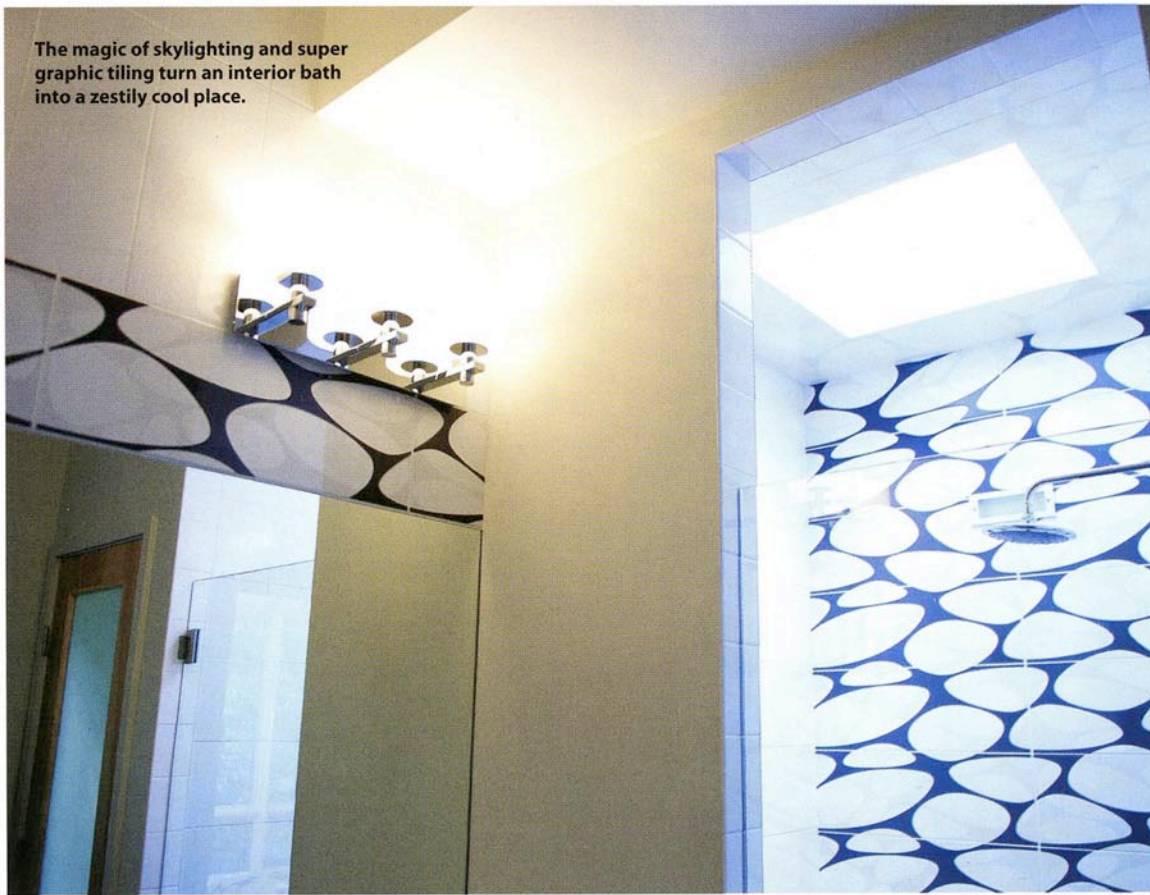


Second was cantilevering new space where necessary to minimize soil disturbance. Last and most compelling was the romantic vision of living in a tree house. But functionally the special needs put upon siblings when one of them is a “special needs” child created a whole host of requirements, including running space and each child’s bedroom being its own “place”—with distinctive characteristics.

This weighty agenda required a great deal of design and construction — a full year of building, in fact — that was only recently completed. Architect Kaufman preserved several of the original home’s bones: the stairway, the first-floor structure, the existing lower level slab and foundation and a side deck. Other than these remnants, much of what is presented in these photographs represents new construction.

Most dramatic to those who drive onto the site is a new second-floor angled frontispiece of children’s bedrooms and bath — complete with metal-clad “signet” bay — cantilevered beyond the cantilevered

The magic of skylighting and super graphic tiling turn an interior bath into a zestily cool place.



Height, light and color as spice make a modern space sing — even for an informal eating area. Note the clean built-in banquette seating and sculptural light fixtures.



second-floor mass. That focal point signals entry on the outside from the existing driveway, but also acts as an interior feature for one of the specialized children’s rooms.

As with all good Modern homes, rigorous consistency of materials and detailing unify the home’s exterior. New full glass walls in living spaces and bedrooms make the trees part of the home’s interior. Exposed timber column/struts draw attention to the new overhanging construction. Similarly, the new roof features open eaves with angle-cut rafter tails and solid wood undersides. Wood decks, grey horizontal siding and complementary metal shingled bays are all “expressed” in proud shapes and subordinate recesses filled with glass weave together a house of distilled shapes.

The front door nestles under the angled bar of children’s bedrooms and has a double-height, top-lit shaft on the way to the stairs that lead up to the living level. The rest of the lower level houses garage bays, Matthew’s shop, the music room, a playroom for the kids, laundry and mechanical space.

The second floor became an “H” in plan, where the angled kid’s wing faces the driveway, and the parent’s master suite wing addresses the back view, with the stair, living, dining and kitchen

amidships - their spaces fully extended by social decks.

The aesthetic is modern and lofted — glass and wire rails, white walls, flat stock trim, beautiful oak floors — the unified sweep of a clean Modernist vision.

All projects have budgets, of course. The Stansels’ zesty kitchen is a \$13,000 assemblage of Ikea cabinetry and a zoomy sink from their old Westville home. Bathrooms feature graphic tile patterns. Expressive art — mostly created by local artists — and boldly rendered furniture make a potentially stark interior as alive and vibrant as the family who calls this space home. A veneered dropped ceiling panel allows for indirect lighting, and a fireplace and glass wall lend balance to this high-ceilinged space.

The interior employs recesses built into walls as well as simple millwork and strategic skylights to complement the predominance of vaulted ceilings. But this artful interior has a not-so-hidden agenda — facilitating and accommodating child’s play.

Explains Laura Stansel: “We have two long wide hallways that serve as play areas for relay races, building forts or just lying in the sunshine and reading books.”

Good design requires a good site as its picture frame, and the mature second-growth forest that surrounds this Woodbridge property is verdant and full. Good design also needs clients with a clear vision of what the house wants to be at the end of the day — and the Stansels provided clear direction flowing from sharp-edged needs. Finally, good design comes from a visionary designer who sees the limits and possibilities inherent in context and weaves a final product that is at once invigorating yet seemingly effortless. This home manifest all these possibilities.

“I feel we truly achieved a synthesis of our aesthetic values and seamless integration with the property and its surroundings,” says Matthew Stansel. “We wanted to create a unique, inviting space for our family and friends to enjoy — not separate from the land but part of it, fully embracing the natural world around it.”

This is where a seven-year-old and four-year-old twins can play, learn and grow. And their early-40s parents can put aside the “what-ifs” and “if-onlys” that constrain construction in so many instances. Design can find a place for a family, as it did here. ❖