



A surprising second  
while innovative materials

# A Thoroughly Modern

BY MARIA LAPIANA

story changed the space,  
gave this home a sense of style

**T**

hey call it the big shoji screen in the park. It sits on a leafy lot surrounded by smallish traditional homes of a certain age (around 50) across the street from a pleasant

park and a creek that runs down to the Potomac River.

The house rises from an original brick foundation, its second story of stucco, steel, and translucent panels peeking through the tops of ancient oak trees. At night, with the lights on, it looks like a giant paper lantern.

If the outside of this house surprises, then the interior delights. Jammed with color and unpredictable planes, rich, sleek textures, and an unmistakably modern sensibility, the house looks nothing like the ranch it once was. It went from six small, dark rooms to a series of dynamic spaces infused with style.

There's a soaring second floor that opens to the first, distinct rooms but few walls, warm woods alongside cool metals, original art on nearly every wall, and color everywhere: a palette of pale maple, blueberry, eggplant, three shades of green, and eye-popping orange.

Artist Michelle Higgins and her husband, John Cohan, lived in the Silver Spring, Md., house for 10 years before they remodeled. "The spirit of the house was welcoming," Michelle says. "I had a good feeling about it. But when people walked in, they didn't know which way to go."

Five years in, they made a few changes, knocking down the wall between the kitchen and a jalousie-windowed



**BEFORE**



**AFTER**

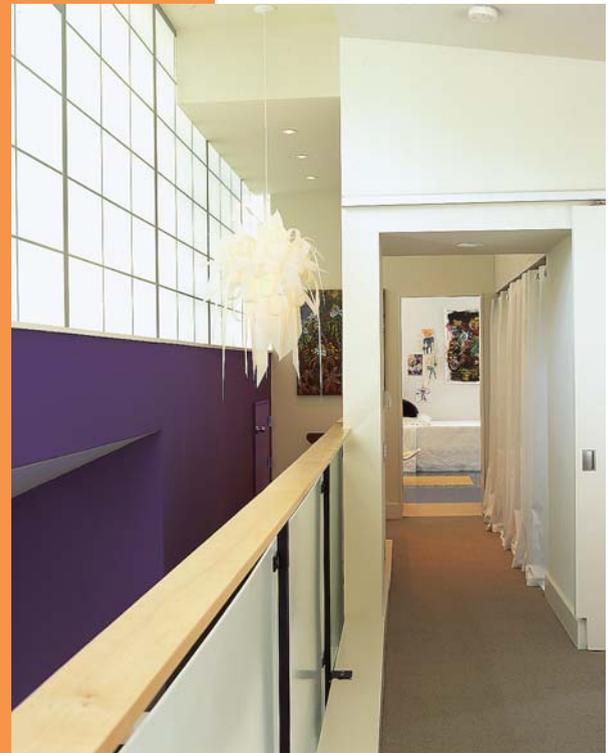


**CHANGE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD**

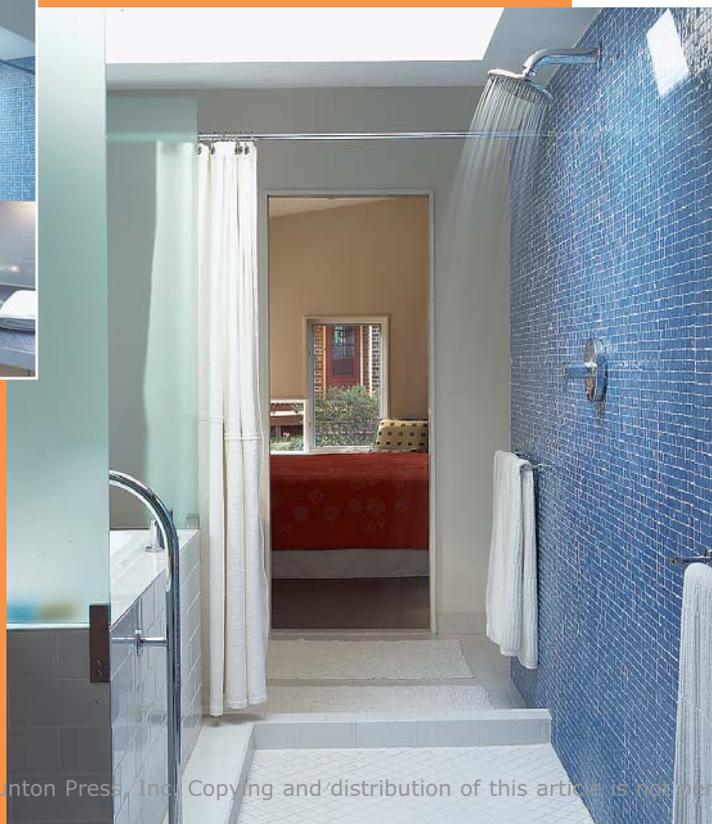
*Thanks to an intriguing second story, this house went from boring brick box to one-of-a-kind contemporary. Located in an older Maryland neighborhood, it is surrounded by mature trees and traditional homes.*

# Makeover

The soaring second  
its colorful,



**A COOL PALETTE**  
Ocean-blue mosaic tiles, sleek stainless fixtures, and pure-white accents brighten the streamlined bathing space Michelle and John share with their son.



**OPEN UP** Although only two bedrooms and a bath were added to the house, the interior was transformed by the light-filled, open second floor, shown from the bottom of the living room stairs (top left) and from the balustrade in the couple's room (above).

floor opens to the first, uncluttered rooms filled with natural light.



Florida room, but it wasn't enough. Five years after that, they hired Robert Cole and Sophie Prévost, of the architecture/design firm ColePrévost, to refresh the tired ranch.

"We had our son by then (Finbar, now 8) and we had to do something. It wasn't just a spatial issue. It was visual," says Michelle. "What drove the remodel was aesthetic claustrophobia."

### Going up inspired a more dynamic interior

"We didn't want it much bigger, just different and modern. I wanted people to enter, pause, see something wonderful, and feel welcome," Michelle says. "It had to be unique because we were not going to spend a lot of money unless it was."

Cole made this assessment early on: The home would have to be "open, light, fresh, witty, and warm."

Stately oak trees and zoning regulations prevented them from bumping out the house, so they decided to do the only logical thing and go up, but not the way you'd expect. Michelle and John opted for a loftlike

second story with a translucent balustrade separating the master bedroom from the living room underneath. The configuration on the second floor is quite simple: There's a master bedroom, Finn's room, and a shared bathing space between them (see floor plan, p. 76).

"We wanted to save space," says Michelle, "so we were never going to put up walls between the two bathrooms. And glass doors weren't in the budget." Instead, the shower and bathtub are separated from the sink and toilet areas by heavy canvas curtains that slide along metal bars.

In Michelle and John's room, the windows were placed low and into a corner, so they could see out of them while lying in bed. That corner will eventually become a meditation space, says Michelle.

It may have added only two rooms, but the second story freed up the first to become anything they wanted it to be. Michelle and John decided on open spaces where they could welcome friends and their large, close-knit families,



**SIMPLE GEOMETRY**  
Michelle and John's room is sparsely furnished with unfussy pieces and punctuated by geometric patterns. Inset: Finn's favorite spot sits off the floor in his bedroom.

# DISTINCT ROOMS, FEW WALLS



By taking down some original walls and adding a loftlike second story, this 1950s ranch went from cookie-cutter close to spacious and modern. Changes in flooring and wall colors help divide the areas according to how the family uses them.

## FIRST FLOOR

After the remodel, the 1,344-square-foot first floor was transformed into a pair of expansive common spaces linked by a welcoming entrance. There are few walls, but function defines every “room.” There are places to cook, eat, gather, read, converse, watch TV, and work (the office is in the rear).



**AFTER FIRST FLOOR**

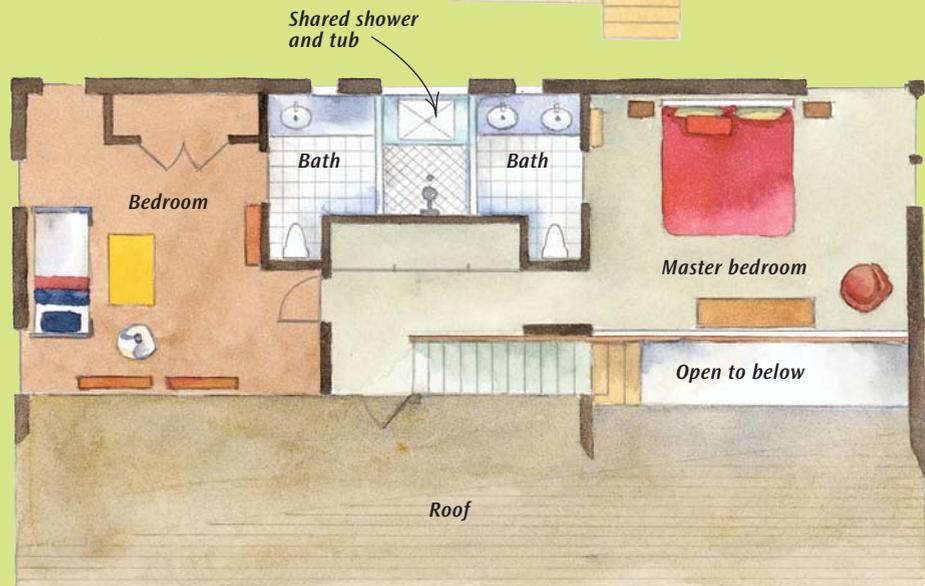


Scale in feet



## SECOND FLOOR

In terms of space, the second story added only 672 square feet to the house—enough for two bedrooms and a shared bath. In terms of personality, it added much more. The master bedroom is open to the living room downstairs, and translucent panels in front bathe the house in natural light.



**AFTER SECOND FLOOR**



who frequently come to visit. "It's always either just us or 12 of us in the house at any given time," says Michelle.

Now visitors experience a deliberate sense of place when they arrive, owing to the dramatically backlit, dropped ceiling that shelters them in the entry (top photo, p. 78). To the left, three small rooms became a spacious kitchen separated from dining and sitting areas by a broad island.

There are places where family members can do things separately, like watch TV (he likes to; she doesn't), but feel connected. A back bedroom was made into an informal family room; the living room in front is a place for conversation in front of the fire.

### Surprising forms and surfaces give it a spark

"Everywhere we sat, we wanted something nice to look at," says Michelle. The couple was interested in using natural, eco-friendly materials throughout. They wanted to keep the lines simple and clean, and they insisted on lots of natural light. That's where the unusual façade came in.

Even on cloudy days, the house is bathed in daylight diffused through Kalwall, the lightweight, energy-efficient panels of compressed fiberglass that cover the front of the house. It's the "shoji screen" visible from the street.



**CRISP AND MODERN** The kitchen (above) and connecting dining and sitting areas (left) are simple and understated, with bursts of color. The zinc-topped island, with cooktop, is a handsome and practical work surface. The rest of the room was designed to encourage family and friends to gather and chat.



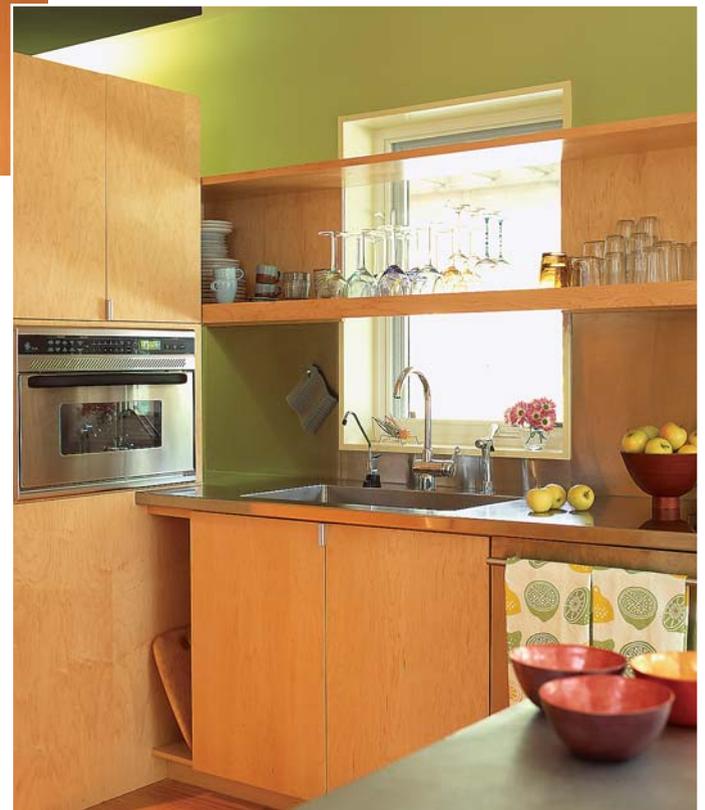
The Kalwall panels are echoed in the balustrade, which is made of fiberglass-reinforced plastic in steel frames. "The translucent surfaces let light and shadow move freely, while maintaining aspects of privacy," says Cole.

The inviting living room is defined by the rolled steel fireplace on the far wall, and an unusual room divider made of branches, designed by ColePrévost (photo, p. 72). The organic quality of the branches stands in refreshing contrast to the contemporary lines and sheen of the balustrade above it.

The kitchen is a study in simplicity and texture with its zinc-topped island and deep counters covered in Italian laminate. The extra-large sink was custom crafted of one piece of stainless steel. "I didn't want anything to be dainty," says Michelle.

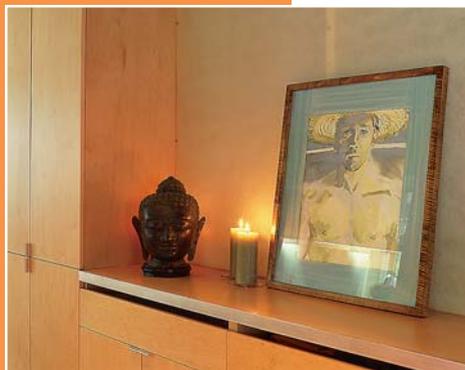
The cabinets and drawers were faced with veneered maple fronts to keep them unified and clean, with a consistent wood-grain look. The cabinets flow into the entry, creating a gallery shelf that showcases a changing art exhibit or a flower-filled glass vase—the first thing you see when you enter.

Half the flooring downstairs (on the kitchen side) is made of bamboo; the other half (the living room, family room, and Michelle's office) is warmed by the original hardwood. Tightly woven sage carpeting climbs the stairs into the master bedroom. The changes in flooring do much to signal the transitions between rooms.



**FRAMING THE VIEW**

Backlighting and a dropped ceiling in the entry create a sense of shelter, while a change in flooring frames the living room as seen from the kitchen. It's one of Michelle's favorite indoor views.



**CUSTOM CABINETRY AND MORE**

The flush maple cabinets don't stop in the kitchen. Shelves extend into the entry, and storage abounds.

## Spirited color fills the home with energy

The powerful color palette throughout the house was used to “link visual vistas and reinforce forms,” says Prévost. “It was selected as much for defining experiences as for the sheer joy and fun of expression.”

Wall colors—heady purples and greens—create a jolt of atmosphere, and all the furnishings follow suit: the bright orange sofa and chairs, lime area rug, and bold striped pillows in the living room. Bright reds and greens peek through the branch wall.

Michelle’s office is decorated in shades of teal, the loveseats and ottoman in the kitchen sitting area were dyed several shades of green and purple; and the couple’s bed quilt is an unabashed shade of persimmon.

Even the shared wall between the bathrooms is covered in tiny, uneven glass tile in an appropriate ocean blue, and Finn’s floor is a playful combination of yellow, blue, and black-and-white vinyl tile (bottom photo, p. 75).

Color inspires Michelle, as does the play of light on the colors she’s chosen. “Every day, when I wake up and I see the filtered light and I look around,” she says, “I am reminded that I am in love with my house.”

*Maria LaPiana is an associate editor.*

*See Resources on page 94.*



## A FRESH, WITTY PALETTE OF UNEXPECTED MATERIALS

**T**he surfaces in Michelle and John’s remodeled home were selected to give the space a calm, sophisticated feel, but architect Robert Cole says they weren’t deliberately trying to use unusual materials.

“We chose the palette of materials for reasons that had as much to do with budget as they did with the mood we were trying to create,” says Cole. “We sought wit and freshness wherever we could.”

They combined conventional and mildly unconventional materials in small ways (laminated counters edged in brushed steel), and big ones (Kalwall popping through the original roof). Here is some of what they used and why:

**BAMBOO FLOORING** Bamboo is a woody grass, not a tree, so it is plentiful and sustainable. It provides a strong, resilient surface that looks fresh and helps link a

number of disparate areas in Michelle and John’s home: the entry, kitchen, dining, and sitting areas.

**GLASS TILE** Covering a large visual surface in the shared bathing space, the bold blue tile provides a good counterpoint to the maple cabinetry. Michelle especially liked the uneven application, preferring it to perfectly square tiles.

**LAMINATE COUNTERS** Hardly garden variety counters, the Abet Laminati countertops look and feel more sophisticated than your average laminate. They are edged with brushed steel for added resilience and a dash of contrast.

**ZINC ISLAND COUNTERTOP** The zinc that covers the kitchen island is more malleable than stainless steel, and over time it will

acquire a patina of use, something Michelle and John look forward to.

**KALWALL** This high-tech building panel is surprisingly lightweight and remarkably strong. It both insulates and diffuses daylight to keep interiors naturally light and climate-controlled. It’s made by bonding reinforced fiberglass to an aluminum grid. Although Michelle and John scaled back the original architectural plans, they liked the Kalwall so much, they added more of it as the design for their house evolved.

**GRP PANELS** The translucent balustrade surface is strong and lightweight. Made of fiberglass-reinforced plastic, it mimics the Kalwall exterior walls while allowing light to spread evenly from the master suite down to the living room.