

**A STUDY IN BLACK AND WHITE** A sheet of etched glass separates the dining room from the home's new staircase. Tall cabinets along the back wall seem to float above the dark-stained wood floor. Facing page: On the opposite wall, glass doors open to an expansive stone terrace.



# *Iceland* COMETH

*A Reykjavik architect  
gives a stodgy Cambridge manse a modernist soul.*

BY REGINA COLE



A PASSING GLANCE at this substantial house on a quiet Cambridge street might tell you that you're looking at a stately Georgian survivor. It has all the hallmarks: a boxy shape, a gambrel roof, a decorative band between the first and second stories, corner blocks known as quoins, massive chimneys, multi-paned windows, and a neoclassic entry pavilion.

But a closer look tells a different story. On a winter day, for example, the driveway's gentle slope is clear of ice and snow — evidence of modern-day radiant heat beneath the beautiful sheets of terrazzolike white granite and concrete that pave the car park. The foundation, too, is faced with smoothly finished granite. The sleek stone, also found along the walkways, is nothing that our 18th-century forebears would have installed. The black columns that flank the front door respect the Doric order but are streamlined, contemporary, and purely ornamental.

The house was built in 1893 to recall New England's earlier Colonial architecture, though some critics would say the replication was less than flattering. A series of further renovations turned it into what one of the current owners calls "an ugly box."

"When we bought this house in the late '90s," she says, "it was known as 'the spooky house,' because it

was brown, dismal, and the yard was all overgrown."

Still, the large backyard was one of the things that first attracted her and her husband to the property. It also drew attention to some of the problems the house posed: The outdoor space was just about inaccessible from inside. "We had a huge garden, but it was hard to get there," the wife says. "The house was all chopped up, with 47 doors."

The owners, both natives of Iceland, called on Reykjavik architect Bjorn Skaptason, who had previously designed an apartment in an urban high-rise for them. "In August of 2005, I said, 'Let's take down this wall, because I want a bigger kitchen,'" the wife recalls. Her spouse, she says, rejoined, "I have a better idea: Let's gut the house."

The following month, they did just that. Collaborating with Cambridge builder Doug Hanna of S+H Construction Inc., the homeowners, who were committed to a tight schedule, were able to move back into their renovated 6,600-square-foot house in a lightning-fast eight months. Nearly all the structural walls had come down, replaced with new ones or supporting columns and beams. The redesigned space is all sleek black and white surfaces washed in natural light, creating a sensibility that blurs hard lines between in-

**SERENE RETREAT** The living architect Bjorn Skaptason's to design a haven for people too many objects." Below: The wine cellar, where the floor





**HARDSCAPE** The rear multilevel white-granite terrace culminates in a waterfall sheeting down polished black granite. Below: The redesigned kitchen is organized around an island topped with light-gray granite, which also lines one wall punctuated by an eye-level gas fireplace.





**PRIVATE SPACES** A restful earth tone is introduced in the master bedroom, where the head- and footboards are upholstered in rich brown leather. Facing page: The sleek Austrian-made tub and sinks by Laufen and the faucets by Il Bagno of Italy suit the house's perfect balance of form and function.

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side and out. The exterior facade is a lighthearted nod to the spirit of Georgian architecture.

"We got quite a number of incredulous stares from tradespeople," says Hanna, recalling the process of building a house without door casings or baseboards, where a white plastered wall in the living room is as wavy as a silk curtain and where etched-glass pocket doors of vast proportions glide out of the walls to divide spaces. Window shades are stored inside head casings, the doormat fits into a cut-granite rectangle.

"We've definitely never done anything like it. But what's most remarkable," Hanna says, "is the schedule." He attributes the successful timeline to exquisite planning and superb communication. "It was made possible by total cooperation, a great flow of information, and perfect trust," he says. "The homeowner and I talked every day. The architect came every month. I was amazed at the spirit that developed on the job — people started to compete to see who could finish first. There was a real can-do spirit that was infectious."

Meeting deadlines is an even more impressive feat given that not only was the architect

commuting from Iceland, but also that various building components were being imported from that country. That includes the polished black-and-white granite used on entry and bathroom floors, windowsills, and kitchen counters, and the sleek kitchen cabinets, glass-fronted and flush with the wall.

Bjorn Skaptason of Atelier Arkitekta in Reykjavik has designed houses in Iceland, Denmark, Luxembourg, and London; this was his first project in the United States, though he has fond memories of his studies at Sci-Arc, the iconoclastic Los Angeles architectural school. "We reorganized the house to modern living standards, meaning open flow between rooms," he says. "We opened it to the backyard and made it a surprise when you walk in, made it into architecture."

Skaptason's design added about 250 square feet in the form of a larger kitchen and a new rear staircase. A large etched-glass panel separates the staircase from the dining room, which overlooks a multilevel white-granite terrace. The outdoor space, which also provides alfresco seating and access to the garden beyond, culminates in a

waterfall sheeting down polished black granite into a black-granite reflecting pool.

Skaptason is also responsible for the interior design, executed in a minimalist palette with an occasional infusion of color, such as a plum wall in the living room. Glass, stainless-steel, and white-leather furnishings rise above black-walnut floors polished to a high gleam.

"I approach color carefully," he says. "Modern society attacks us with forms, colors, messages. I like to design a haven for people, where there are not too many objects to disturb you when you come in. Spaces where you can breathe, where curves and shapes make shadows."

Just inside the entry is another etched-glass pane, this one engraved with the plans for a 1939 renovation of the structure. "We found the blueprints in a closet," one of the homeowners says, "and used them to pay homage to the history of the house in a way that's consistent with its style today." ■

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