

# New England Home

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Fourth Anniversary Issue

## Simply Spectacular

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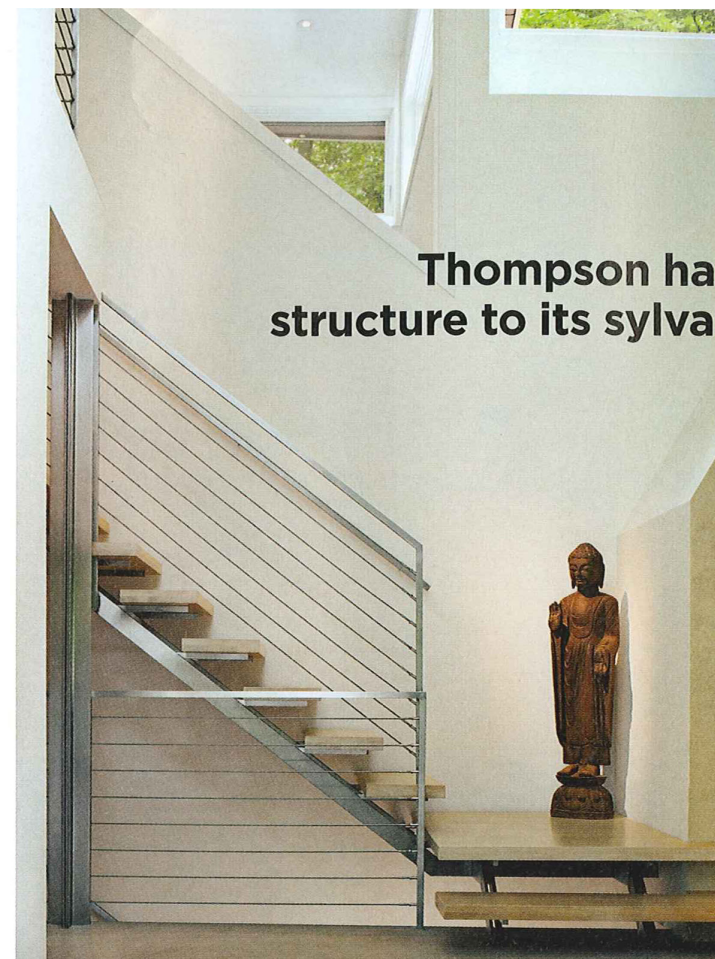


# Sleeping Beauty

With an architectural wizardry that borders on the magical, a 1950s suburban-Boston ranch is transformed into a sleek, modern two-story home.

Text by Megan Fulweiler • Photography by Robert Benson • Architecture: Maryann Thompson • Landscape Architecture: Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates • Produced by Stacy Kunstel





**Thompson has ingeniously opened the structure to its sylvan site, peeled back layers and let in the light.**

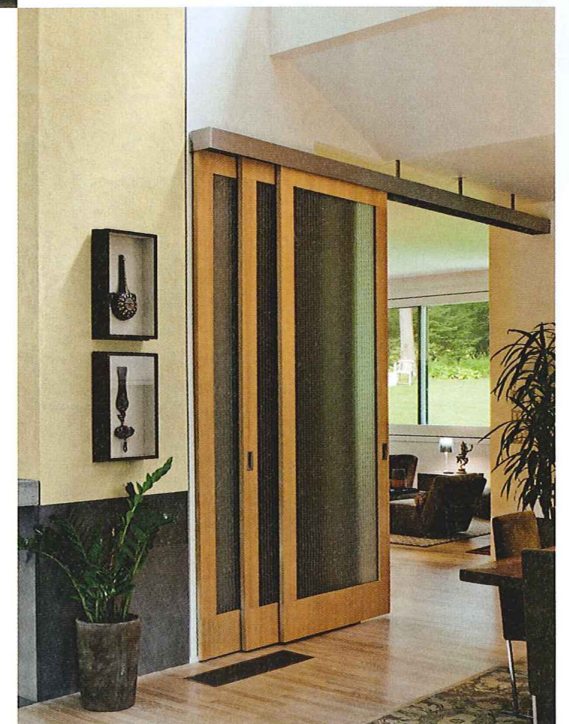
*Left: Interior windows combined with a line of clerestories bring light to the north-facing house. Below: Woven steel sandwiched between glass blurs the view into the kitchen and family room when the doors close. Facing page: Thompson married two-inch bleached oak veneer treads with a stainless steel frame to create the new stairs.*

Some transformations are legendary. Think of the pumpkin-turned-coach that taxied Cinderella to the ball or the frog reborn as a handsome prince. Memorable makeovers though they might have been, this house in Newton, Massachusetts, has an equally enchanting story—and it's no fairytale. The 1950 split-level ranch was slumbering until Maryann Thompson came along to revive it. The Cambridge, Massachusetts-based architect went a giant step beyond simply waking up a tired old design, though. She reinvented the house, giving it a stylish, contemporary new look. Miraculously, yesterday's comfortable house survived; it's just a million times improved.

According to the green-principled architect, the old saw that insists renovation is more costly than new construction is simply not true. Anathema for her is the all-too-familiar strategy of razing a building and beginning anew. Instead, Thompson favors the sustainable approach: embracing what's there and making it better. "I love how this house started," she says. "Just think of the many sad dumpsters you see when a building comes down. We took the existing condition and had fun. It's an example of what can be done when your profound preference is for recycling."

In this instance, working with what was there translated into conserving the foundation and most of the interior walls along with the existing plumbing locations (always a huge savings). To underscore the magic further, even the floor plan remained basically the same. Of course, judging by the sweeping roof lines and an abundance of glass in today's exterior, who would ever guess? Thompson has ingeniously opened the structure to its sylvan site, peeled back layers wherever possible and let in the light.

Any other owners would be happily dumbfounded with these incredible results, but this family already had witnessed Thompson's abilities. Thanks to the architect, their Martha's Vineyard getaway is also a view-grabbing dwelling that merges outdoors and in. In fact, it was that retreat







that launched this project. "After just one season, my clients realized they were craving an ambience similar to the one of their summer house year-round," says Thompson.

Thompson traveled extensively during her graduate school years, with Asia being her favorite destination. Many of the glorious and historic gardens she saw there left a lasting impression. This house, like much of her work, bears witness to the Eastern idea that architecture and site can and should work together, one heightening the other.

Every detail has its role to play. Take the striking roof overhangs, for example. They create a kind of thoughtful boundary, says Thompson. "Diffusing the outside and in, they foster a different way of looking," she says. "You can sit on the porch and meditate on the garden rather than inhabit it."

Thought it's less than an acre in size and set in a residential neighborhood, the property

**The house bears witness to the Eastern idea that architecture and site can and should work together.**



The homeowners need only slide open the glass doors to merge the handsome porch, enlivened with mahogany decking and ceiling, with the living/dining area. *Below:* In the kitchen, frosted glass cabinets further Thompson's luminous theme. A sliding ladder accesses loftier reaches.



feels grander. Landscape architects Michael Van Valkenburgh and Herb Sweeney cleverly took their cues from the existing conditions. To visually enhance the narrow site's size and create a strong sense of privacy they used layers of plant material. Most of the existing trees were retained and, coupled with hemlocks, rhododendrons and red twig dogwoods (a source of vibrant winter color) they subtly obscure neighbors, while maintaining an organic atmosphere. At the back of the house, large tilted planes of lawn—a response to the architecture's geometry—draw the eye, providing long views into the woods.

Of course, the profusion of windows pulls all this lovely bounty inside. And as the day unfolds, ever-changing light penetrates deep into every corner. "The rooms used to be discrete," Thompson says. "But now there's transparency through the house to the landscape. You're not in little boxes anymore. Windows—including several carved into the

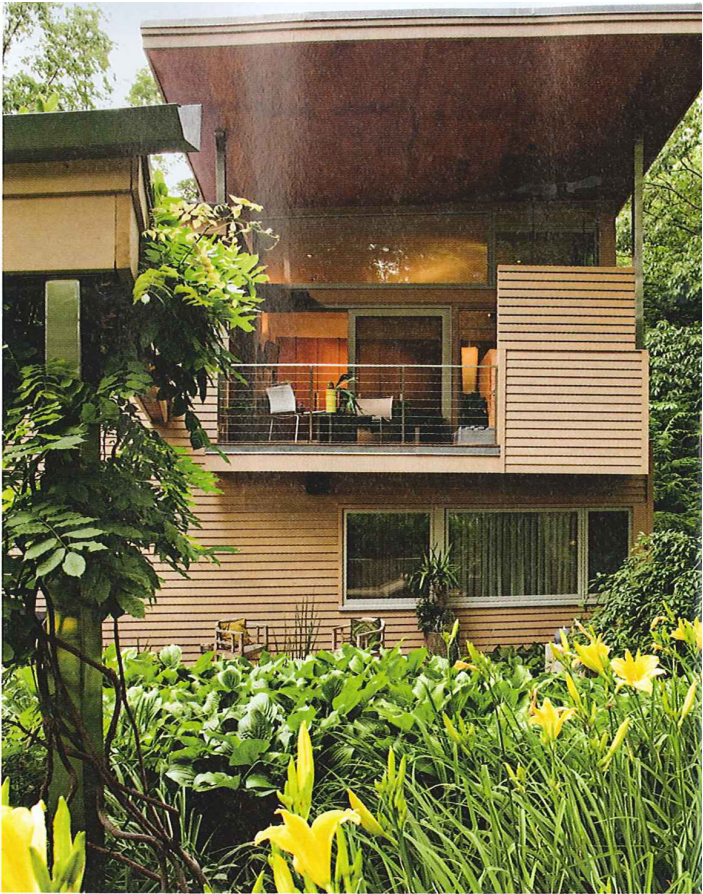


interior—break the barriers.” An oversize skylight borrows light from the stairs to bring luminosity to the kitchen. And the husband’s study, with a window on the living room, feels far less confined.

The entry and living and dining rooms effortlessly mesh, although should the owners want to block the kitchen, say, for a formal affair, Thompson designed large, sliding wooden doors to do the trick.

The living-room fireplace is original but its updated persona belies its age. The era-appropriate four-foot hearth was thickened and given a custom creamy-beige coat of stucco for what Thompson calls “a monolithic appearance.” The rustic surface plays well off the satin-finished bleached oak floors and minimal furnishings. “All the credit for the decor goes to the homeowner,” Thompson says. “She has a wonderful eye and a keen sense of color and style. She knew exactly what was needed where.”

The cozy “Leave It to Beaver” kitchen went as quickly as the aged appliances. A slick top-of-the-line galley by Arclinea suits the home’s urbane demeanor and better matches the owner’s lifestyle. Thanks to Thompson, the new hub is user-friendly, too, and more flexible for entertaining. Where the humble kitchen sink once stood, the wall was brought down



**A profusion of windows pulls nature inside. As the day unfolds, ever-changing light penetrates deep into every corner.**

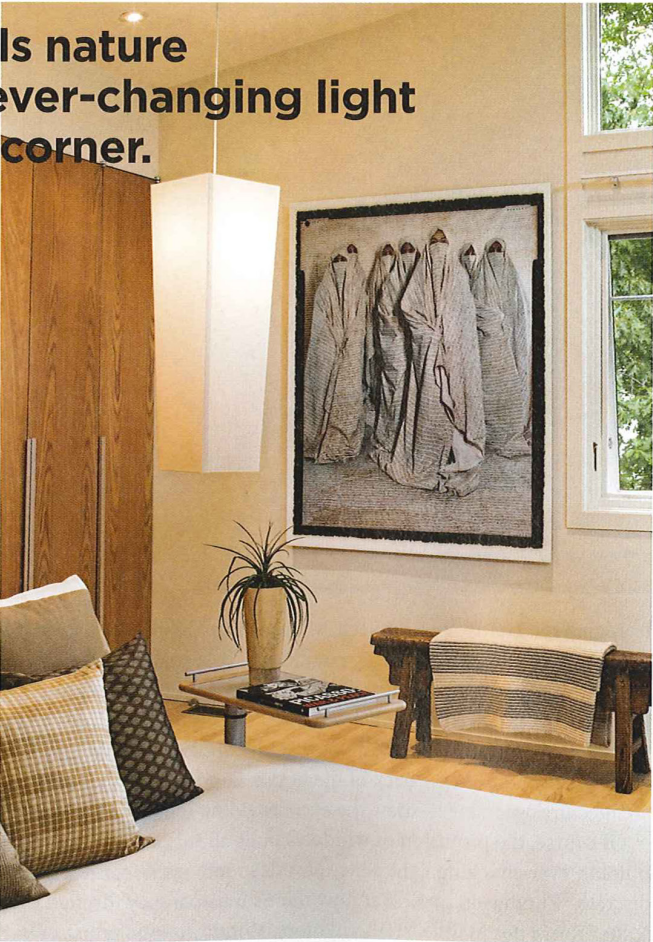
to make way for a spacious family room. The owners can hang out here for morning coffee and head to the revamped screened porch nearby for evening cocktails.

The old place had a quartet of small bedrooms clustered on this level. Thompson scrapped one, expanded another and added a bath for comfort. Then for the master suite, she created a new second floor. Graceful stairs with open risers and gleaming railings lead the way to this private sector where dual studies afford husband and wife office space. Relaxation for the couple translates to peaceful sleeping quarters as well as a red cedar deck with a Japanese-style ofuro hot tub. Another cunning link to nature, the luxe bath is concealed from people passing below by a slatted cedar screen.

Overnight visitors fare just as well. Thompson also engineered a second floor guest bath with a deep tub. Perched on pale pebbles and river rocks, the tub conjures a spa-like vibe.

In the end, the home’s metamorphosis is almost too remarkable to believe there were no fairy wands or potions involved. Unless, of course, we see it as a lesson: imagination and creativity are magic in themselves. •

**Resources** For more information about this home, see page 228.



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Find before-and-after photos showing the amazing transformation of this house. Click on “Featured Homes” and then “Home Tours.”



Left: See-through deck railings keep nature close. Below: An alluring tub elevates the second-floor guest bath. Facing page top: An eye-popping overhang shields the master deck. Facing page bottom: Behind the bed is a generous custom storage wall with closet.

