

Home of the Month: Rambler redux in Edina

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Audra and Todd Emerson had lived in traditional homes their entire lives. But when their family, including two young daughters, outgrew their 1920s Dutch Colonial in St. Paul, the Emersons decided it was time to pursue their true love — midcentury modern architecture.

“It’s amazing to me what was happening in the 1950s,” said Audra. “Architects like Frank Lloyd Wright were designing homes with modern-day aesthetics. They had open floor plans with built-ins and flex spaces.”

The couple spent nearly a year house-hunting for a classic 1950s rambler that could easily be remodeled and refreshed to serve their day-to-day needs. They found it in a 2,800-square-foot walkout in Edina — with a retro free-standing brick fireplace and cool geometric-patterned windows. But the neglected home had never been updated and was awash in wall-to-wall beige.

Two builders had unsuccessfully tried to buy the rambler, with plans to demolish it and rebuild on the prime lot. The Emersons decided to buck the growing trend of Edina teardowns. “From an environmental standpoint — we wanted to use what we had and turn it into a home that worked for us and our daughters,” said Audra.

“We wanted to update it and breathe new life into it,” added Todd, “but still preserve the charm of that era.”

Their architect, John Dwyer, saw the home’s potential and agreed with their choice. A rambler is ideal for transforming into a modern open floor plan because of its low-slung linear shape and lack of interior barrier walls, he said. “This house also had the square footage they needed and a sound structure. All they had to do was the fun stuff.”

Phases of ‘fun’

The Emersons did the “fun stuff” in phases over time to make the renovation fit their budget.

First they tackled the main floor, knocking down several walls to create free-flowing connecting spaces. Audra and Todd helped tear off the wood paneling covering the fireplace on the living-room side and uncovered raw brick in excellent condition.



The reinvented 1950s rambler mixes original features, such as the brick fireplace and geometric screens and windows, with new design elements, while maintaining a midcentury modern aesthetic.

JOHN DWYER,



Joely, Audra, Lila and Todd Emerson in the rambler’s new open floor plan.

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A walnut cabinet serves as an entry bench, media center and storage. The office nook is to the left.

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“Remodeling is more cost-effective and material-efficient than tearing down and starting over, but also unpredictable,” said Dwyer. “We got lucky with the covered brick around the fireplace.”

On the opposite side of the fireplace, they converted an existing tiny bedroom into a combination office nook, closet and storage area. Dwyer put in a wall of sliding panels made of screen-printed textural mylar to conceal the coat closet and the mini-office when not in use.

Just inside the front entry, a new custom walnut cabinet wraps around the brick fireplace and is designed as an entry bench, storage area and TV cabinet. “It’s a nod to the built-ins that would have existed in homes from this era,” said Audra, calling it the “hub” of their house. “And it defines the entryway.”

The wide open kitchen can be seen from the front entry. The vertical-grain floor-to-ceiling walnut cabinets warm up the popular family gathering and cooking space. “It’s an updated take on midcentury modern paneling and design principles,” said Audra, who devised the home’s interiors. The kitchen’s clean contemporary lines are repeated in the flush integrated cabinet hardware and suspended stainless-steel range hood. Audra chose gallery white for the Cambria countertops and walls to “highlight the home’s architecture and bring the outdoors in,” she said. “And we planned the storage very carefully so that the kitchen is visually clean and quiet.”

‘Wow’ windows

The fireplace isn’t the only ‘50s feature the couple preserved. They dramatically improved the look and function of a group of windows by the front door, which Dwyer described as “a midcentury modern take on a divided light window.” The frames are painted white, and glass replaced the cloudy polyurethane panels. “That was a ‘wow’ for me,” said Todd. “It lets in so much light throughout the house.” Dwyer strategically positioned new energy-efficient windows on the street side to give the family privacy, as well as to capture the views of a big flowering crabapple.

For the second phase of the project, completed a year later, the Emersons focused on finishing and improving the walkout basement. They took down a partial wall at the bottom of the stairs to make it feel more open, polished the concrete floor, added a playroom for the girls and turned a large workshop into two bedrooms and a fitness room. The light-filled walkout opens to a new bluestone patio and large back yard. “We like that it has high ceilings,” said Todd. “It’s not a cold, dark basement.”

Audra’s favorite magazines, *Dwell* and *Atomic Ranch*, influenced her choice of fit-right-in retro-style furnishings, ranging from a ‘50s blue molded Eames chair to Blu Dot and Room and Board leather furniture. “We pick really modern, minimalist clean-lined pieces, regardless of the era that they came from,” she said.

The Emersons are planning future remodeling projects, including floor-to-ceiling windows on the wall facing the back yard. But for now, they’ve successfully created a rambler for the 21st century, while preserving that midcentury modern vibe they fell in love with.

“We have big common spaces because we don’t want the girls holed up in their rooms,” said Todd. “We always feel connected.”



Joely and her sister, Lila, have a playroom in the finished basement.

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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

What: A 1950s rambler renovation to create new multi-functional spaces for an Edina family.

Size: 2,800 square feet includes four bedrooms and three bathrooms.

Design team: Architect John Dwyer, John Dwyer Architect, while with Shelter Architecture, Minneapolis, and Tom Westbrook, www.johndwyerarchitect.com, 612-270-4429.

Interiors: Audra Emerson.

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