

THE MAGAZINE of *SPLENDID HOMES and GARDENS* • JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2013

# DESIGN

NEW ENGLAND



*Island Hopping*

FOUR KITCHENS WITH WORKING APPEAL



THE LIVING ROOM feels expansive as tall windows and long skylights flood the space with light. The sitting area is defined by an Eero Saarinen Womb Chair, a contemporary couch with custom shelves, both from Knoll, and a bench hand-hewn from a solid block of wood. The two-story addition doubled the size of the guesthouse (FACING PAGE) while keeping its intimate sensibilities.

# Forest Presence



## A VERMONT GUESTHOUSE RETREAT REFLECTS ITS OWNERS AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

Written by KATHLEEN JAMES  
Photographed by SUSAN TEARE

**EVERY SPACE TELLS A STORY**, and Mitra Samimi-Urich considers it her calling to tell those stories through design. In this case, the main characters are an American family living abroad. The setting is their vacation home on 180 acres of forest and mostly fallow pastures in rural Addison County, Vermont. The plot involves their quest to turn a secluded farm into a contemporary retreat — a place to relax and reconnect with their relatives, with one another, and with the land.

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Phil Culhane is an attorney who works in the Hong Kong office of a Wall Street law firm. His wife, Amy Halverson, is also a lawyer who is taking time off to raise their two children: Maeve, 10, and Dechen, 5. She was born and raised in Burlington, Vermont, and he has family scattered







along the East Coast, so when it came time to buy a vacation home in the United States, Vermont seemed a logical choice. “Our kids are growing up in Hong Kong, the quintessential concrete jungle,” says Culhane. “Our time in Vermont is about spending time with family and, almost relentlessly, spending time outside.”

After purchasing the property, they hired Vermont architectural and interior designer Mitra Samimi-Urich to oversee a multiphase renovation. The first order of business was to convert a former artist’s studio, just uphill from the main house, into a guesthouse. (They’re renovating the main house in phases to reflect a blend of contemporary design and traditional Vermont vernacular. A key focus is energy efficiency and green building techniques, with an eventual goal of net-zero energy use.)

“When designing the guesthouse, we started with their story,” says Samimi-Urich, whose firm, Mitra Designs Studio Inc., is in Bristol, Vermont. “It’s about a family spending time together, wanting a separate place of retreat. It’s about guests having their own intimate space. And it’s about connecting the interior to the beautiful natural surroundings.”

**THE RENOVATED SPACE** was expanded (ABOVE AND FACING PAGE) to include a living area with a master sleeping area below a loft designed for younger guests. The kitchenette’s custom cabinets conceal a microwave, coffee maker, and storage space. Guesthouse completed, architectural and interior designer Mitra Samimi-Urich (RIGHT) is overseeing a multiphase renovation that includes the main house and landscaping.









**HARD EDGES** in the forms of concrete and glass in the new bath (BELOW AND FACING PAGE) are softened with natural and artificial light and a soothing palette evocative of the natural surroundings just outside. Concrete slabs along one wall

recall a rock ledge both outside and inside the glass-lined walk-in shower. Under-counter storage and a stately rectangular sink are also concrete. Samimi-Urich designed the mirror to float in front of the existing windows. Concrete slabs along one wall

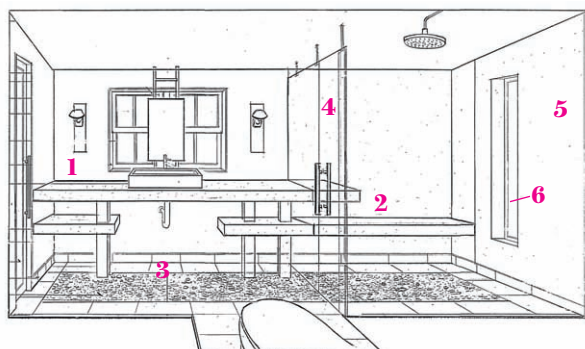




#### DESIGN DECISION

#### Woodland Spa

Before the renovation, the one-room artist's studio offered a work sink and a composting toilet. Now it features a full bathroom that re-creates the ambience of a woodland stream. Thick concrete slabs run nearly the length of one wall, evoking a rock ledge as they evolve from countertop (1) to stone sink to storage shelf before extending into the shower as a shelf and bench (2). The floor, a creative installation of smooth stones edged in slate (3), recalls a cool, quiet riverbed. It leads to the walk-in shower, which is enclosed with floor-to-ceiling glass panels (4). Sheets of frosted glass (5), back-painted in a soft dusty gold, protect the interior shower walls, and a narrow window (6) provides a view to the quiet forest outside. Near the



sink, two photographs by Sierra Urich depict the calm ripples of the nearby pond. "You tell a story with design," says architectural and interior designer Mitra Samimi-Urich. "You want to put the person into a carefully created environment. In this case, the environment was the outdoors."

The existing structure was a single room, about 460 square feet, on the edge of a steep ledge. The only amenities were a sink and a composting toilet. The most cost-efficient solution would have been to tear it down and start over, but that ran counter to Culhane's philosophy. "The concept of working with what you've got is one of my driving ethical forces," he says. "You don't just erase something. You take what exists and you improve upon it." Inspired by a long-ago visit to a hotel in Bali where three walls of their room were windows, offering wraparound rain-forest views, the clients asked for a contemporary design that evoked a treehouse.

General contractor Chris Stackhouse of Cambium Construction in Middlebury, Vermont, had to do some blasting — through granite bedrock — to upgrade the plumbing and shore up the guesthouse footings and foundation. "There was a little boy's aspect to this phase of the project," says Culhane. "I loved the explosives and the drilling."

Samimi-Urich designed a two-story addition that added 300 square feet without the retreat losing its intimate feel. A raised roofline accommodates a new entry, the front door offset with a wooden trellis that creates visual balance. Boulders found on site by Chris Cartwright, a master carpenter and the clients' property manager, encircle a small stone patio to connect this transitional space to its natural surroundings. Long overhangs lend a slightly Asian feel to the rooflines, a nod to the family's Hong Kong home base, while custom metal brackets soften the corners and replicate tree branches.

Inside, a small foyer opens to the living area, a space that feels expansive thanks to its cathedral ceiling, long rectangular skylights, and three walls of windows. It is made cozy with a sitting area outfitted with a custom sofa, hand-hewn wooden bench, and Eero Saarinen's classic deeply curved Womb Chair. The view at every window is of tree trunks and graceful branches, pond and fields, and distant mountains.

The back wall holds an efficient kitchenette with a stone vessel sink. Custom maple cabinets conceal a mini-refrigerator, microwave, coffee maker, and storage. "Everything was designed to be simple and uncluttered," says Samimi-Urich. "Their goal was a clean, contemporary design that still felt warm and inviting."

The two-story addition to the left of the living space is cantilevered dramatically above





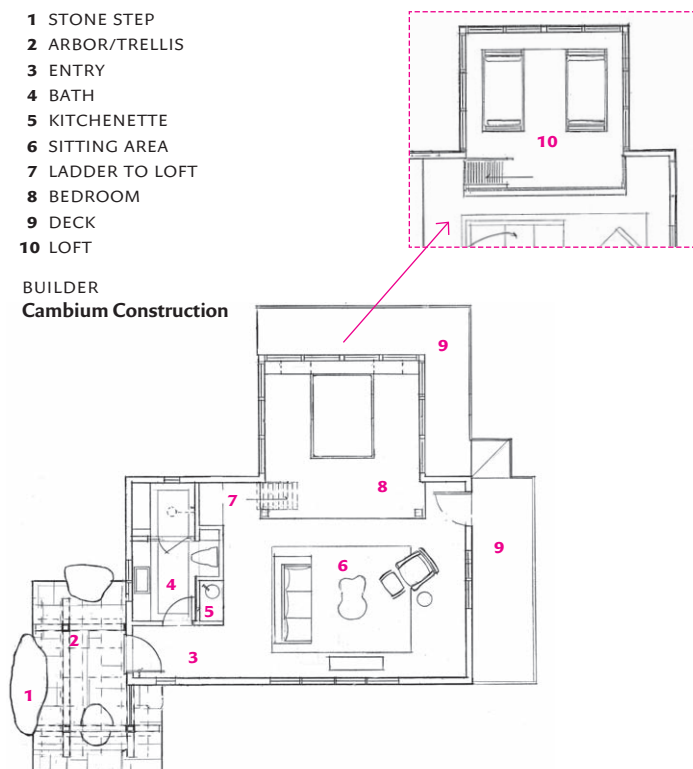


IN THE NEW loft and master sleeping area (FACING PAGE), Samimi-Urich designed beds with sleek built-in shelves and drawers. "Contemporary design is harder to execute than traditional design," she says. "You can't hide flaws with moulding. The lines have to be perfectly clean and the details just right. It requires a skilled carpenter."



- 1 STONE STEP
- 2 ARBOR/TRELLIS
- 3 ENTRY
- 4 BATH
- 5 KITCHENETTE
- 6 SITTING AREA
- 7 LADDER TO LOFT
- 8 BEDROOM
- 9 DECK
- 10 LOFT

BUILDER  
**Cambium Construction**



the rock ledge. On the first floor, a low platform hides a heating duct and insulation, and a custom maple bed is fitted with built-in drawers and shelves. The loft above, intended for children, has custom twin beds with angled back- and footrests that make them as inviting for playing games or reading as for sleeping.

The wood floor is painted black with bronze undertones. The walls, a mellow pistachio, are adorned with colorful photographs of wildflowers, chipmunks, and farm objects such as an old barn door, all the work of Samimi-Urich's daughter, Sierra Urich. A film major at the Rhode Island School of Design, she was hired to photograph the property and create artwork that captured the world outside. In the living area, her images of fields, deep woods, and footpaths are printed in muted black and white touched with sepia and infused into brushed aluminum.

"Good design, artistic design," says Samimi-Urich, "is about developing a story line. For this project, we were telling a story about people and nature. We put a lot of thought into every detail. I think hard about the psychology of the space, about what the client wants. Everything is calculated, yet it can't look forced or controlled."

"We're very happy with how it turned out," says Culhane. "Guests love it, and our kids play up there quite a bit. It's a very open space, filled with incredible light, yet it feels cozy and welcoming. It's our presence in the forest." ■

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