

Homing Instinct

How an architect couple went against the grain in rehabbing their unpretentious house

By DUO DICKINSON



It's not easy being an architect. We are supposed to be the "cool" ones — thin, black-clad with the hippest of eyewear. Reputedly we live in poignantly sculptural techno-homes, laughing at the absurd bourgeois banalities of typical American domesticity. You have to have real mud to need a mudroom, after all.

Then we have children. Besides the body issues created by mid-life larding up and the lack of budget for \$750 eyeglass frames, parenthood makes all our pretensions seem, well, *pretentious*. When you have to create a home for the most precious of our creations — our children — the artsy affectations can get old. It's hard to hold your home at arm's length when you are holding your spawn close to your bosom.

So it was with Alan Organschi and Lisa Gray, co-principals of Gray Organschi Architecture, a seven-person New Haven firm. They are 40-something-year-old practitioners who happen to be married to each other and have won national acclaim for their extraordinary designs. Whether winning national awards for poignant outbuildings in Litchfield County or landing a commission to design a super-green Jesuit center at Fairfield University, this couple are truly capital "A" Architects.

Organschi is an instructor at Yale's graduate school of architecture, where he met Gray while both were graduate students there more than 20 years ago. Together they created a firm whose work product has been celebrated in exhibits, publications, awards and lectures. But if you asked either of them what collaborative effort means the most to them, it would be their children, Hanna and August. Given their High Modern design sensibilities, one would think that their most precious production would be housed in a creation of extreme innovation. But house design often defies obvious answers.

In 1995, with toddler Hanna in tow and Lisa great with August, Organschi and Gray happened upon one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities — 4.5 acres of land in Guilford with a rocky knob overlooking vast coastal marshland at an affordable price. (This was 1995, after all.)

But there was a catch — the property had a house on it. An ambiguously

Renovated top to bottom, the original house (at right) features large-scale glass facing the open back yard. An exquisite new stone terrace fills the flattened area (right) and a new garage/shop/playroom (left) allows for full architectural expression including a "living roof" with an outsized scupper to fully drain the grass roofing.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANTHONY DECARLO

Windows replace walls at the back side of the house — they fully capture the new and existing stone landscape walls and rock outcroppings. The view room (left) utilizes a standard set of sliding doors, pitched at a slight angle, to better bring the view back into the main living room (at right). Note Lisa Gray's expressive furniture that plays off of the relatively traditional architecture.



aged "Foursquare" (a roughly square floor plan perimeter, with four roughly square rooms subdividing it). It had a cesspool septic system, a collapsing chicken coop and a lot of 1950s aluminum siding covering its stark exterior.

Its interior needed to be stripped of all antiquity — walls covered in classic plywood "paneling," ceilings in acoustic tile, and a "3/4" room (short for three-season porch) set on dirt. Worse than what was there was what had been expunged in a 1959 scorched-earth renovation — the front porch.

You would expect that a High Modern couple like the Gray-Organschis would simply bulldoze the offending box and build their dream sculpture to live in. But that would betray a deeply green ethos that values the embodied energy of any viable structure over the environmental cost of creating more landfill.

And besides, their house was to be a place to live in and love as well as a piece of architecture — and lavishing their creative love on the old box suited their values. Extreme hipness in architecture gravitates to urban centers — New York, L.A., London have the preponderance of those thin, black-clad groover architects. But Gray and Organschi were (and are) comfortable enough in their own skin to let their work speak for them, and to come home to a place that is soft about the edges, yet made into something that is uniquely theirs.

Upon buying the property the young couple stripped the land of all overgrowth of invasive plants, discovering a web of garden walls with plantings incorporated into them by the previous owners, long lost in the intervening generations that occupied the home. Those walls served as the design guide when they had to regrade to build a septic system that could accommodate a

growing family's needs. But equally significant, when they grubbed out the overgrown landscape the couple discovered a mysterious turned wood column. Finding a old photograph that showed the column with its long-deceased brethren in the once-upon-a-time front porch, they knew they had to redress their naked two-story, street facing façade and poured-concrete front door stoop with a rebirth of the original proper front porch.

If these talented designers followed the "correct" path for capital "A" Architects, they would have seen the absence of a porch as an opportunity to create their own counterpoint commentary — a result that would have tossed away any reference to that old column. Similarly they might have invented some new garden wall system that proudly proclaimed a new sensibility. But these architects knew that the public streetscape was a shared stewardship with their neighbors — and besides, there was room for overtly "new" pieces of building discretely away from the street view.



Organschi's and Gray's embrace of a simple box as the seed for their home did not mean they left well enough alone — just the opposite. After they fully rehabbed the original structure (integrating that "3/4 room" into the house by completely rebuilding it) over the intervening 15 years they designed several new additions to their Foursquare. All the work was executed by a contractor the couple had grown to trust, Pat Lowe.

First, in 1998 they decided that with children fully mobile and growing, they needed some elbow room. So they razed the soon-to-collapse garage and created a two-level outbuilding. Its lower level was for a shop and garage, the upper level accommodates musical practice space (drums!), workout equipment and TV/

video game center. The orientation of this new building allows the upper level to dig into the existing rock knob hillside, affording upper-level access independent of the shop equipment and cars, as well as an overlook of the expansive salt marsh. Rendered in mute simplicity facing the street (its gable end façade plays peek-a-boo around the corner of the house), the free-standing addition is loosely connected to the house by a gate, and the rear of the upper level is completely glazed to fully open up to the salt marsh view.

All good enough, but what makes this a distinctly Gray-Organschi project are the elaborations that fully express the latent possibilities of this little construction. Raw concrete, exposed timber and wood slats combine to form vibrant surfaces and details spice up areas in contrast to the starkness of the balance of the outbuilding. But the jewel in the crown of this diminutive structure is the sod roof that caps the rakishly skewed one-story shop extension off its two story main body.

In addition to the gate, the new building is attached to the house with rock terraces that are ruggedly expressive yet crisply simple, punctuated by local flat step stones. This civilized backyard development embraces the latest addition: a fully open glazed sun/view room that grabs the rock knoll view and brings it fully into the home.

It would be fine to bask in the full-throated and skillful expression of raw materials — stone, glass, wood, concrete. But this last bit of renovation was informed by a classic expression of family values. The view room replaced an existing space that served as an ad hoc mudroom. As any family with teenagers can tell you, creating a demilitarized zone to stanch the invasion of sports gear, recyclables, winter garb and the detritus of student life before it takes over the living space of your home is perhaps the most screaming need for any household to address.

Organschi and Gray created a new mudroom fully designed to organize chaos. The space is carved out of the existing home, freeing up the rear for the new view-room addition. Even though it's anything but architect-y, the new mudroom "is my favorite part of the house," Gray proudly proclaims.

The home's interior is gracefully open, and carefully respectful of what was — all original trim reapplied following plywood/ceiling tile removal. Wood floors and the old stairway were restored; walls were strategically removed to accommodate a



Integrating the outsized television set into a custom built-in technology is 'civilized.' The eclectic furnishings play off the traditional trim and detailing that are in play.



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crafty wood kitchen that feels at home in the Foursquare. Lisa often executes interiors for the firm's projects and was the chief interior designer of her family's home. "Like my other designs, I gravitate towards an eclectic approach," she explains, here introducing some zesty new furniture that plays off the static Foursquare bones.

Set in a cluster of traditional homes that comprised a small enclave within this Guilford neighborhood, this modest home "fits" its immediate context — the typical home life of a family in full teenager embrace. And yet it allows the extraordinary skills of its owners to shine through in carefully calculated interventions and expressions.

It seems oddly appropriate that the neighborhood has no cellphone coverage — its old-school swamp Yankee sensibility

underscored by the limits of technology to access every nook and cranny of the landscape. Down the road is a classic mid-century Modernist community (the Old Quarry section of town) filled with a couple of dozen "modern masterpieces" — most designed by or for Yale faculty. Each of these homes evince the proudly abstracted vision of the "new" that is at the core of what Gray Organschi Architecture produces every day.

In expressing their art and values for their own family, Lisa Gray and Alan Organschi have followed subtler, and perhaps richer, inspirations than the showcase homes down the road. Having history, landscape and mudroom combined in one vision may complicate the perfected notions of Architecture, but it fits this family. ❖

A completely new kitchen wrought of traditional means and methods. Full tile backsplash and stainless appliances make for a high durability and a bead board ceiling adds a layer of detail that truly is 'at home.'

