Floating cottage

A Lake Minnetonka ugly duckling becomes a swan

BY JACK CORDON, ] PHOTOS BY PHILLIP C. MUELLER
The lakeside property, revamped inside and out, makes the most of its setting. Stone walls edge the new side deck, framed by mature trees that form a canopy for the house.
This empty-nester couple brought the past with them when they downsized to their new cottage. The living room showcases their collection of antiques, while windows open to the lake. OPPOSITE PAGE Dinner cruise anyone? New, double-glazed dining-area windows surround guests with tranquil expanses of water.
Why undertake a major remodeling of a 2,700-square-foot house that sits on less than a quarter acre and is prevented by zoning ordinances from being enlarged? Mainly because the house rises just 11 feet from the water on Lake Minnetonka, with a stunning view across the expanse of the lower lake. You can’t build those anymore.

"Looking out the living and dining room windows, it’s easy to imagine that the house is actually floating on the lake," says Minneapolis architect Rosemary McMonigal, who handled the renovation. Upstairs, from the owner’s bedroom or the spacious office, a person is tempted to dive in. He’d almost make it.

This floating cottage belongs to an empty-nester couple that formerly owned a much larger home on Minnetonka. When their children left, they wanted to downsize. They fell in love with the little property in Greenwood and with the original two-bedroom home’s exterior, but not the interior, which McMonigal characterizes as “neglected and outdated,” with a number of “odd and awkward spaces.”

The house was unusual to begin with. Appearing from the outside to have two levels, it actually has four. "This may be the only split-level Cape Cod in existence," the owner says. Born as a cabin in the 1940s, the structure evolved over the years and was remodeled in the 1980s with results that the new owners considered tragic: poor quality cabinetry, rough-sawn beams in rooms with no other rustic character, and oddly proportioned rooms and ceiling heights.

As antique collectors with an eye for fine detailing, the homeowners wanted a cottage that would showcase their favorite furniture pieces. They also needed more closet and storage spaces—commodities that the existing house sorely lacked.
A cottage is what McMonigal gave them—one with exquisite detailing that uses every inch of space that could be squeezed out of a structure that couldn’t be enlarged. The only expansion, a 5-foot partial cantilever above the first level, gained just enough room for a large walk-in closet in the owner’s bedroom.

“This was almost like designing a boat, where we used every bit of space we could find,” McMonigal says. That meant preserving the size, the shape, and the basic four-level structure of the house, while changing practically everything within that shell.

Vaulted ceilings over the kitchen and foyer on the entrance level were closed off to provide additional floor space upstairs. Several non-supporting walls were moved or eliminated. On the top two levels, ingenious built-in cabinets and rollout drawers were tucked as far as 30 inches into spaces between walls and the sloped roof.

THE WHOLE WORKS
The house got everything from a mechanical overhaul to a face-lift, courtesy of Kyle Hunt & Partners, the Deephaven contractor on the project. In-floor heating for rooms with new ceramic-tiled floors was added to the forced-air system that serves the rest of the house. (Both systems run off the same boiler for efficiency.) Fresh insulation went into the walls before the exterior got new siding of cedar lap and cedar shingles. (The detached garage received the same exterior treatment.) A damaged foundation wall was repaired. Every window in the house was replaced with double-glazed upgrades, as were glass doors. Seventeen new windows were added, and 18 of the existing ones were enlarged.
The grounds metamorphosed as well. The owners were careful to preserve the mature trees surrounding the house, but landscape designers Bob Harvey and George Santosh, of Edelweiss Design in Minneapolis, dug up the buckthorn and other invasive species that had taken up residence. They replaced the ground cover with a riot of mostly native plants, as well as screening shrubs and smaller trees. Harvey and Santosh also rearranged existing fieldstone retaining walls and added a low, semicircular wall of Wisconsin Chilton stone to frame the house’s revamped entry. Striking walkways of New York bluestone now guide strollers past the vegetation and around the house to a new waterfall feature by a side deck. The walkways beautifully achieve their purpose, which Harvey says was to create “a sense of continuity and circulation within the length of a long, narrow lot.”

Inside the house, the remarkable transfiguration continues. On the entry level, windows in the living room were extended about 18 inches toward the floor to open up the rooms to the lake. Douglas fir replaced worn flooring. The partial walls that once made tunnels of the short stairs leading up to the mid-level and down to the basement were eliminated. The kitchen’s corner sink moved to a granite-topped island facing the water, while cabinetry was added in natural alder, a theme repeated throughout the house.
The owner’s bedroom repeats the signature truss beams. A private deck adds to the ship-at-sea ambiance of the space. OPPOSITE PAGE The remodeled owner’s bath boasts a steam shower and tumbled marble.
The once all but unusable basement became an inviting family room with the installation of in-floor heat beneath new ceramic tile, a white coffered ceiling, expanded windows on the lake side, and a wall of alder cabinets and bookshelves.

On the midlevel, a slanted ceiling in the owner's bedroom became a symmetrical vault, with dramatic boxed trusses added to lower the cye. The owner's bath now boasts tumbled marble tile and a steam shower. The new walk-in closet draws natural light from three added windows placed close to its 10-foot ceiling.

The signature truss beams in the owner's bedroom are repeated in the large office on the top level, which also houses a guest bedroom and another revamped bath. As in the owner's bedroom, the office conceals behind alder fronts some remarkably deep cabinets and drawers that capitalize on found space between the wall and the roofline. The office desk is centered so as to receive light from windows on two sides. On one side, the lake beckons, directly below. On the other, a mature oak spreads its branches so close to the windows that "I feel like I'm in a tree house up here," the owner says.

Or maybe in a tree cottage floating on a lake. 

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