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THE ESSENCE OF MODERNISM

Architect Mark Hammer stays true to the history of a Midcentury gem while converting it to a family's dream house

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Sometimes, the very best new house is an older house that has been rescued and given new life. It is an even better story when that house is an undiscovered gem whose owners resist making an oversize statement, but who instead respect its history. Sometimes, less is very much more.

The conversion of a pool house and art studio into a residence in the Chestnut Hill section of Newton, Massachusetts, just west of Boston, is especially noteworthy. It is “my dream home in every sense,” says Nairobi Zelman, a Costa Rica-born actress, artist, and yoga instructor. She and her husband, business owner and avid squash player Daniel Zelman, lived in a dearly loved penthouse in an



ILLUSTRATION BY JENNA TALBOTT

WHAT WAS ONCE an art gallery and a place to entertain guests poolside is now a family home with a kitchen, dining room, and living room in a single open space. The hallway to the right leads to bedrooms and a workroom.





old brownstone in Brookline for eight years. They vowed never to leave unless they found a place with real “wow factor,” says Nairobi. Committed minimalists, the Zelmans were drawn to Midcentury Modern design and explored period houses in Lincoln, Massachusetts, a town known for its Modern house inventory. But exurbia seemed far away and too quiet. And then the pool house on a hidden parcel became available.

Designed in 1963 for a couple of art collectors, the pool house was a small addition to an estate. When the property came on the market, it was divided into several building lots, and the Zelmans bought half an acre with the swimming pavilion. Instead of constructing a piece of egotecture, such as the McMansions being built nearby, the couple created a home while maintaining the aesthetic





EXPOSED STEEL BEAMS, painted white, boldly highlight the house's Modern credentials. Kahlil Gibran's bronze fence can be seen beyond the pool. A meandering downhill path, planted in the spirit of a Japanese garden (BELOW AND FACING PAGE), leads to the house's entrance.



integrity of the spare design. They honored the spirit of a modest but dignified work of architecture that sat empty and unused for 25 years and polished it into a gem of Modern architecture without increasing its 1,750 square feet.

A Midcentury maven steered the couple to Mark Hammer of Hammer Architects in Cambridge and Truro, Massachusetts, an architect noted for sensitive restorations of Modern houses on Cape Cod. The site and the pool that came with the house posed several challenges, not least of all the Zelmans' requirement of staying within the building's footprint and not compromising its rigorous geometry. "Because it was so small and constrained by the structural grid," says Hammer, "it reminded me of one of those puzzles that had one missing square and required moving all the pieces around until the solution evolved."

There are really two architects here, Hammer and Nathaniel Saltonstall, the original designer of the pool house. Along with his

FATHER AND DAUGHTER share the delights of a floor-to-ceiling glazed nook, punched through the living-room wall, that offers a borrowed view of the garden.





FLOOR PLAN

- 1 ENTRY
- 2 LIVING AREA
- 3 DINING AREA
- 4 KITCHEN
- 5 WORKROOM
- 6 BATH
- 7 MASTER BEDROOM
- 8 MASTER BATH
- 9 BEDROOM
- 10 TERRACE
- 11 POOL

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SHILOH SITS AT the island in the kitchen. Above her in the refurbished original fir ceiling is one of several skylights. Except for some cooking tools and a few favorite dishes, everything is hidden behind storage doors (ABOVE RIGHT).

partner, Oliver Morton, the Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology-trained Saltonstall was a regional master of Midcentury Modern. He designed a prototype solar house in Natick, Massachusetts, in 1946 and was a founder of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, then called the Boston Museum of Modern Art. He is best known for his Bauhaus-inspired vacation houses on the Outer Cape, including a 10-cottage artists colony in Wellfleet, Massachusetts. Hammer had renovated another Saltonstall house in that town, but the Chestnut Hill example was previously unknown to him.

The swimming pool, the envelope of the building, and several exposed steel columns were unalterable givens, but Hammer and his partner, Don DiRocco, were able to reconfigure the plan by changing what was just a gallery and entertaining space into a home with two

bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, and a free-flowing entrance-living-dining area. "Once we moved the utilities," DiRocco says, "the building made a lot of sense." This allowed the grouping of private areas along the street side of the house, which is partially burrowed into a hillside, and opened the rest of the house to the pool.

The original exhibition walls had no windows, so Hammer added clerestories to the two bedrooms. The master bedroom was given a 12-foot-long, 6-foot-deep exterior light well, with a ladder up to ground level for emergency egress, that brings in abundant light through a wall of glass. Outside, the space became a meditative Zen garden. Several skylights bring additional natural light into the interior.

While the nonpublic rooms are grouped on the street side, the L-shaped living area is an open space focused on the outdoors. Slid-



BOTH BEDROOMS ARE partially embedded in the hillside, but they are made bright by clerestory windows along the back wall, as demonstrated in Shiloh's room (TOP), as well as by deeply boxed skylights. Since the master bedroom's back wall (BELOW) is underground, the architects created a light well that became a tableau that is both a canvas of light and a contemplative, horizon-less landscape. Even the shower stall in the main bathroom (LEFT) receives natural light by way of a skylight.





THE POOL IS the heart of this idyllic composition, where (FROM LEFT) Daniel, Shiloh, and Nairobi Zelman enjoy time together. Plantings and fences mitigate the impact of nearby houses and a busy road. The wall behind the yoga platform features art installed by the previous owner.



SHILOH PLAYS AT the dining-room table. The painting is by her mother, who studied at Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston.

ing glass doors visually extend the interior to a stepped terrace leading to the water and a deck, which is often used for yoga. At the far end of this platform is an outdoor shower; its runoff is channeled in a streambed. Patinated bronze panels, created by the sculptor Kahlil Gibran (a cousin of the author of *The Prophet*) for the original owner, frame the pool on two sides.

A thicket of bamboo and trees beyond the Gibran fence shields the Zelmans' 7-year-old daughter Shiloh's hidden garden. Jessalyn Jarest of Jessalyn Jarest Landscape Architecture in Cambridge, a longtime Hammer collaborator, understood the genius of the place. In keeping with the palette of the cedar-sheathed house and the minimally furnished interior, Jarest created a low-maintenance garden with ferns, bamboo, and Japanese forest grass. While purposely monochromatic, "the gardens are full of texture and depth," she says, with many different shades of greens and varying leaf types. "There are hidden moments in the gardens, so it unfolds as you move through it."

A stone-and-gravel walk meanders from the roof-level parking area down to the entrance, a quiet path of discovery that evokes a classic Japanese garden. The underlying but noninsistent simplicity, both inside and out, offers a sense of balance and contentment that utterly reflects the Zelmans' philosophy of life.

Each thing that went into the transformation of the pool house and the grounds into a Modern masterpiece contributed to a spirituality that is lacking in so many new houses. As Daniel says, "There's a soul to this place." ▲

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