Opening up a split-level

BY DEBRA JUDGE SILBER

Homeowners and architect remove

Andy and Rose Field used to compare their home to a cave. Typical of its type, their Seattle-area rambler was built in the early 1960s as a jumble of small rooms linked by narrow corridors. Worse still, the inside offered little hint of the stately old-growth firs and lush wetland shrubs just outside its doors.

"You have to imagine everything completely closed in," Andy says, sweeping a hand through the open air that now surrounds him as he stands, cradling his year-old daughter, Katherine, in the center of the house that sits near Yarrow Creek.

A few years ago, the Fields' options for improving their split-level home

NO OBSTRUCTIONS *Walls that blocked off the kitchen and entry were replaced with free-standing dividers that fulfill the function of ordinary walls—housing closets and displaying art, for example—without interrupting the flow of the ceiling.*

walls and add glass to bring light into a house

OPEN AND FUNCTIONAL *The Fields' remodeled kitchen is no larger than the original and, in fact, has fewer cabinets. Yet it is much more functional, with a granite-topped island separating the work area from a bank of stools for visitors. On the cook's side, the refrigerator, sink, stove, and dishwasher—clad in fir to match the cabinets—are in easy reach.*

seemed as closed off as its interior. Local regulations governing building near wetlands had changed in the 40 years since its construction, prohibiting major alterations (see sidebar, p. 64).

Yet today the house is hardly cavern-like. Its interior reads more like an airy forest that extends not only through but beyond its 3,200-square-foot area (see site plan, p. 64). Several of the walls that boxed the house into separate spaces are gone, with skylights, broad corner windows, and patio doors opening the whole of the interior to the outdoors. In the center of the house, the stripped trunk of a Douglas fir holds up a central beam. Coupled with a glass panel molded with

Photos except where noted: Karen Tanaka; before, courtesy of Julie Campbell; after, courtesy of Gregg Krogstad

the likenesses of ferns and other vegetation on the property, it's a visible and very tangible link to the great outdoors.

Expanding the plans

The home's redesign is itself quite a meander from the Fields' initial plans for improving their home. Rose had purchased the property in 1989 as a fixer-upper, and for several years they had been doing small projects. They wanted to make a bigger impact but weren't sure how. After selecting CTA Design Builders of Seattle as their architect/builder (see sidebar, p. 63), they sat down with architect Julie Campbell. "At our first meeting, we told Julie we might need a new roof and new windows," Andy recalls. "But I think we always knew we'd need more than that."

Campbell saw the potential right away. "I asked if they were willing to have me think creatively on a larger scale," she explains. Campbell drew up two plans: one that stayed within the scope of the Fields' initial inquiry, and a second, more ambitious blueprint. "When they saw this, they knew it was the direction they wanted to go," she recalls.

"The space between"

Priority one for the Fields was bringing more light into the interior. "The house was terribly dark in the winter, so we asked her to have light enter at every possible location," Andy recalls.

"The intent of the design was to make the house feel like the quintessential Northwest home, like a pavilion in the woods," Campbell explains. "To do this, it was important to have as strong a connection to the outside as possible."

In making that connection, the architect drew on the Japanese concept of *engawa*. Often used today to describe the narrow veranda typical of Japanese homes, the attitude

BRIGHT IDEA *The bank of windows that light the upstairs landing was Andy's suggestion: "I thought, wouldn't it be cool to come out of the master bedroom and be able to see trees as you come down the corridor?"*

WE STAYED IN THE HOUSE DURING CONSTRUCTION

They warned us about staying in the house during the remodel, because it would be too dusty and there would be a lot of disruption and periods of power and water outages. Nonetheless, we chose to stay in the basement, which had a kitchenette and a bath. It was inconvenient but not so bad that we felt we should get out. Of course, extravagant dinner parties and quiet mornings in bed had to wait.

For me, being present on the job site had its rewards. First, I was reassured that progress was being made even when it wasn't visually obvious. I was also able to establish a friendship with the carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and others who worked on the project. When you have a good relationship with someone, they do better work and are more forthcoming when problems arise.

At the same time, I was surprised at how much I was able to contribute. Even though we had detailed drawings from the architect, there were still a thousand small decisions to be made. Did I want to save anything from the demolition? Where exactly did I want the cabinet doorknobs? If you really want a custom home, then you should be there to customize.

I must emphasize that there is a fine line between being a helpful homeowner and an interfering pain-in-the-rear. I never told any contractor how to do his job, even if I felt something was amiss; that is the job of the project supervisor. But I do think having another pair of eyes on the work site helps avoid problems. You do sometimes see things that everyone else has missed. And, in the end, that will bring you much closer to those dinner parties and relaxing mornings in bed.

—Andy Field, homeowner

ALWAYS IN SIGHT One-year-old Katherine Field plays in the entryway just below her dad's computer station. Open railings mark where a wall once separated the upstairs from the entry. Just inside the front door, slate tiles mix gradually with wood flooring to soften the visual transition between indoors and out.

SMALL RETREAT By moving the dining room wall in, architect Julie Campbell was able to create a small covered porch on the back of the house without violating restrictions against building there.

INVITED IN Large, wrap-around windows and woodwork restored to its natural finish bring a sense of the outdoors into the Fields' once-dark rambler.

"The house was terribly dark in so we asked to have light enter

it inspires dates back to the building of ancient temples. "The translation is 'the space between'—between inside and outside, between a holy place and a secular place," Campbell explains.

Her design eases the transition from inside to outside in several areas of the house by extending the plane of the floor outside onto low decks accessible by sliding glass doors. She also refashioned the front entrance, topping it with a glass canopy that shelters while admitting sunlight. The canopy is supported by a pair of fir tree trunks that create a conceptual link between the live firs on the property and the fir posts inside the house.

In other areas, the technique is more subtle. The slate surface outside the front entry passes through the doorway without the interruption of a threshold. Inside, the slate transitions to wood flooring one or two tiles at a time. There is no sharp line announcing an arrival indoors (photo left). That small, seemingly unnoticeable feature, says Andy, "has proven incredibly popular among our friends."

Removing walls but retaining spaces

There was nothing subtle about Campbell's approach to the home's interior. Originally, the living room, kitchen, and dining area were separated by a thick white stone wall containing a central fireplace and an indoor barbeque. Campbell proposed removing the wall and building a new fireplace on the other side of the living room. "It was a bold move," she recalls, "but Andy bought into it right away."

Walls that separated the living room from the entry and the dining room from the kitchen were replaced with freestanding dividers. Stopping several feet short of the ceiling, they satisfy the need for storage and structure without completely closing off the spaces. "I didn't want to have anything that obstructed the reading of the ceiling as a full canopy," Campbell explains. "On the other hand, it was important to have the walls there. They contain features—including closets and hookups for kitchen appliances—that get a lot of intense use, and they do provide definition to the space."

With the central wall gone, the large fir beam forming the spine of the house emerged as a defining feature. Masked

OUTSIDE INSIDE The trunk of a Douglas fir supports the home's central beam. Beside it is a glass panel fabricated by a local craftsman using castings of plants from the property. It separates the kitchen from the entryway while maintaining an open feel.

FINDING THE RIGHT ARCHITECT

One of the first steps Andy and Rose took toward remodeling was to attend a Saturday morning seminar for homeowners at the Seattle offices of the American Institute of Architects. The two-and-a-half hour session answered their basic questions about hiring an architect, qualifications to look for, and what costs to expect. They also made use of the office's local Resource Center for Architecture, in which visitors can view portfolios of members' work. Services and resources vary at the roughly 300 AIA components, or chapters, throughout the country. To find your nearest chapter, call 800-242-3837 or visit the AIA's national Web site (www.aia.org) and click on "about the AIA" and then "components." You can also click on "find an architect" for a list of AIA members in your area.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS BRING A SPLIT-LEVEL UP TO DATE, DESPITE BUILDING RESTRICTIONS

Increasing the spaciousness of the Fields' home was more complicated than just adding a few rooms. Because of its proximity to a pond and creek, the house was subject to wetlands restrictions. Among the prohibitions were any additions higher than a low deck on the back and side of the house, any changes to the roof line, and any improvements that more than doubled the home's value.

EXCEPTIONS The restrictions effectively ruled out expanding the kitchen or dining room or adding another level. But on the point of increasing the property value, exceptions were allowed for improvements that qualified as maintenance. Since the house had been virtually untouched since the 1960s, they were allowed new, energy-efficient windows—a crucial step in the home's transformation.

GAINING SPACE Campbell found a creative way to add a roofed deck off the dining room by moving the exterior wall back into the room, gaining a sheltered outdoor space. She also visually extended the living room by adding a slider and a low deck.

NATIVE PLANTINGS Officials would not sign off on any improvements until the wetlands buffer was restored to native vegetation. While the return to nature was a must-do rather than a want-to, the Fields embraced the project and called in a landscape architect who replaced the lawn with native plants. Several seasons later, the mix of textures and shades creates a natural, ecologically balanced view beyond the sliding doors of the lower level.

Andy and Rose Field wanted to bring more light into their 1960s house and emphasize its connection to the outdoors. The resulting remodel does this on each of the home's three levels by removing walls, enlarging windows, and adding sliding doors for outside access. A stone wall dividing the living and dining areas was removed; other walls were replaced with dividers that stop short of the ceiling.

The bedroom level was opened to the rest of the house with the conversion of an extra bedroom to a landing/office area. The upstairs hallway, once long, narrow, and dark, was widened with an ell formed by taking a portion of a long bathroom. The lower level was also transformed by combining several small rooms into one large open area, and connecting that to the outside with a wall of sliding doors leading to a lush rear yard filled with native vegetation.

BEFORE

AFTER

Scale in feet
4 8 16

Illustrations: Beverley Bozarth Colgan

"I always wanted a room that would totally open to the outdoors." —Rose Field

by white paint for years, the beam was stripped to its natural finish, along with the joists that support the slatted ceiling.

Function and fun on the lower level

Laid out with rooms on both sides of a long corridor, the home's lower level had problems identical to those above. Campbell and the Fields decided that rooms in the front of the house would remain separate, while those in the back would be combined into one large space.

Andy got his wish when a small dark bedroom in front was turned into a media room with a rear-projection TV, refrigerated beverage drawers, and a leather couch. Rose got her wish, too, when the rooms along the back were combined into one large area connected to the backyard with a bank of four sliding-glass doors. "I always wanted a room that would totally open to the outdoors," Rose said.

Reconfiguring the home's lower level was not without its difficulties, though. When Andy and Rose realized that moving the powder room would require jack-hammering the concrete floor for new plumbing, they nearly abandoned the idea. But the thought didn't faze Campbell, a fact that convinced Andy to go ahead with it. "Architects are so good at making those huge leaps that are just too much for regular people," he said, emphasizing a point he had made several times in talking about the remodel. "Here we had this rough idea that we wanted to get to the yard, and Julie made it happen."

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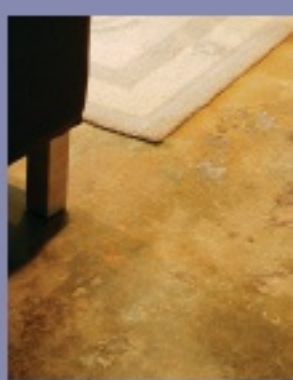
See Resources on page 94.



WALL OF GLASS *In the remodel, several rooms on the lower level were combined into one large one with four sliding doors opening to native plantings in the backyard.*

PATINATED CONCRETE *The lower level's concrete floor was stained using an array of acids and dry chemicals, which created a galaxy of splatters, blips, and dots ranging from orange to green, gray, and black.*