Collaboration & Community

A client-focused, eco-conscious approach

BY CAMILLE LEFEVRE

In high school, Rosemary McMonigal read a career book that advised, “If you like math and art, be an architect.” She loved both, so she attended the architecture school at the University of Minnesota, which was then under the direction of legendary architect Ralph Rapson. One day, McMonigal met with an adviser who told her, “You’re a woman. Go into interior design.” She refused. After graduation, she also said no to residential architecture, because, “as a woman, the perception was that I’d do houses,” she recalls.

Instead, she worked for Cenex, the agribusiness/energy conglomerate, designing computer centers, offices, and industrial sites, including an oatmeal plant. She then spent several years in Finland, focusing on commercial projects. A few years after she returned to the Twin Cities, she joined Charles Levin Architects and designed offices and retail buildings.

In 1984, she started her firm, McMonigal Architects. A commercial client in Brainerd asked, repeatedly, if she’d do their house, and after much hesitation, McMonigal finally relented. “So I designed their home and fell in love with residential design,” she recalls. “The detail and personality that infuse homes, energize residential spaces and engage the homeowners are so much more exciting than in a school or office project.”

East meets West in this home overlooking White Bear Lake in Mahtomedi. The spare, asymmetrical design reflects the homeowners’ time spent in Asia, and uses transition spaces and vistas to carefully integrate the home into its surroundings.

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Since then, all of her work has been residential and “100 percent client driven,” she says. “My philosophy has always been about collaborating with people to figure out their vision of home. Sometimes I wonder how different the practice might have been if I’d developed a design signature or a single architectural style. But that never even entered my mind.”

Cindy and Jay Ihlenfeld have worked with McMonigal on four projects that have transformed their White Bear Lake home. “Our house has great bones, but didn’t have a lot of character,” Cindy explains. “After the first remodeling project, Rosemary showed us what a significant difference she could make. Still, instead of imposing some preconceived ideas, Rosemary always adapts to the style we prefer and enhances it.”

Since the early 1980s, when a client asked her to design a child-care center with passive solar energy systems, McMonigal has incorporated sustainable strategies and materials into projects wherever she can. “It’s become the essence of my practice, our standard of care,” she says. With one residential client, she undertook a three-year design process that included testing almost every building material for off-gassing and chemical reactions before including it in the project. With another client, McMonigal was able to remodel their home with many re-used materials, including exterior siding, interior millwork, cabinets, appliances, and plumbing salvaged through the Green Institute.

In her spare time, McMonigal is actively involved in community outreach. From organizing the first Minneapolis/St. Paul Home Tour, to participating in the Block Kids Program with Women in Construction, to building houses with Habitat for Humanity, she’s determined to give back. Through publishing and speaking, she educates the public about the value of architects. “When you’re a residential architect, you realize how few people know what architects do, the difference we can make,” she says. “Especially when we engage with them on their vision for their home.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON FEATURED PRODUCTS AND SUPPLIERS, SEE PAGE 143.

TO SEE MORE PHOTOS OF PROJECTS BY BEN AWES AND ROSEMARY MCMONIGAL, VISIT MHMAG.COM/AIAAWARDS2013

ABOVE Inspired by modern and traditional European design, this Minneapolis home’s 1920s character was preserved, while the interior spaces blend a mix of eras. BELOW A sunny retreat in McMonigal’s own home.

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