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INNOVATORS

RENOVATION — SHELTER — AT HOME WITH — SPACES — URBAN OASIS — RETREAT — NEW ENGLAND MADE



RENOVATION

MODERN EVOLUTION

A Wellesley midcentury home gets a thoughtful update, bringing its original vision into the present.

BY STEFANIE SCHWALB / PHOTOGRAPHS BY NAT RAE



MORE THAN 60 YEARS AFTER ARCHITECT J. ROBERT WOLF JR. designed the Burke House as a floating treehouse in Wellesley, its defining concepts remain strikingly current. The butterfly-shaped roof, the home's siting on a slope near a natural spring, clerestory windows, the indoor-outdoor connection, and the sensation of living among the trees are exactly what guided Flavin Architects when they were tasked with adapting the home for a young outdoorsy family. "We have done a number of midcentury renovations over the years, and our mantra is to try and keep the essence of the original building where there's a really wonderful structure," explains principal in charge and lead designer Colin Flavin, "then to make edits to it that fit today's lifestyle."

THE FLOATING TREEHOUSE

Because the home's main living spaces sit a floor above grade, being inside already feels a bit like inhabiting the tree canopy. The team strengthened that relationship by extending the formerly 6-foot-deep deck outward and wrapping it toward the rear of the residence to create what Flavin describes as an "outdoor living room." Existing windows were replaced with large sliders, further blurring the boundary between the interior spaces and the exterior. Just as important was what the team didn't change: Wolf's unusual butterfly roof and the clerestory windows beneath it, which give the structure its distinctive sense of lightness.



CONTEMPORARY COMFORTS

For the owners, bringing the house into the present also meant accommodating the day-to-day realities of family life. The new storage area below the deck provides space for mountain bikes and climbing gear, while a modest lower-level guest suite and en suite bath give visiting relatives a comfortable place to stay. In that bathroom, modern conveniences blend with the home's midcentury roots through a floating mahogany vanity, period-appropriate sconces, and soft curves alongside contemporary fixtures. The result gives the family the functionality they need without letting the new interventions overpower the architecture that made the house special in the first place.

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Outside, color also became an architectural tool. Inspired by Wolf's original vision of the floating light box, the team devised a new palette that emphasizes the exposed beams, roofline, and the house's suspended quality. Darker blue-gray highlights the structural elements, while paler tones maintain the sense of weightlessness. A red front door, meanwhile, references a similar hue in the residence's existing color scheme. Collectively, the goal was to make all of the new work feel less like an addition and more like a natural evolution of what was already there.







MAKING SPACE

The original 1950s galley kitchen may have been charming, but it lacked the much-needed workspace and storage for contemporary cooking and entertaining. The solution? The team pushed one exterior wall out by just 5 feet. That small move made space for additional cabinetry and an island where guests can gather when the owners cook. Existing mahogany influenced the choice of new custom cabinetry, and a warm cream-white palette offsets the wood. Meanwhile, Fireclay tile helps provide what project designer Katarina Wabrek calls "another nod to the past without feeling dated." Black Zimbabwean granite countertops and Porcelanosa flooring add modern finishes while complementing the home's original architecture.