

Bethesda  
Magazine

# HOME

MAY/JUNE 2013

## ONE-STORY NOT TO BE MISSED

A spectacular home rises from the  
ruins of a Somerset rambler



# level best

After demolishing a 1950s-era house, a Somerset couple builds a dream home that's simple, spare—and spectacular

By Nigel F. Maynard

MATTHEW CARRIG/AWDB

TIMOTHY BELL



A red door and a steel-and-stone bridge with glass rails create a dramatic entrance to this Somerset home. **Top left:** The floating treads on the stairs make a strong architectural statement as you descend from the master bedroom to the basement home gym.

level best

Water destroyed Charles and Charlotte Perret's one-story home in Somerset. Years of excess groundwater gradually and silently eroded the soil and the foundation under the rear of the house, causing extensive damage to the basement walls and windows.

"We tried everything [to fix the problem], but nothing worked," says Charlotte, a retired museum educator who spent years at the Smithsonian Institution. "We dug up the basement and put in a French drain, but that didn't work either."

The problem wasn't all that surprising. Somerset is a place with a history of water problems. (Wikipedia describes the town as plagued by "inadequate water drainage.") The Perrets bought their circa-1950s home in 1981, when they returned from living abroad, and undertook minor interior renovations over the years.

"We made changes based on what I thought we needed for the house," Charlotte says, including the removal of walls and the consolidation of closets.

But after the couple's children moved out—Charlotte has three children from a previous relationship and Charles has two—they were ready for a more extensive remodel in 2005. Unable to find design solutions that satisfied their needs, they called on Anthony Wilder Design/Build, a 20-year-old firm in Cabin John.

Immediately, there was bad news. During an early analysis of the project, the firm determined that the water problem was much more serious than previously thought. In fact, it was safer and cheaper to raze the house and start over, says architectural designer Anthony Wilder. The good news was that a complete teardown meant that the Perrets had more design flexibility and could get more square footage.

"We originally planned for a partial basement, but because the land was so eroded in back, we sculpted away the remaining piece of the ground to make a full basement," Charlotte says.



The towering ceilings and skylights add to a sense of openness in the living room. The art and furniture design are by Charles Perret's daughter, Eugenie.



A large, quartz-topped island anchors the kitchen, which features red cabinets with a lacquer finish and windows underneath to let in natural light.

The town of Somerset had been experiencing a wave of infill homes that were too large for their lots, according to Wilder. The Perrets had other ideas. Each had been influenced by time spent overseas: Charlotte lived in France, studied French literature at the Sorbonne in Paris, and wrote the book *At Their Doorstep: The Street Fairs of Paris & Their Carnival Folk in Stories & Photographic Postcards, 1900s*; Charles was a businessman and human resources manager in Turkey. The couple had grown fond of

modest living with an "economy of size," Charlotte says. A McMansion was out; simple and spare were in.

And that's what they got. Their house is based on a design that venerable Washington, D.C., architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen produced in 1998 for *Life* magazine's annual Dream Home showcase. Wilder and architect JP Ward adapted the plan for the site and customized it to the couple's needs.

"Charlotte didn't like certain things about the original house, so we refined

TIMOTHY BELL (2)



The porch features a circular vaulted ceiling made from Kalwall, a translucent building material that lets in light but blocks solar heat. It overlooks the lap pool.



**Above:** The house has two pavilions—one with a kitchen and dining room and the other containing a master suite and two guest bedrooms—connected by a central living space. **Here:** This view shows the rock garden set beneath the steel-and-stone bridge leading to the front door.

it and made modifications,” Wilder says.

Modest in scale and respectful of the old neighborhood, the house is very much in the Jacobsen tradition. It features simple gable forms, crisp lines, painted-white clapboard siding and a soft-gray metal roof.

Wilder and Ward conceived the structure as an H-shaped single-story, with two pavilions connected by a central living space. One pavilion contains the kitchen and dining room, and the other houses the master suite and two guest bedrooms (with sleeping lofts for visiting grandchildren). A gym, rec room and three additional bedrooms are located in the basement.

The dramatic approach to the entry features a flagstone walkway with embedded LED lighting and glass railings. Just before visitors arrive at the red 8-foot front door, they cross a steel-and-stone bridge that spans a below-grade, Japanese-inspired rock garden planted with bamboo trees. Wilder and Ward scooped away earth to create the subterranean space, which allowed “very large windows and window wells in the basement,” Ward says. “It gets lots of daylight into the basement, which becomes a wonderful space.”

Inside, light-filled rooms are elegantly restrained and simply detailed. Two sets of dormers allow daylight to permeate the foyer and the main living areas. The light also washes the stark-white walls in the entry, where a painting by daughter Eugenie Perret is displayed. (Another of Eugenie’s paintings hangs above the 8-foot-long gas fireplace in the living room.)

The foyer leads to a large and open living room and screened-in porch, which features a round and vaulted ceiling made from Kalwall, a translucent building material that lets in light but blocks solar heat. Additionally, a floor-to-ceiling wall of aluminum-framed glass brings in natural light while providing views of the pool and landscaped backyard.

“Charlotte loves natural light, but she hates direct sunlight,” Ward says. “The rear of the house faces south, so in the summertime there is no direct light, so it’s not heating up the spaces.”

TIMOTHY BELL (2)

To the right of the living room, a kitchen with red-lacquered cabinets holds court. Measuring about 20 feet by 30 feet, the space is anchored by a large, quartz-topped island that serves as a gathering place when family members visit.

“They are very contemporary people,” Ward says of the Perrets. “They know that the kitchen is not going to be this secondary space that’s sequestered from view. They live in the kitchen, and they entertain there. . . . They wanted the space to be just as finished because it’s adjacent to the living room and really on display for all to see.”

Though the house is rooted in traditional forms, it’s loaded with contemporary detailing, such as a round glass vanity and a frosted-glass wall in the powder room, and a steel, open-riser staircase leading to the basement. A warm, dark-stained hickory floor ties all the spaces together.

The landscape design is equally clean and modern. In addition to the flagstone paving, which is softened by plantings and the gravel driveway, the project features a backyard with a long lap pool, a patio tiled in marble, and red concrete accent walls that conceal the pool equipment and outdoor shower.

Despite appearances to the contrary, the design/build firm didn’t finish the home all at once. Rather, it evolved over a period of six years between 2006 and 2012.

“A year or two after they moved in, we did the pool, then [the entry] bridge. And the latest piece is the spiral staircase going up to the loft space,” Ward says. Wilder and Ward say the clients were always looking for adjustments to make the house more enjoyable for visiting children and grandchildren.

The repeat work is a testament to the relationship that developed between the firm and its clients. Wilder and company got a chance to work on an exciting project that challenged their creativity. And the Perrets got a house they could love and enjoy with their family. ■

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