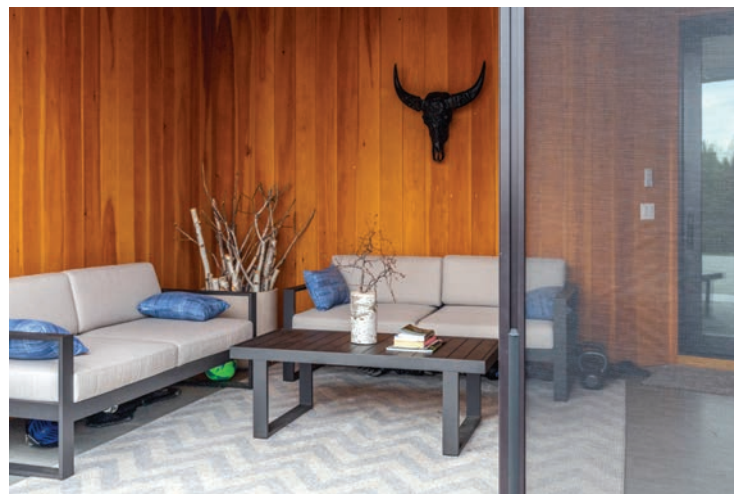




LESS IS MORE

Massachusetts couple embraces minimalist-style of living

STORY: robert kiener | PHOTOGRAPHS: kate carter



The design team for this three-bedroom, 2,400-square foot, high-efficiency vacation home took full advantage of the sloping lot to maximize uninterrupted long-distance views. Every room, including the pine paneled, screened in, indoor/outdoor porch area, opens onto the views. A swimming pool, fire pit, and picnic table and chairs blend in with the patio made of pre-cast concrete pavers.

How's this for impulsive? A Massachusetts-based couple and their three young sons came to Stowe to ski during Christmas in 2017. Like many other visitors, they fell in love with the area. "Big time!" says the husband. "We're an outdoors family and this part of Vermont really speaks to us."

By a twist of fate, the couple rented a new cottage owned and built by Morrisville builder Sean Gyllenborg. "My wife and I both have design backgrounds and admired his property's clean, minimal design. It inspired us; it got us thinking about having our own ski-vacation home," says the husband.

Long story short: They met Gyllenborg and clicked. "He spoke our language and shared our design aesthetic," says the husband. The next day Gyllenborg showed them several lots for sale.

By March they closed on a partially-wooded 36-acre hillside lot with expansive, picture-postcard views north of Stowe and enlisted the help of Stowe architect Andrew Volansky.

"Impulsive ... Yes, that's a good word," he says. "We were on our way."

From the beginning, all involved said the design and building of this home was a "model collaborative effort."

"All of us were on the same page from day one," says Volansky. For example, the husband and wife's design backgrounds helped them rough out the layout and design of the four-bedroom house. After conferring with both Volansky and Gyllenborg, who helped modify and flesh out their ideas, the couple produced detailed sketches.

They identified several "must haves" in their initial design plan. First, they wanted an interior that reflected a minimalist design aesthetic. The husband explains, "We like the Scandinavian, 'less is more' look. We elected for a design palette that consisted of mostly neutral colors and used natural materials like

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The great room is a neutral colored, comfy gathering place that offers “something for everyone,” from a relaxing leather sofa—“perfect for curling up and reading,” say the owners—to a maple-paneled reading nook, as well as a comfortable sectional for watching TV or the flickering gas jets of the fireplace, which is encased in a hard-coated, hand-applied plaster shell.

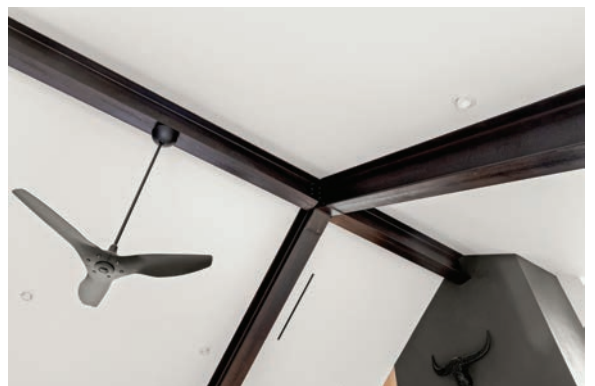


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As can be seen in these views of the great room, instead of covering up or hiding the house's structural elements, architect Andrew Volansky painted and then incorporated structural steel beams into the interior's minimalist style and decor, much like wooden beams in a timber frame design. A quartet of sliding doors help flood the great room with light and bring the outside in. At top: A few leaves that blew into the house were left before the concrete set.





The kitchen and dining areas, both open to the great room, were largely designed by the owners and feature an accent wall of lightly-stained maple and an island with five scalloped stools. The steel and wood dining table can seat 10 and was constructed by builder Sean Gyllenborg's team from 3-inch pine slabs the owners had been given by a neighbor near their home south of Boston. Minimally designed windows, many without trim or frame, purposely do not distract from views to the outside.



Like the other bedrooms, the master bedroom (top) boasts walls of oversize windows to take full advantage of the home's close and distant views. In the front hallway (above) a spiral staircase climbs to a the home's lone, second-story room, while a moveable "dog fence" that retracts into the wall when not in use can keep the family pet at bay when needed.

to retreat



This loft-like “get-away” room, located at the juncture of the home’s private and public areas, is reached by a spiral staircase designed by the owners and fabricated by Custom Metal Fabricators of Vermont in Hyde Park. The multi-purpose space serves as an office, a playroom, a meditation station, and includes second story views to the rear of the home, as well as dramatic long-distance views to the east. “When the leaves have disappeared,” say the owners, “we can sometimes see as far as Mount Washington.”



Like the rest of the house, the master bathroom has radiant-heated, cast-in-place concrete floors. It also boasts twin showers; a wood-paneled one outside, which the husband uses throughout three seasons, and a tiled version inside. Hanging pendant lights were chosen for the master bathroom, as they were throughout the house, to help “scale down” the home’s vaulted ceilings.

The home's entry way has minimal landscaping and includes pre-cast, board form concrete retaining walls. A combination laundry and mudroom offers plenty of space for coats and hats, and the athletic family's ski equipment and other sports gear.



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'less is more' look. We elected for a design palette that consisted of mostly neutral colors and used natural materials like concrete, wood, and stone."

Adds the wife, "We didn't want the interior to fight with the exterior because the outside views are so colorful and spectacular." Massive windows throughout the house, as well as a second story "get-away room" take full advantage of the long-distance views.

The owners also wanted a distinct separation between the private and public side of the house. Says Volansky, "We designed the house as a collection of pods that guaranteed privacy between the master bedroom, the children's three bedrooms, and the open-plan, expansive great room." The couple also wanted all the rooms to have direct access to the outdoors—via sliders—and asked that the children's bedrooms be designed minimally. "That's because we want the kids to be outdoors, as opposed to being cooped up in their rooms or watching television," says the husband. "The whole idea of this home is to be outside as much as possible."

Siting the house was another collaborative effort. The husband, Volansky and Gyllenberg met several times to walk the sloping site and find just the right position for the home. "We had several objectives," explains Volansky. "We wanted to site the home to take full advantage of the views and also wanted to do as little grading as possible. Instead of plopping the home on the site, we wanted it to look settled in or nested—more of the site than on the site."

Another request: a low-maintenance, minimalist exterior. Landscaping was also kept to a minimum. "Because this was our second home, I didn't want to be bothered by a lot of weeding, gardening, mulching, and mowing," explains the husband. "I spent enough time doing that at our South Shore home."

Construction began in the summer of 2018 and the 2,400-square foot house was completed by October 2019. Everything went pretty much according to plan and the owners decided, after spending time on the site in the spring and summer, to add a pool to the outdoor space that also features a patio and fire-pit made of pre-cast concrete. And, a hot tub. The husband got his outdoor shower, explaining, "I love using it even into November. It's chilly but it makes me feel part of nature."

It is inside the home that the trio's collaborative efforts are especially visible. Much of the interior was inspired by the minimalist design of Gyllenberg's rental cottage. Details matter. For example, there is much less wood trim used around the windows, doors, and walls than what is typically used in traditional home design. This is a testament to the skilled craftsmanship of Gyllenberg's team.

"When you cut back on details like trim, you force the framers to think like finish carpenters," says Volansky. "Everything has to be precise. There's no covering up gaps; no room for error."

Adds Gyllenberg, "Simple details can take a lot of planning and forethought to make them work."

Another detail is a custom-designed retractable dog door/fence that helps separate the public and private areas of the home and disappears into the wall when not in use. The floors are mostly cast-in-place concrete. Look closely and imprints of leaves can be seen in floors throughout the home. "Some leaves blew onto the concrete as it was being poured and instead of smoothing them out, we left their impressions in place," says the husband.

The team kept to its promise of minimalist interior design, including the color palette. "We tried to keep the overall design very subtle and experimented with many shades of white," explains the wife. Some wood walls, mostly maple, helped warm up the decor. Volansky describes the style or look of the home as "Vermont Mountain Modern."

"What I mean by that is we work to let the beauty of the natural building materials, from the concrete floors to the maple walls, remain undecorated to be what they are," he says. "They themselves add to the richness of the design and add a connection to the outside."

On a surprisingly warm November afternoon, the couple sit on their patio and admire stunning, distant views to the east. "When the leaves are gone and the skies are clear, we can see as far as Mount Washington," says the husband, who has recently finished clearing a bike path through his wooded lot and added a mini downhill ski run.

When asked if their new vacation home is everything they hoped for, both break into broad smiles. Says the husband, "This was supposed to be our vacation home. But the more we stayed here, the harder it was to leave. We came up in March planning to stay for several weeks, thanks to COVID-19."

He explains that like many people, they both discovered they could work comfortably from home. He adds, "The longer we were here, the harder and harder it was to think of going back to our Massachusetts home. The gravitational pull here was so strong."

He pauses for a beat, then says, "So we put it up for sale. It sold in a day. We are now full-time Vermonters!" ■