

RED BOARD-AND-BATTEN SIDING and cobalt blue ceramic tiles create a strikingly unconventional exterior for this four-story house in Cambridge, Massachusetts. On the left, a vertical plant wall is filled with ferns. Bluestone slabs mark the main entry, which is topped with perennial grasses and plants. On the right, a secondary entry leads to the ground-level guest suite. The wooden gate opens to the backyard.

WOODLAND — MODERN

A CONTEMPORARY HOUSE
AND GARDEN FLOURISH ON
A TINY URBAN SITE

WRITTEN BY COURTNEY GOODRICH
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERIC ROTH





IT'S THE RED YOU NOTICE FIRST.

A four-story house built between the pine trees of a small lot in Cambridge, Massachusetts, stands out with its deep red — specifically “falun red” — reclaimed board-and-batten siding, chosen by the wife of the couple who live there. Of Swedish heritage, she knows the color well. “In Sweden,” she says, “these red board-and-batten houses are everywhere. It’s a standard.”

However, closer inspection reveals that’s where conventional Scandinavian design references end. Architect Gary Wolf of Wolf Architects Inc. in Boston worked with builder Grant Rhode of G. F. Rhode Construction in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, to turn an ordinary big box of a house built in the 1980s into the contemporary custom home it is today. The exterior is fragmented yet carefully arranged; each mass is defined and enhanced by its materials — cobalt blue ceramic tiles frame the entry, cedar and painted fir sheathe the central stair shaft and landing areas, and the red board and batten wraps the house.

The integration of multiple heavily planted green

roofs, reclaimed materials, photovoltaic panels, a geothermal well, and native plantings in the small yet action-packed landscape by Julie Moir Messervy Design Studio of Saxtons River, Vermont, earned the project Silver certification by the US Green Building Council’s LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) program.

But getting it all just right was a challenge.

“There’s a very small footprint for the house,” says Wolf, explaining that to fit the 3,300 square feet of living space on a roughly 6,500-square-foot lot, he needed to “make the verticality of the space an asset.”

At the center of the design is an open south-facing staircase with windows at every level so that it both connects all four floors and brings them natural light. A garage and guest suite are on the entry level. Above is the main living area. Bedrooms are on the third level, and the husband’s treetop perch of a study is at the top. “We provided a range of attractive places just to ‘be’ throughout the house,” says Wolf, referencing the home’s quiet cor-



THE LIVING ROOM fireplace (TOP) is embedded into a wall of Vermont granite. The view from the sitting area past the dining area to the living room (ABOVE) shows how the spaces form three bays separated by cherry veneer cabinetry topped with sliding panels that allow the spaces to be open or closed to one another.



A MEDITATION HUT (LEFT, TOP) is the focal point of the shady backyard, where epimediums, liriopse, creeping jenny, hellebore, and ginger flourish on both sides of the winding steel water runnel. About halfway along the 55-foot-long runnel, the water flows into a circular pool (LEFT, BOTTOM) where it continues through the runnel to a recirculating fountain. Fieldstone pavers provide steppingstones.

THE UPPER TERRACE at the front of the house (FACING PAGE) has a sunny exposure. Above the door, which leads to the main level of the house, is a green roof of 'Bluebird' aster, nodding onion, and mixed grasses. The driveway is below and to the right of the container of grasses, clematis, strawberry, and allium.



ners and spacious landings. With aging in place in mind, a small elevator was installed near the stair.

The living, dining, and sitting areas, located on the north side of the house, resemble three bays, cleverly separated by base cabinetry finished in cherry veneer. Sliding panels, made of cherry, fir, and walnut, provide flexibility in how open or closed the spaces are to one another. "We wanted a sense of coziness we could create," says the wife. Wolf added cutout shapes of maple and oak leaves, a nod to those found floating throughout the neighborhood in the fall, to the panels, a whimsical touch he refers to as "a metaphorical forest."

The kitchen, too, is open, with only a banquette-style breakfast nook separating it from the sitting area. Countertops are Danby marble from the wife's beloved Vermont. "My grandparents founded and ran a summer boys camp there and then retired there," she says. "I like having that connection with that specific place in Vermont. I can look at my kitchen counters every day and think of my wonderful grandparents and their incredibly beautiful spot."

Both range and refrigerator are a striking cobalt blue, referencing the blue tiles outside marking the entry. The absence of upper-wall cabinets makes the space feel less utilitarian and more connected to the nearby spaces. But fewer cabinets mean less storage, so Wolf designed one wall to hold the refrigerator and a maximum amount of drawers and pullout shelves, all fabricated with cherry veneer by Kidder Blaisdell Woodworks Corp. in Woburn, Massachusetts.

Every level of the house has some kind of outdoor space. The ground floor opens to the backyard, the second floor has a narrow balcony off the wife's north-facing office and access to the terrace above the front entry, the third floor features a walled-in outside room off the master bedroom, and the fourth floor has a beautiful rooftop deck with a view past the 'Bluebird' aster and mixed grasses planted on the roof to the distant city skyline.

"Having access to nature and being able to get outside on every single floor was really important to us," says the wife. "We hiked the Appalachian Trail, from Georgia to Maine. We lived outdoors for eight months while we did that!"





ONE WALL OF the master bedroom (LEFT) has windows and doors that open to an outdoor terrace enclosed by solid walls that make the open-air room a private oasis. The elevator opens on the third-floor stair landing (TOP). Just outside the study (ABOVE) on the top floor, a rooftop deck and garden provide a contemplative spot above the city.

Despite its urban location, the landscape has the woody feel of a quiet, contemplative setting. “Because it was a LEED Silver project, we also needed to be part of that equation,” says landscape designer Julie Moir Messervy, who worked with project manager Anna Johansen. “We used pervious pavements, addressed groundwater issues, and used mostly woodland wildflower plants. Lots of grasses, birch trees, Amsonia, and rhododendron.” On this backdrop, Messervy and Johansen connected the sunny upper terrace with the lower shaded backyard by winding

FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES

a 55-foot-long self-weathering steel water runnel from a small circular pool on the terrace down along pea-stone steps, where it acts as a kind of handrail, around a meditation hut designed by Wolf, and into a backyard fountain, which recirculates the water. The runnel is such a simple, playful, yet elegant demarcation that it doesn’t disrupt the protective white pines that attracted the owners to the property in the first place.

“We made a house that responded to its site much more effectively,” says Wolf. “It’s a real retreat in the middle of the city.”

DESIGN DECISION *The Life of Lumber*

Whether reclaimed, salvaged, recycled, or rescued, what’s appealing about the wood in this house is that it’s *old*. Armster Reclaimed Lumber Co. in East Windsor, Connecticut, supplied much of the lumber, and most of it has a history worth sharing. The red board-and-batten siding, for example, came from pickle tanks at the former Oxford Foods site in Deerfield, Massachusetts, and from vinegar tanks at the Heinz plant in Pennsylvania. The fir siding, painted gray, is mostly made of reclaimed bleacher seats from a school in Devils Elbow, Missouri, while Pennsylvania juice tanks belonging to Cliffstar Corporation provided the cedar siding. Inside, the floors are old-growth heart pine salvaged from an 1880s building on Broadway in New York City.

