

360 Modern

Balancing Act

Designer Amely Wurmbrand's mid-century Shoreline home combines architectural integrity with a fresh iconoclastic style for a look that's absolutely au courant.

By Sara daSilva

Given its location at the end of a long forested lane smelling richly of Douglas Fir, it's easy to believe that Amely Wurmbrand and Craig Rosenberg's home was originally intended as a hunting lodge. But before you think threadbare tapestries and carved antler candelabras, remember that it was built in Shoreline, Washington in 1962. Although quail were (and still are) abundant, these particular hunters were more likely to sport leisure suits than leather jerkins, and the sleek, low-slung lodge itself was a model of mid-century cool.

Thanks to Amely Wurmbrand's meticulous modern sensibilities, it still is. An interior designer and a painter, she relied on an artist's unerring sense of proportion to guide the structure through two major remodels with remarkable fidelity to the original vision. But rather than treat this updated mid-century gem as an untouchable relic, she went on to design current, comfortable, and family-friendly interiors, and to decorate the entire home with a provocative mix of styles and colors-proving that in life, as well as in art, discipline is the key to true freedom.

Before discipline was called for, though, a good deal of patience was required just to find the house. Craig, who was lucky enough to have spent his boyhood in a Richard Neutra home in California, had his heart set on modern. Amely wanted a view. But nothing in their price range seemed to fit the bill. After searching fruitlessly for six months, the young couple was ready to throw in the towel. A frustrated Wurmbrand remembers sitting in the parking lot of Richmond Beach Saltwater Park, staring glumly at the spectacular vistas of Puget Sound, and saying, "I wish we could just live here." The following week, real estate kismet struck when they discovered their modern home with its panoramic marine views, in a location just a stone's throw from the same fateful parking lot.

While the house was perfect in theory, years of dowdy design choices had left the interiors woefully down-at-the-heels. Layers of paint masked gorgeous mid-century materials, while original-and ugly-Formica countertops still prevailed in an inconvenient kitchen. To top it off, Wurmbrand and Rosenberg needed more room. A lesser designer would have slapped on a second story, but Amely knew the extra height would ruin the home's modern silhouette and destroy its demure, site-specific charm. Undaunted, she taught herself AutoCAD (a software program designed for architects) and starting drafting a plan to renew and revitalize the original structure while orchestrating a virtually seamless addition.

Such a rigorous overhaul wouldn't be easy, especially one guided by a perfectionist with a penchant for experimentation. At one point Amely sent her husband up on the roof with a measuring tape to record the exact relationships of some overhanging eaves. The final kitchen layout was determined, not on a computer screen, but by the epicurean version of air guitar: the couple pretended to prepare a meal while moving between squares of tape representing counters, sinks and stovetops. And Amely herself admits that they slept in every room in the house before the bed finally touched down for good.

"I believe in live models," Amely says. "For me that's the right way to design." And while few of us mere mortals can spare quite so much time in the service of perfection, you can't



Careful attention to scale and proportion ensures that a 2003 addition is virtually indistinguishable from the original 1962 structure.



Abstract art by Wurmbrand provides a jolt of color against creamy Milestone cement walls.



Amely designed her new kitchen around an original sandstone wall in what was formerly the living room.



A planter box discovered during the renovation is filled with greenery to echo the fir trees outside.



Amely loves refurbished mid-century treasures rescued from local second-hand stores

argue with results like these. Working closely with a structural engineer, Amely calibrated each aspect of the renovation with the precision of a Swiss watchmaker. Her success is a reminder that hiring a good designer or architect to guide a mid-century remodel isn't a luxury expense, but rather an investment in property value, aesthetic purity, and quality of life.

Far from a generic modern box, the home's sleek new L-shape fits into the surrounding landscape like a puzzle piece, achieving a harmony with nature the prefabricated homes of this generation could never attain. A simple, floating breezeway separates the old rectangle from the new, and all that measuring paid off in flawlessly proportioned rooflines.

Interiors are no less respectful of the home's splendid natural setting. Suspended between a thick stand of evergreens and the restless waters of the Puget Sound, the long glass-enclosed great room forms a dazzling light-drenched channel between earth and sea. A massive stone fireplace wall that had been painted white was restored to its former organic glory and provides a stunning focal point for a brand new kitchen. The rosy sandstone adds warmth to modern stainless steel appliances, while pebbly mosaic backsplashes from Ann Sacks reinterpret the same rocky theme. Such conversations between materials abound throughout the house. New rift-sawn oak floors reflect the silky pale stripes of original car decking. And a planter box that Amely discovered beneath a discarded countertop now boasts a flourishing collection of orchids, moss, and feathery ferns—a paler, leafier version of the forest beyond.

Like a beautiful woman, a house with such perfect proportions can wear what it likes. Amely chose to capitalize on her home's metaphorical size six by indulging in the rich Cerulean blues and wine-reds usually reserved for Victorian drawing rooms. While the great room's creamy Milestone walls are quietly modern, the punch of a plush, candy-apple-red bench rescued from the old Seattle Opera House states in no uncertain terms that these interiors are hardly paint-by-the-numbers mid-century.

"I like surprises," Amely states, "especially old treasures from dilapidated shops." A wonderfully ambiguous Swedish recliner with a quilted leather seat buckled to a sharp steel frame is a case in point. Likewise, Amely saw past a "horrible" seventies-print upholstery job to the elegant essence of Milo Baughman dining chairs found on E-bay.

"I don't believe in doing a cliché of mid-century," Amely explains. "That style developed when things were very stripped down. I like to add texture, color, and warmth back in." Accordingly, while almost everything in the main area of the house is mid-century, none of it is predictable. Yes, there are two iconic Barcelona chairs, but instead of standard black leather, they sport seditious grey corduroy.

With a remodeling triumph to her credit and an evolving young family, Amely has already created a cardboard model of yet another addition, this one featuring a pop-up shed loft and a new master suite. Even in miniature, the lovely clean lines of the proposed project make one wonder whether this very good designer shouldn't consider expanding into architecture.

Amely, however, has other ideas. If she ever has a few precious free months, she isn't planning to spend them in architecture school. Instead, Amely would like to follow in the footsteps of a literary family and write a book, one chronicling the long, but ultimately satisfying, journey of her house. The story of a once fabulous hunting lodge rescued from dingy disrepair by a visionary designer and reinvented as the perfectly remodeled mid-century home of a very modern family is sure to make for a good read. After all, doesn't everyone love a happy ending?

See her work at www.amelydesigns.com