

A TOP-TO-BOTTOM REMODEL TURNS A NEGLECTED MID-CENTURY HOUSE INTO A MODERN GEM

SEEING THE LIGHT

WORDS: Jane Craig • IMAGES: David Lauer

THERE'S NOTHING BETTER THAN A STORY ABOUT AN UGLY DUCKLING-TURNED-SWAN. PARTICULARLY AN UGLY DUCKLING THAT'S BEEN HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT FOR DECADES.

Before its recent remodel, this 1959 mid-century modern house, on a busy corner in Park Hill across the street from City Park, was often mistaken for a neglected office building: Hidden behind overgrown junipers, it had a steep, forbidding front walkway, an out-of-place peaked portico, and an overhanging roof in back that dipped so low anyone six feet or taller could barely stand up straight. On top of that, there was a continual cacophony coming from nearby Colorado Boulevard. Inside was an oddly dysfunctional layout (including a master bedroom as capacious as a bowling alley), poor circulation and a clunky river-rock fireplace that looked like it belonged in a log cabin.

But to the new homeowners, a couple with a seven-year-old daughter, the house was “timeless and classic,” the wife says. “There’s a beautiful amount of light that came in, and we thought the house could flow so well. It had an open feel and accessibility that we really loved.”

Looking for a firm that had experience renovating mid-century moderns, the couple hired Nest Architectural Design. “The home has a unique location on two pretty historic thoroughfares in Denver,” says Scott Hamman, architect and project manager at Nest. “It’s personally been one of my favorite projects. You could tell that the house needed some love,

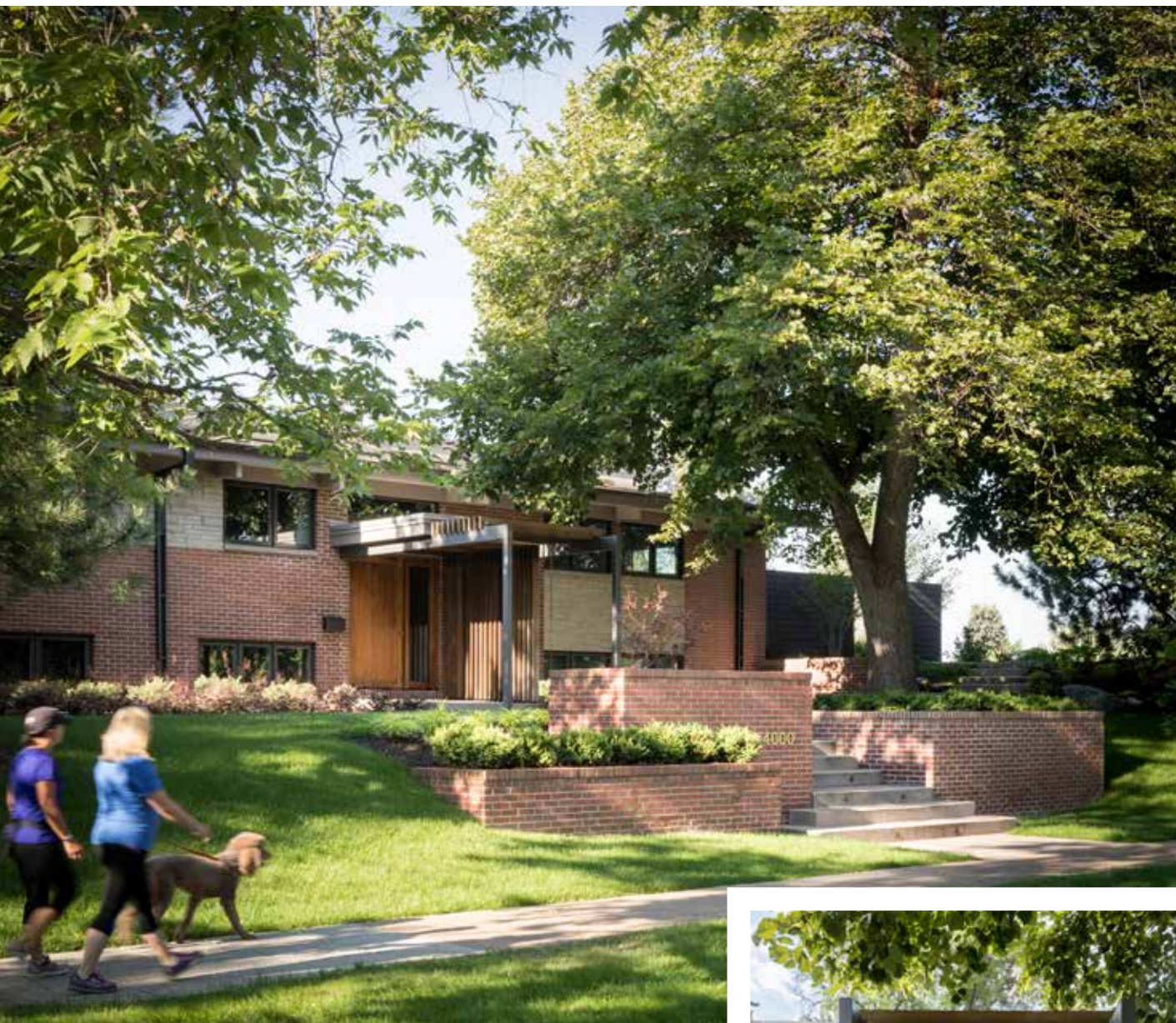
but the clients knew that it had the bones to be something really special, and not everyone would have seen that. They knew they wanted to breathe life back into the home’s 1950s style but also blend in the needs of their family by adding about 585 square feet of space for an expanded kitchen (the husband is a former professional chef) and master suite.”

Why take on a mid-century modern home? “These houses tend to have really clean, uncluttered spaces, which people today really like, but the scale of the spaces is often much more intimate,” says Hamman. “The design gives a feeling that things are connected yet intimate and authentic.”

On the exterior, one of the biggest changes architecturally was to literally raise the roof—about two and a half feet—in the back to open it up and create room for a new kitchen and master suite. On the front facade, Nest left intact the existing materiality—stone bands on a brick façade—and windows, but removed a fascia gutter detail to expose the beautiful beams extending out from the home. They also added clerestory windows across the top, to create both interest outside and light inside. “The beams were such a strong stylistic detail that we knew we wanted to celebrate them,” says Hamman. “They created the rhythm of



To update the entryway to the home, which includes a half-stairway down to the bottom floor and a half-stair up to the main living area, Nest Architectural Design added a slatted screen detail that continues the look of an exterior slatted portico. Directly ahead is the new “core” of the main floor, which includes storage but is also a central design feature.



The home's front exterior was completely changed. The landscape architecture firm Elevate By Design tore out aging junipers and a large tree that were blocking views of the home, rebuilt the front walkway to make it more graceful and friendly (and less steep), and added staggered brick walls and a modern portico with steel spider legs. They also planted massings of boxwood, Japanese forest grass and coral bells.



the house, and they defined the clerestory placement." The Nest team also redid the entryway to the home, replacing the gabled front portico and brick columns with a modern, slatted wooden entry supported by elegant steel spider legs.

To make the house more "present," the landscape architecture firm Elevate by Design ripped out overgrown, unhealthy junipers and a large blue spruce tree in front that were overshadowing the home and rethought the front walkway. "The old staircase was sandwiched next to a tall brick wall and was cavernous and narrow," says Elevate's Paul Wrona. "We took that tall wall down, added staggered walls, and then widened the entry walk to make it more graceful. Now there are three broad steps and a landing, and then three more steps, all made from sand-finished concrete." Elevate also preserved the "Denver roll" in the frontyard, and created an understory of plantings across the front of the house "to let it shine a bit more," Wrona says. Finally, it added hardscape steps along the front of the



"IT'S PERSONALLY BEEN ONE OF MY FAVORITE PROJECTS. YOU COULD TELL THAT THE HOUSE NEEDED SOME LOVE, BUT THE CLIENTS KNEW THAT IT HAD THE BONES TO BE SOMETHING REALLY SPECIAL, AND NOT EVERYONE WOULD HAVE SEEN THAT."

– Scott Hamman, Nest Architectural Design

home to connect the entry walkway to both the driveway and the backyard and create "circulation all the way around the house."

Inside, the changes started with the home's entry hall. "We knew that we wanted an open, connected, very airy stair," says Hamman, "but we also wanted to signify a transition because you really enter the home directly in the middle of it, vertically and horizontally, so the new walnut slats (which mirror the slats on the exterior portico) afford views in some areas and not in others."

Walk down a half-flight of stairs from the front entry and you find two bedrooms > p.74

In the backyard, Elevate by Design focused on creating rectilinear features that reinforced the architecture of the home, which was expanded in back to create room for a master bedroom suite and a larger kitchen. The yard is surrounded by double fencing that helps shield the space from traffic noise nearby.



“THE CORE REALLY DEFINES THE SPACE. IT DOESN'T GO ALL THE WAY TO THE CEILING BECAUSE WE WANTED TO BE ABLE TO HAVE THE LIGHT FROM THOSE CLERESTORIES ON THE FRONT COME OVER THE TOP INTO THE KITCHEN.”

– Scott Parker, Nest Architectural Design



Though the main-floor entertaining and living space was already open with large windows, Scott Hamman of Nest Architectural Design says, “The circulation was really confused.” Nest created a new core and added clerestory windows on the front, and now the hallway back to the bedrooms and laundry room is more accessible.



In the new kitchen space on the back of the house, Nest added a pantry into the home's core and walnut cabinetry. “I love a really bright, white kitchen,” says the homeowner, “but I wanted to be respectful of the mid-century feel as well, so we found a compromise between the light, bright white cabinetry and the walnut surround. It's modern but timeless.”





The master bedroom and bath are part of an addition on the back of the house. The bath, which includes a wet room, “is a really efficient space but also beautifully detailed,” says Hamman.

and a full bath, whose configuration stayed much the same as finishes were updated. Walk a half-flight upstairs and you see where the major interior changes took place. Directly across from the stairs is a new floating walnut core that is both beautiful and functional. “It houses everything from a coat closet to a broom closet,” says Hamman, “and on the other side is the new kitchen, where it houses kitchenware.”

“The core really defines the space,” adds Scott Parker of Nest. “It doesn’t go all the way to the ceiling because we wanted to be able to have the light from those clerestories on the front come over the top into the kitchen.”

The large, open main living area of the home, which is 4,873 square feet overall,

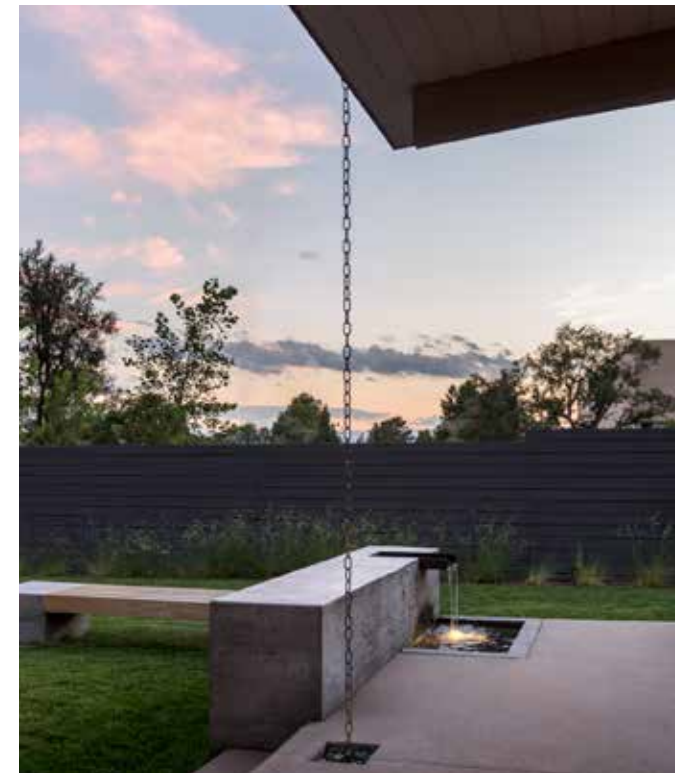
is divided from the open dining room by an updated floor-to-ceiling fireplace. By removing a wall between the kitchen and dining room, and between the kitchen and hallway, and adding accordion glass doors to the dining room, the Nest team opened up the home’s circulation and made it less choppy and confusing.

Down the hall from the living room are three bedrooms: one for the homeowners’ daughter, a guest bedroom, and the new master suite, opening onto the backyard, plus an office and a laundry room. “With the square footage of the house, it should have worked as a family home,” says the homeowner, “but it did not before. Our vision was to make sure we could all live together on the main level by expanding the kitchen and reconfiguring those bedrooms.”

Off the dining room, the folding glass doors open onto a large patio perfect for entertaining (there is also a smaller “meditation patio” off the master bedroom and office) and a large backyard. “We made the backyard very geometric and rectilinear to match the clean lines of the mid-century modern architecture of the house,” says Wrona. “We wanted something that was very simple, very organized and very tranquil and we wanted to create a good connection to the outdoors.”

One of Elevate’s biggest challenges: lowering the decibel level coming off Colorado Boulevard. To do that, the firm designed a double-sided cedar fence, whose two sides sandwich a hidden layer of noise-reducing fabric called Acoustiblok. The landscape architects also added a

“WE MADE THE BACKYARD VERY GEOMETRIC AND RECTILINEAR TO MATCH THE CLEAN LINES OF THE MID-CENTURY MODERN ARCHITECTURE OF THE HOUSE” – Paul Wrona, Elevate By Design



“The outside spaces have very clean lines and are very organized and tranquil, with a strong connection to nature,” says landscape architect Paul Wrona of Elevate By Design. Because the homeowners have a young daughter, “it was also important to create play space, including a backyard tree swing.”

poured-in-place concrete fountain with a water weir adjacent to the patio to subtly distract from the traffic noise. The yard also includes a new succulent garden and a line of Spring Snow Crabapple trees. “The homeowner had a great eye both inside and out,” says Wrona. “She was very involved in the types of plants we used; it was fun to work with someone who is knowledgeable and has good taste.”

After a two-year renovation, the home is now what it was originally intended to be—only better. “It’s everything we expected in the sense of having an easy flow, easy in and out,” says the homeowner. “It’s light, but even though it’s at a busy intersection, when you’re inside it feels very park-like because of all of the windows, the big lot and the unobstructed views of City Park. It’s so peaceful.” ■

PROJECT CREDIT LIST

ARCHITECT
Nest Architectural Design

GENERAL CONTRACTOR
Cadre

CUSTOM MILLWORK
Benchcraft Custom Woodwork

LANDSCAPE DESIGN
Elevate By Design

STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING
Studio 8:18