Rounding out the edges

A midwestern house finds inspiration in southwestern forms

The Stillwater, Minn., countryside is a mix of rolling landscapes, working farms and encroaching suburban development. In another 10 years, split levels and ramblers surely will outnumber cornstalks. For now, though, enough open land remains to retain the bucolic environment, although downtown Minneapolis is a mere 25 minutes away.

Courtesy Rosemary A. McMonigal Architects

Set amidst rolling landscape outside Stillwater, Minn., this residence designed by Rosemary McMonigal follows a circular form, inspired in part from vernacular Navajo architecture. The rounded plan is most evident from the back (above), where the living room's wall of windows curves outward. From the front (back page), the house is understated yet richly detailed with a golden stone base and contrasting bands of gray and beige shingles.

Tom and Liz Rieser capitalized on the country scenery by setting their new house on a 70-acre lot surrounded by cornfields (which they hire out to farm), a lake, woodland and a ravine. Wanting to avoid the standard fare offered by builders, they approached Rosemary McMonigal of Minneapolis to design their new home.

"We wanted the house to be unique but functional," Liz says. Having lived in New Mexico for several years, the couple developed an affinity with vernacular Navajo architecture, marked by daylit rooms, softened corners and circular motifs.

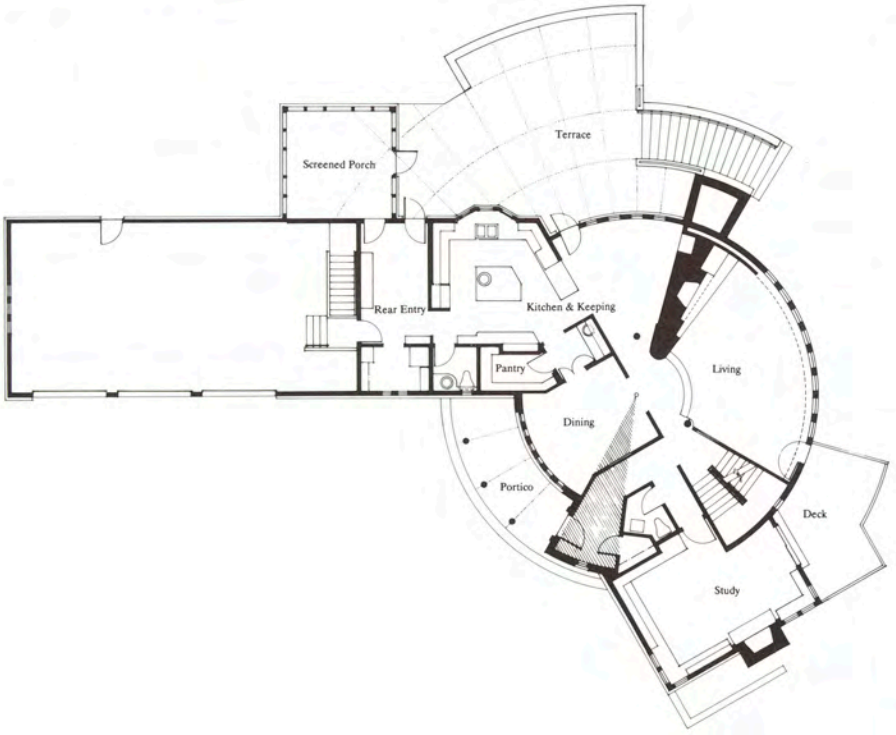
McMonigal responded with a circular floor plan that, in fact, has as much in common with the Prairie School as the Navajo-inspired architecture of New Mexico.

The front of the house is fairly traditional and horizontally scaled to reflect the expanse of the midwestern landscape. Yet the quiet front is enriched by natural materials. A golden stone base, recalling the base of a nearby barn, wraps around the house. Above are contrasting bands of gray and gold cedar shingles. A gray hipped roof, wide overhangs and white, horizontal trim reinforce the front's rectangular massing; the curving entry portico is the only hint of the house's circular form. Around back, the facade becomes more animated. The central living-room core curves outward, emphasizing the circular plan. A 2 1/2-story-high stone fireplace wall slices through the house, creating a visual link between the interior and exterior. From the lower yard, a stone stairway links with an upper terrace, which leads to a screened porch.

Inside, the house reveals itself gradually. The couple, who also had lived in California, fondly remember their West Coast house as having rooms and spaces that "slowly unfolded as you progressed through." Liz says that a house shouldn't be all-revealing at the front door, leaving nothing to surprise or the imagination. Their Minnesota house offers similar spacial progression. A wedge-shaped foyer veers toward the living room, offering just a peek into the room. An interior art-glass window in the foyer glimpses opaquely into the dining room. At the end of the foyer is another art-glass window that looks into the living room, the view of the room and outdoor vista fractured by the patterned glass.

James Erickson

The dining room (above) features custom-designed lighting fixtures and an interior window by artist Mike Mealey. The art-glass pattern is based on variations of wildflower motifs. McMonigal says she designed the house as a series of wedges (floor plan below).



Beyond the foyer, the house opens to the 2-story-high living room. "We wanted the living room to have a feeling of height and openness," says the couple, who lived in the cramped quarters of a town house before moving in. A wall of windows following the curve of the room overlooks the prairie, further increasing the spaciousness.

Detailing is the house's strong suit. The living room is anchored by the wedge-shaped, stone fireplace wall. The wall's curved corners are hand chiseled. Bands of contrasting light-and-dark oak trim heighten the Prairie influences. "There is a bit of [Frank Lloyd] Wright in here," Liz says. The two-toned dining room is lit by custom fixtures and sconces by artist Mike Mealey, who designed all the

The stone fireplace wall (left) reaches 2 1/2 stories, dividing the living room from the kitchen. A second-level balcony (not pictured) overlooks the living room. From the foot of the stairs, another art-glass window (below) looks into the living room. The rounded corners of the fireplace wall were hand-chiseled from stone blocks.

house's art-glass features based on wildflower imagery. Upstairs, an open hallway and balcony overlook the living room. To add a playful touch (this is a family with three small children), McMonigal included a flight of stairs leading to a lookout, giving the children a bird's-eye view of the landscape. On the lower level, which walks out on grade with the backyard, another fireplace trimmed in terra cotta and stucco recall the couple's New Mexico days.

For the Riesers, a bit of Californian and New Mexican architecture adds up to a house that is uniquely midwestern. *Eric Kudalis*

Project: Rieser residence
Client: Liz and Tom Rieser
Architects: Rosemary A. McMonigal Architects
Contractor: Nastrom Construction

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