





Modern Breed

CLEAN, SIMPLE, AND GREEN DEFINE THIS CONTEMPORARY

BY ALISON PRATT // PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF McNAMARA



INSIDE AND OUT An indoor/outdoor fireplace surrounded by a wall of windows lets smoke out and sunlight in. Heated porcelain floors warm up feet and bring down energy costs. Well-planned landscaping gives this southern Ridgefield house a classic appeal. Greyhounds Jolie and Ender share a moment.





“A HOUSE IS NOT JUST WHAT YOU WANT BUT WHAT THE SITE WANTS,” says architect Vincent Colangelo.

That’s particularly true for the modern house he designed off Branchville Road. Finished in 2010, this stunning contemporary sits on a 2.65-acre property that slopes down to the woods. Designed in collaboration with the owners and Wilton-based builder Mike Trolle, the house models comfort and sustainability. It is also a happy haven for the owners’ two retired greyhounds, Ender and Jolie.

The owners met in high school in Sao Paolo, Brazil. Apartment dwellers since birth, they had never lived in a single-family house before embarking on this ambitious project. When they discovered Stamford-based Colangelo, a self-described Kenny Rogers look-alike, they liked his combination of architectural experience—skilled in everything from luxury houses to more simple office buildings. They found him easy to talk to, “not too stuffy,” and without any of the “high ego” of some other architects.

The ease of communication turned out to be important as the house went through multiple iterations in the design stage—shrinking from a three-story mansion to a manageable 4,500-square-foot four-bedroom with a functional second floor underneath. New modeling software helped the owners visualize the plans as they changed.

Also, the owners’ vision for the house evolved. At the outset, paralyzing seasonal allergies and comfort drove the project. The owners needed to escape the pollen-soaked Connecticut air in spring while still enjoying the outdoors the rest of the year.



While these priorities remained, the project turned green—transforming into a showcase for reduced energy consumption. Enter local builder Mike Trolle, who with his brother has been building green houses for 15 years. Trolle declined to put in a bid for the original plans. “We prefer to work up front,” says Trolle. “In the bidding stage, corners get cut and these are usually the parts that make the house sustainable. By consulting on the design stage, we can determine strategies to reduce energy consumption and give the owner the house they want.”

Trolle’s knowledge of the latest green technology informed the redesign. He took Colangelo’s scaled-back plans and introduced geothermal heating and cooling. They used a prefabricated concrete foundation that allowed them to build through the winter. A heated porcelain floor keeps the great room toasty and a tight thermal envelope reduces heating and cooling costs. To reduce allergens, all the air that comes in the house filters through a HEPA filter. A closed-cell foam roof is well-insulated and virtually leak proof. These energy efficiencies keep the inside air quality good and allergens down.

About Trolle, Colangelo says, “He was the most diligent, detail-oriented builder I’ve ever worked with, which is especially important on a sloping site like this. I’m building my 11th house and I’m going to see if Mike can build it.”

Most of the large windows in the house do not open but there are ten doors that lead to great outdoor spaces for low pollen count days. One of the clients’ favorites is the courtyard, shaded by a poplar trellis. Another is the small screened-in porch, meant for summer dinners, and the balcony off the master bedroom.



NOTHING TO SNEEZE AT
Reducing the owners' allergy symptoms drove part of the design. The architect and builder collaborated to make the house energy efficient and allergen free. A dining area affords a view of a landscape that is both beautiful and beneficial to wildlife. Shades open 30 minutes before sunrise and close 30 minutes after sunset.



REST + PLAY Many well-thought-out indoor and outdoor spaces allow for activity and restful contemplation. A walkout bottom floor houses an endless pool, ping-pong table, kitchen, and a gym. Balconies off the master bedroom and screened porch allow for relaxation



The main living space is almost loft like, featuring a drop ceiling that hides the mechanical parts of the house and makes the room cozy. Colangelo draws attention to the “drama of the space,” which he says, “is achieved solely through the manipulation of volumes and natural light.” He shows how two basic materials—white sheetrock and glass—comprise the interior.

An indoor/outdoor gas fireplace vents out through the courtyard so there is no chimney. Pointing to a comfy daybed, the husband jokes, “That’s my wife’s office,” an admission that they spend the majority of their time in the bright and cheerful space. A gray fabric screen around the television adds a decorative element but also hides the tangle of wires, speakers, and other electronic necessities.

The kitchen is part of the great room. Four square skylights bask the counter in natural light even on a cloudy day and create remarkable contrast when the sun comes out. The owners prefer to spend time with their greyhounds than a stove. They installed a GE Advantium oven that can cook a baked potato in ten minutes, and they make use of sure-fire recipes with pre-measured food from the online service Blue Apron.

A long narrow pantry runs behind the kitchen, providing ample shelf space, and exemplifies the smart design throughout. A solar tube uses mirrors to amplify the natural light in the pantry. In fact, receiving some design tips from Colangelo, the couple did all the decorating themselves, choosing pieces from CB2, Ikea, and Room and Board. The furniture in the guest suite and master bedroom has all the clean lines of modern design and is also built for comfort.





If most of the business of living is on the main floor, there is a lot of fun to be had in the lower level of the house, which includes a ping-pong table, small kitchen, an endless pool, drainable hot tub, home gym, and two more bedrooms. Doors open outside to a greyhound ready walking path and stamped concrete patio.

The architect and builders' work finished over five years ago, but the owners have continued to research energy efficiencies. They are currently installing solar panels and replacing halogen light bulbs with more efficient LEDs to further reduce energy usage.

The couple's collaborations in design go beyond the walls of their house. Working with landscape designers Jennifer Simko and Jeff Stopa of Stopa Landscaping in Fairfield, they transformed their property. Stopa notes, "Very rarely do you find people as into the garden. They love it and do a lot of research. Some of the plants they suggest are so rare that we need to look them up."

Favoring native species and hardy plants that are deer resistant and will grow into their environment without watering, the owners have cultivated a stunning landscape and local wildlife refuge. There's no lawn to mow so pups Ender and Jolie have an astroturf playground, which means no mud or ticks. However, if the dogs go out in the woods, there is a doggie shower in the mudroom.

Both long time and would-be homeowners can take inspiration from these first-time homebuyers' ideas, research, careful planning, and collaborations. ■



LOW MAINTENANCE
Corian tiles in the master bath have a special grout that doesn't need to be sealed. Floors in the master bedroom are strand-woven bamboo, both durable and sustainable.

