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Answers @ Home

Q: Letting the Outdoors In?

A: Homes That Embrace the Garden

by Tabitha Kenlon

Pachter Residence
Architect: Reena Racki Associates
Contractor: Madden Corporation

Even the most ardent nature lover acknowledges the usefulness of doors, ceilings, and walls. But these protective elements, while offering shelter from wind, rain, snow, and sun, can also become barriers that separate homeowners from one of their most prized possessions: their backyard. Two local architects have faced the paradoxical challenge of letting the outside in with beautiful results. Reena Racki Associates transformed a kitchen in Cleveland Park; Inscape Studio built a porch in Bethesda; in both cases, the division between inside and out became less important, less noticeable, and infinitely less distracting.

The Garden Room

The first work Marc Pachter did on his house was not actually on the house, but in the garden. He had it meticulously redesigned by landscaper Jane MacLeish in a slightly Japanese mode, with a small fountain and beautiful vegetation. When he turned his attention back to the house, he focused on the kitchen. He knew what he hated about the room: it was small and dark, and unimproved by a boxy brick addition the previous owners had constructed. But he didn't fully realize what he loved most about his property until architect Reena Racki, AIA, asked him. When he replied, "the garden," the metamorphosis of that claustrophobic kitchen began.

Due to zoning restrictions, a further addition to the house was impossible. So the "brick box" at the end of the kitchen was razed completely and a new breakfast nook, with the same dimensions, created in its place. Now, windows form two walls, and high transom windows crown a third, letting in sunshine but keeping out a view of the neighbor's brick wall.

Racki designed every detail of the new kitchen to heighten the feeling of spaciousness and provide optimum functionality. A high ceiling with an exposed structure is adorned with a curved wooden beam, where light fixtures shaped like tiny stars twinkle down subtly. Complementing the warmth evinced by the abundance of natural light, maple was used for all the cabinetry; the only other tones inside are the stainless steel appliances, the white porcelain tile floor, and the absolute black countertops. "Too much color inside," explains Racki, "would make you miss the green outside."

The placement of all the utilities, counters, and storage spaces was carefully designed to be discreet yet accessible. There is no countertop clutter to interrupt the view out into the garden. The usual kitchen accessories are tucked away in closets and cabinets, available when needed and hidden when not. Open one door for the broom closet, another for the trash can, still one more for the butler's pantry. Even the stove's exhaust hood is concealed.

Special care was taken throughout the rebuilding of the addition to protect the garden. Holes for new piers were drilled carefully, ensuring the survival of a beautiful evergreen just outside. And the view looking in is just as gently blended, with the granite paving in the garden reflected in the purple-gray paint of the reconstructed structure.

The renovated kitchen cannot be assigned a specific style. Both Pachter and Racki hesitate to place a label on the room. Pachter appreciates the quiet simplicity of the Arts and Crafts movement, but believes "every era in which something is done should feel like its era." His house is a colonial, but as he has methodically devoted his attention to each room, every one has emerged with a style of its own. Pachter compares walking through his home to moving through a museum, in which the rooms have distinct moods but blend together in a seamless whole.

For Racki, connection to nature is fundamental. She notes this is especially important in urban settings, where city-dwellers can go for days or even weeks without seeing the moon or grass that goes on for more than two square feet. In the midst of never-ending asphalt, Racki strives to provide small respites, tiny nature reserves, little escapes—all within reach, right in the backyard.

The Butterfly Porch

Elisa Rapaport had a childhood memory that she longed to reenact for her own family: summertime meals taken outside, serenaded by crickets and caressed by warm breezes. So after she and husband Michael Schoenbaum purchased a house in Bethesda, they decided to make her vision a reality. Shopping for a house had cultivated Rapaport's strong interest in architecture, and she tackled the project eagerly. She devoured shelter books and magazines—one of her favorites is *Dwell*—and found herself drawn to a more contemporary and modern style, one that might provide a unique contrast to her traditional colonial home.

Rapaport began her search for an architect on the AIA/DC website, www.aiadc.com. After looking at numerous work samples online, she interviewed a few different firms and chose Inscape Studio. She was impressed with their design work and their eco-friendly approach, which was of paramount importance to her. When she met with Rick Harlan Schneider, AIA, LEED AP, and Petros N. Zouzoulas, LEED AP, of Inscape, she explained her basic requirements. She wanted a porch off of the kitchen, enabling easy transit between where the food was prepared and where it would be served. The porch should be screened to keep out bugs, but still have an open, inviting feel that embraced the out-of-doors. It should have plenty of space for a table and chairs as well as convenient and inconspicuous storage space for utensils and linens to limit trips back to the kitchen. An unscreened deck portion would be nice, too. And it should all be done in the most environmentally friendly way possible.

After discussing the future structure, Schneider and Zouzoulas took stock of the present conditions. They documented the angle of the house, the views to and from neighboring yards, and the location of the driveway. They also noted the track of the sun, the surrounding flora and fauna, and the direction of the breezes. Then they went back to the studio to research.

Architects often look to similar work done by their colleagues for education and inspiration. Zouzoulas notes that the initial photos he studied, however, were of fields of flowers rather than decks, and of tobacco barns rather than porches. "My concern was for the landscape more than the house at first," he explains. Rapaport and Schoenbaum wanted a little backyard retreat, and the Inscape team was determined to create something that would not spoil the environment they wanted to enjoy.