

MODERNIST



MIRACLE

BY ROB DUCA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY LUONG

In an extensive renovation, S+H Construction integrates Paul Rudolph's iconic '50s architecture into a light-filled contemporary home.





The now-open kitchen, previously tucked away and hidden, was relocated to the main room, bringing the design into modern times.

IT REQUIRED THE ABILITY to take the long view when the homeowners first looked at the unique Cambridge house that would become theirs. Designed by modernist architect Paul Rudolph in the 1950s, this converted parking garage was literally built into the side of a hill, with large portions of the home buried below ground. The 3,500-square-foot house had cement-block walls, a flat rubber roof, single-glazed windows, poor insulation, dated wallpaper and evidence of water damage.

"It was in pretty rough shape," says the wife. "The wiring and the plumbing were a mess. It all needed to be replaced."

The goal was to bring the house up to date by making it energy efficient and weathertight. And that would prove to be no simple task. "Like a lot of renovation projects, it's not what you see but what's behind what you don't see," says Will Ruhl, a principal at Ruhl Walker Architecture + Interiors. "Every time we dug a hole or removed something we found worse news than we expected. It was built to late-1950s standards, and we had to bring everything up to current codes."

There were significant obstacles, not the least being that much of the renovation was done during the snow-filled winter of 2015. "The site presented its challenges," says Doug Hanna, principal at S+H Construction. "There is just a little alley that goes back to the house, and though we could get our trucks back there, we started many days digging out the snow first. It was a cool job, but the winter was rough."

When workers removed the original glass wall at the front of the house, they discovered there was no footing to support the weight of the insulated, and much heavier, windows that would be installed. Even removal of the roof led to unpleasant surprises. "We found five layers of tar and gravel, so there was an enormous amount of material that had to be taken away," Hanna says. "We also had to do quite a bit of infrastructure improvements."

The below-grade room, labeled the "winter garden" by the previous owners, had a 60-year-old fiberglass roof that was covered in dirt and leaves from an overhanging maple tree, which meant that little light was filtering through. It was also uninsulated, rendering it useless for most of the year. The corrugated roof was replaced with translucent polycarbonate panels. "Now there is beautiful diffused light coming through," Ruhl says.

A heating and cooling system was also installed, along with high-density foam insulation, transforming the space into what is now a library that houses the homeowners' collection of nearly 1,000 books and also serves as a guest bedroom.

The great room, which once had commercial garage doors, was updated by S+H Construction with fixed glass panels, transoms and triple-glazed sliding doors that provide access to an outside garden. "It has made the sofa our favorite spot in the house," says the wife. "It almost feels like you're sitting in the garden. It's quite gorgeous."

"It certainly was one of the more unique projects that we've done," Hanna says. "But we were able to overcome some unusual conditions and produce a very good project." **H**





The homeowners, who moved from a brownstone in Boston's South End, maintain that the home has changed their quality of life. "It gives us freedom and peace of mind," the wife says. "It's unfussy. We feel that this kind of architecture is the way we want to live our lives. It is unencumbered and just has a lot of clarity."





"This was not a typical home renovation and there were definitely some challenges, but it was a great project to work on," states Doug Hanna principal at S+H Construction. "For me, it was kind of a dream project," architect Will Ruhl says. "I just love the way Rudolph worked with light and structure. The fact that he took a half-buried parking garage and turned it into a house filled with light is really extraordinary."