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MET HOME OF THE MONTH
A BOSTON COUPLE GAVE
THEIR DESIGNERS FREE REIGN
TO CREATE A HOME THAT
PUSHES THE BOUNDARIES OF
"WEEKEND GETAWAY."

RUBBER



The shapes of this New England home are anything but traditional, although some of it is clad—like many of the area's vintage barns—in board-and-batten cedar siding. The main entrance to the house is on the middle level of three. Opposite: An 18-foot-high window wall, allows light to flood the house, which is partly covered in a black rubber membrane.





Given the new-frontiers look of the architecture, the interior designers put their emphasis on easy livability; there's even a reading corner in the kitchen, which opens to the family room. Sliding doors offer privacy to the adjoining guest room/office. Opposite: Simplicity reigns in the kitchen/dining area, where natural materials include river stone on the appliance wall and wood for the long dining table.



Picture

37 acres of hay fields and meadows in the timeless New England countryside. Now add to this image an asymmetrical, contemporary building partly wrapped in black rubber and looking like a cross between something industrial and domestic at the same time. Is it a hip family getaway or a rustic art installation?

Actually, it's both. The forward-thinking homeowners, a couple with young children, wanted something unique for their second home. As avid contemporary art collectors, they are familiar with points of view that subvert the expected, and that's just how they approached their country place. "The property is our canvas," the husband explains, "and we decided to put an innovative structure on it."

To accomplish their vision, they hired Office dA, a Boston-based architecture firm with impressive credentials: Principals

Nader Tehrani and Monica Ponce de León are both faculty members at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. "Our projects are often essays on materials," explains Tehrani, "where we try to find some latent property in the material to explore." Here, in a Christo-meets-Prada architectural solution, they expanded on traditional building methods by choosing to wrap a large part of the new structure in a membrane of black rubber. "We were upholstering the house's facade," Tehrani says.

"The architect's idea was clearly outside the box," says builder Lou Boxer, no pun intended. Rubber turned out to be a difficult material to work with. Boxer's crew used an available roofing product as siding, applying it with a rib every 20 inches.

PRODUCED BY ELANA FRANKEL AND DONNA PAUL. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF McNAMARA. WRITTEN BY DONNA PAUL.



Making

such an extreme house comfortable became the job of the Boston interior design firm of Manuel de Santaren, Inc. "The architecture was so rigorous that the living spaces needed to be humanized," says de Santaren, who, along with associate Carolina Tress-Balsbaugh, used warm colors and supple textures to impart a soft look.

The middle-floor kitchen/dining area (the ground floor is a garage) was kept as simple and natural as possible, its focal point being a ten-foot-long oak table under a custom-made Kevin Reilly chandelier (the "candles" are electric). The cooking zone is outfitted with white sycamore cabinets, terrazzo countertops and a backsplash of river stones.

On the top floor, the living room has floor-to-ceiling windows at eye level with the surrounding treetops. The space, conceived

as a relaxed and flexible gathering place, can accommodate any kind of entertaining, even sleepovers for the kids. An L-shaped sectional sofa, extra deep at 42 inches, easily holds the whole family. "The obvious approach for this house would have been to go minimalist," says de Santaren, "so we resisted that impulse. We went for earthy colors and textures that abstract nature." In keeping with the master plan, the couple's Mies van der Rohe chaise was not upholstered in leather, as is typical, but in a cotton fabric that mimics wood grain.

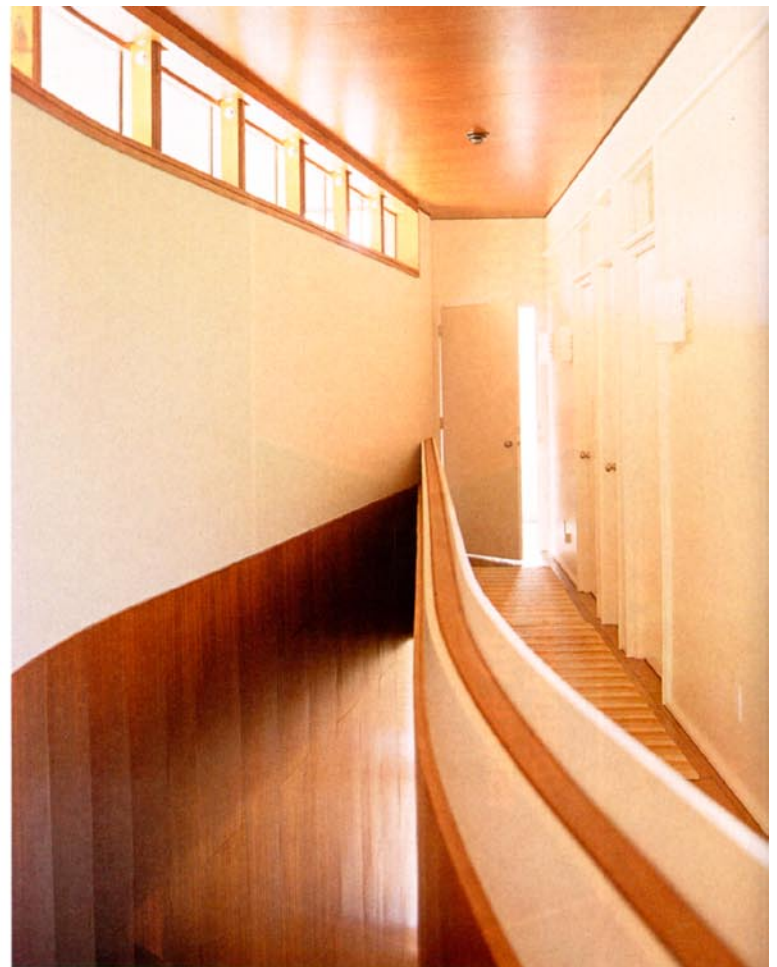
The designers hung draperies from a recessed hospital track. The hems were hand-rolled, "like a scarf," says Tress-Balsbaugh, for a softer look. As for their length, she likes the panels to "kiss the floor." Throughout the house those floors are hand-planed walnut, with four-inch planks chosen for their crafted quality.

A bank of clerestories and a window wall light up the soaring—and reflective—living room ceiling. Opposite: A custom sectional devised by the interior designers is covered in fabric that's reminiscent of autumn foliage; four ottomans double as a coffee table. The slatted mahogany cabinet, designed by Office dA, conceals the television when it's not in use.



The master bath is an open-plan wet room that's a step up from floor level (for runoff). Materials include slate tile, river pebbles and limestone (the Boffi sink). Opposite: The headboard in the master bedroom is covered in fabric that was edged in gros-grain ribbon and woven like a basket; the modernist interior spaces are meticulously finished in materials that were so skillfully installed that they become decorative as well as functional.





Opposites

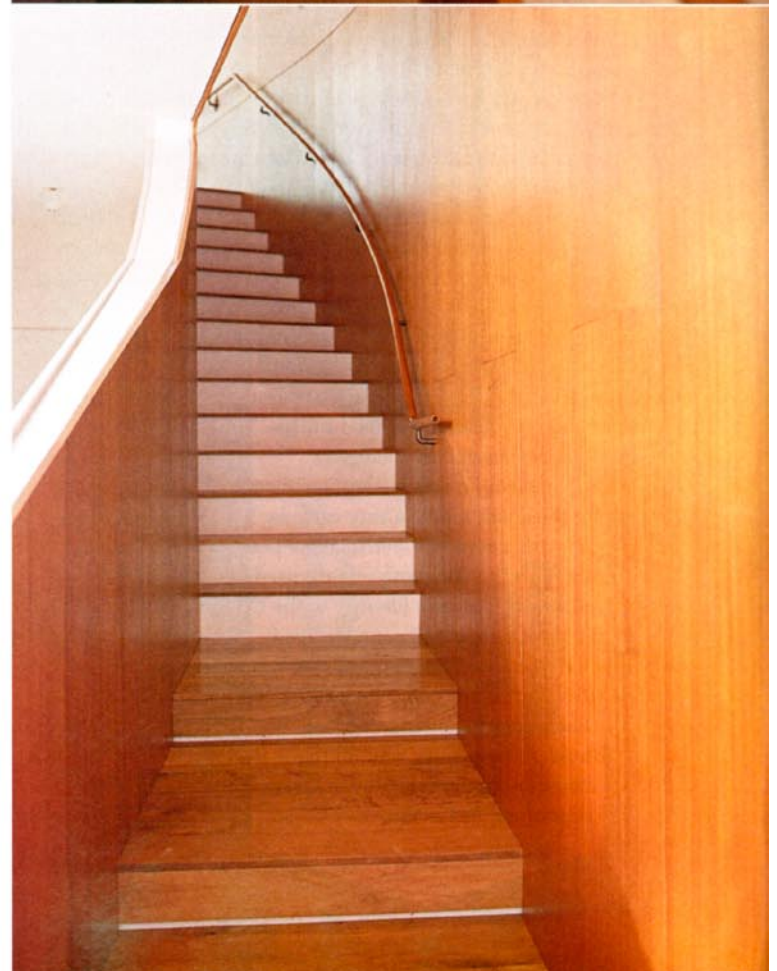
attract artfully in the serene master suite: hard and soft, dark and light. Slate and wood meet in the master bathroom, where a platform covered in slate tile rests atop a floor of hand-hewn wood planks. In the open-plan “wet area,” the glass-“curtained” shower is demarcated by yet another change in flooring, to river rock.

The suite’s sleeping area offers a tranquil contrast to the bathroom’s hardscape. Soft colors and materials make the space into a soothing, private chamber. The bed has tailored but luxe piqué-woven linens by Muse (de Santaren is the company’s owner and design director). But the designers were intent on making sure the house did not look like a showroom. “We wanted it warm but not too chic,” says Tress-Balsbaugh.

Much of the decoration of the home is, in fact, its stunning interior architecture, which achieves some masterful traffic-flow effects in transporting people from one space to another. The curving staircase, where clerestory windows admit morning light, connects the two public areas of the house—the upstairs living room and the middle-floor kitchen/family room—but this important element is “more than just functional,” says Tehrani. “We designed it as a piece of furniture.”

Installation of the staircase, with its sweeping, spinelike curves and odd angles, was trickier than the team first thought; it had to be suspended from the roof beams, with sections cantilevered off the roof.

Despite the many hurdles they faced in creating a unique house, the homeowners are pleased with the results. “The fact that it is so unusual reflects us,” says the wife. “That the exterior material is so strange is something we celebrate.”



Details

1 Sheathing a house in rubber is no mean feat. The flexible material was stretched over the facade in strips connected so that the seams don't show (the fastening is hidden in "double felt" seams, the kind found on Levi's). Side slits are held in place with laser-cut steel elements that are "buttoned" into the rubber and pulled back, stretching the rubber skin.

2 The outdoor dining pavilion was designed by Carolina Tress-Balsbaugh. Its clean linear shape stands in gridded contrast to the organic form of the house. The front wall is mirrored glass, the back wall mostly screens. The polished stainless-steel chimney was fabricated by Milgo/Bufkin in Brooklyn, New York.

3 Inside the dining pavilion is a 13-foot-long dining table of poured concrete in two levels: The raised section accommodates a prep sink, refrigerator and food storage. The ceiling of the pavilion is veneered in mahogany.

4 Craftsmanship meets modern architecture in this floor section, where the house makes a very irregular bend. The problem was solved with a standard herringbone floor technique augmented by more rarefied sawtooth joinery used in cabinetmaking.

5 Giving idiosyncratic identity to the exterior, sections of cedar siding meet horizontally and vertically in a variety of patterns; corncicing was done in copper. "We wanted the facades to dovetail into each other," says architect Nader Tehrani.

6 Contemporary construction detailing is able to show the thinness of the plaster wall and how it meets the mahogany at the stairway, "to look bladelike," says Tehrani. 🍷

See Resources, last pages.



