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A Midcentury Modern Redux

A 1959 residence overlooking the Atlantic opens up to reveal majestic ocean views.

BY J. MICHAEL NELTON / PHOTOGRAPHS BY NAT REA / STYLING BY SIMPLEMENTE BLANCO



The newly renovated Bluff House on the North Shore is a tale of rags to riches.

A down-at-the-heels midcentury modern a few years ago, it now celebrates once-hidden, sweeping views of the Atlantic, thanks to a visionary team of architects, engineers, and homeowners.

It was originally designed in 1959 by architect Edward Weinschanker for a family that would live there 60 years.

Alas, time and weather took their toll. But a thoughtful redesign, carefully executed, unveiled new opportunities for this 4,460-square-foot, two-story structure. "The clients asked us to reconsider it," says Colin Flavin, founder of the Boston firm bearing his name. "I would say the big picture design intent was to bring a purer modernism to bear."

Flavin's was the right firm for the job. After graduating from MIT, the architect gained practical experience as an associate at Benjamin Thompson & Associates in Boston. He founded Flavin Architects in 1991 and 12 years ago shifted from a combination of residential and commercial work to residential design alone. In addition to new construction, the firm is respected for midcentury modern home renovations.

He's an architect who combines fine design with a sense of restraint. For this project, Flavin says he was intent on avoiding anything akin to Phillip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut—the see-through residence that's glazed on four sides, clearly designed as a pavilion. This home was to have a back, a front, and a sense of containment.

"We opened it up to the view side but retained the brick side on the opposite elevation," he says.



"There's opacity on the street side and transparency out to the ocean."

That's precisely what the home's new owners, a couple living in Europe, had in mind in 2019. The pandemic would delay their intended move to the States, but not their search for a modernist home near Boston.

A pair of Bauhaus aficionados, they spotted this house online in December 2020 from Berlin, where they'd witnessed the restoration of Mies van der Rohe's National Gallery. From across the pond, they relentlessly pursued their dream home. "We were still in lockdown mode when they reached out after they'd purchased the property," Flavin says.

With Covid in retreat, the couple moved to the U.S. and began interviewing architects. They clicked with Flavin and his intense appreciation for the Bauhaus—they'd visited Walter Gropius's house in nearby Lincoln, after all—and appreciated this architect's desire not to turn the home away from its midcentury roots. "That was the first thing he said," the client says. "He felt close to it and crystallized its design even more than it had been."

They lived in the house for a year before the renovation began, to get a feel for what to keep and what to change. Inside, where the original owners had walked up the home's walk-in entry, Flavin insisted the wall come down so they could see the

Below: More modest in scale compared to its neighbors, the renovated home is nestled among an eclectic series of residences.

Right: The home's material palette is composed of steel, glass, stainless steel, and brick from the original ranch estate, painted white so it doesn't stand out. Opposite, above: Floor-to-ceiling windows open the home up to ocean views.

Opposite, below: Inside, architect Colin Flavin demonstrated a sensitivity for midcentury modernism and its simplicity of form and detail.





The clients wanted a very minimal design that was light and clean, with white walls, glass and steel.

Below: The architect called for a sliding window system from Portugal called "panoramah!" and removed an interior wall except near the stone fireplace, retaining the original layout.



ocean as soon as they stepped in. "So, it's all about the view," she says. "That was important to us and to Colin as well."

For structural engineering, Flavin turned to Steve Siegel and his eponymous firm in Newton. The pair have worked together in New England for the past two decades; they understand each other well.

"Flavin's a thoughtful architect with a passion for midcentury modern design and its simplicity of form and detail," Siegel says. "He uses a lot of creativity to make something appear simple—when it takes a ton of thought."

The original house was basic in design, with a fair amount of glass facing the water. Flavin and Siegel replaced much of it with a floor-to-ceiling sliding window system from Portugal called "panoramah!" plus Loewen windows upstairs. They removed the main interior wall except near the stone fireplace, keeping the original floor plan intact.

Siegel's efforts are invisible but highly effective. The structural engineer left a short section of solid wall between the glass sliders and inserted a steel column inside it, securing the building foundation at grade and to a steel beam bolted atop. Physically, it maximizes the amount of glass and minimizes the visibility of structural steel. "It's a delicate dance," Siegel says. "That's a celebration of the design style of Flavin."

"It feels like an extension from the inside to the outside. You feel like the outside is part of the house."

As for context, the new home sits quietly among a collection of traditional and contemporary houses surrounding it. "This is more modest in scale than the neighbors," Flavin says. "So, it doesn't stand out too much."

Most important is the view of garden, landscape, and ocean. "It feels like an extension from the inside to the outside," the client says. "You feel like the outside is part of the house."

That was the home's original design intent in 1959. But today, this midcentury jewel—with its clean lines and unimpeded vistas—speaks volumes to the evolution of modernism. flavinarchitects.com; [kitchen, divinedesigncenter.com](http://kitchen.divinedesigncenter.com); [contractor, Cambridgeport Construction](http://contractor.cambridgeportconstruction.com); [landscape, vagnerrothson.com](http://landscape.vagnerrothson.com) Windows, loewen.com; panoramah.com; sigelstructural.com

Below: The stairway is composed of wood for treads, and exposed steel for risers and railings.

Bottom: In the primary bath is one splash of color—with green ceramic tiles.

