AIA Home of the Month: Simple dream

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Heather Jennings and Noelle Stoyles were outbid on the house they really wanted, a Ralph Rapson-designed midcentury modern home. But they didn't give up; they went ahead and built a version of their own.

Jennings and Stoyles thought they had found their dream house: a 1950s flat-roofed Rapson walkout in University Grove, an eight-block community in Falcon Heights with many modernist homes designed by famed architects.

The two-level box-shaped home designed by architect John Dwyer combines a simple material palette with smart design. The cantilever off the back creates an enclosed ipe wood deck.

John Dwyer,

The Rapson home needed new windows and appliances and had water damage. "But it was our chance to get an affordable University Grove house, which never come up for sale," said Jennings. They were devastated when they lost the house. Then Jennings discovered she could buy a copy of the floor plans online.

"It gave us the idea that we could find a nice piece of land and do our own Ralph Rapson-inspired home," she said.

Although both women were raised in traditional older homes, they are drawn to clean modern-style architecture and open loft-like spaces. Their previous home, built in the 1930s with dark chopped-up rooms, made them long for smooth concrete floors and barrier-free rooms, with lots of glass to let in natural light. Oh -- and they really wanted a flat roof.

"I grew up in an 1880s farmhouse in Iowa," said Jennings. "It's crazy. I don't know why I had to have a house with a flat roof."

Priced right

In 2009, Jennings and Stoyles found that nice piece of land -- three-fourths of an acre filled with oaks, maples and cottonwoods in St. Paul's South Como neighborhood. Even better, the bank-owned lot was priced right.

"It was a chance to live in the city but have a big suburban lot," said Stoyles.

To gain some insight into building a modest home with a modern aesthetic, Jennings followed Minneapolis homeowner Jeff Gallo's blog documenting the construction of the "5ive House," a flat-roofed LEED-certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) home designed by Shelter Architecture. That's how Jennings connected with architect John Dwyer, who was working for Shelter at the time.

Dwyer, who admits to "an obsession with midcentury modern design," brainstormed ideas with Stoyles and Jennings. The women showed him the Rapson floor plan and examples of projects they really loved from Dwell magazine and other resources.

To meet their budget, "I tried to figure out the most efficient way to make this house happen," said Dwyer. "The footprint is a perfect box with a cut-out entryway."

Dwyer also incorporated a simple material palette of concrete, steel, wood and white finishes. "I wanted to maintain as much continuity in the materials from inside to out," he said. "I wanted the house to feel integral in that way."

The Jennings/Stoyles home's stark white front exterior is clad in fiber-cement siding that melds visually with the snow-covered landscape. The simple box shape, broken up by a strip of clerestory windows and a partially hidden entry, resembles an abstract piece of sculpture.

'Humble' from the street

"I really love how humble the house is from the street," said Jennings. "It's simple and makes sense and there's no wasted space."

The exterior's streamlined design belies the interior's generous 2,300 square feet, which includes four bedrooms over two levels, warmed by heated concrete floors. The baseboards are made of reclaimed aluminum instead of wood. "I like the industrial feel, and it's unique," said Jennings, an interior house painter, who did most of the research and made the home-building decisions.

Jennings liked the look of the windows at Chipotle restaurants, so Dwyer put in expansive aluminum-clad commercial windows, which offer views of turkeys, fox and even coyotes in the yard. "I call it city in the front and farm in the back," she said.

"The home feels glassy but there's less than 20 windows, to keep the cost down," added Dwyer.

To create seamless indoor and outdoor living spaces, Dwyer cantilevered the main floor, creating an ipe wood deck the length of the back of the house. The deck doubles as a sheltering overhang above the concrete patio off the lower-level walkout.

"We pushed the engineer on that one," said Stoyles. "Originally the deck was to be 4 feet wide, but we made it 6 feet so there would be room for a table and chairs."

To soften and warm up the minimalist, clean-lined spaces, Dwyer added strategically placed grainy walnut accents in kitchen cabinets, the staircase steps and railings and the master bathroom vanity.

"I chose what had the highest impact visually," said Dwyer. "It would be a different house if there wasn't wood in the kitchen."

The rest of the kitchen is composed of stainless-steel appliances and white quartz countertops. "We didn't want trendy backsplash tile colors," said Jennings. "With an all-white backdrop, the food and flowers really pop at a party."

Stoyles and Jennings also asked Dwyer to add a main-floor office without adding square footage. His solution was to take 2 feet from the garage to make a computer station with lots of storage cabinets tucked into one end of the kitchen. Other smart space savers include a built-in platform bed, walk-in closet with built-in dressers and pocket doors in the master bedroom.

And with energy-saving features such as spray-foam insulation, big south-facing windows and in-floor heat, the homeowners' utility bills are the same as in their previous home even though they have twice the square footage.

Today Stoyles and Jennings are glad the University Grove property fell through. They estimated it would have cost more to update that home than what they spent to build new. And they wouldn't have their big yard for a fire pit and perennial and vegetable gardens.

"This house fits our personalities. It's not extravagant," said Stoyles. "It just feels right."

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