

AN OPEN PLAN



BY JULIE SANDERS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANICE HOACHLANDER

Kitchen designer Jennifer Gilmer created a bright, streamlined space punctuated with color. Open shelving showcases brightly hued dishes and glassware.

An Arlington Cape gets a modern makeover with an emphasis on light and space

When Shannon and Mike Nifontoff approached several architects about updating and enlarging their down-at-heel Arlington, Virginia, home, the responses varied from “Tear it down” to “Move somewhere else.” Only architect Randall Mars saw what they saw—a 1940s Cape with good bones in a great location, with a neighborhood the couple didn’t want to give up. Tearing down the home, says Mars, “would have been an enormous waste of use and structure.”

Working together, the Nifontoffs and Mars decided to add on to the existing house. The architect designed a two-story addition comprised of an open-plan kitchen/family room with a breakfast nook, a dining room area (currently in use as a home office), a mudroom with access to the backyard, and on the second floor, a master bedroom suite with walk-in closet and bath and rooftop balcony. An unfinished basement—which will one day become an in-law suite—boasts large picture windows and French doors out to the backyard.

What made the project distinctive was the owners’ decision to go modern. “I like the more contemporary, clean lines,” Shannon Nifontoff says. “I wanted lots of light.” She adds, “We looked at Randy’s past work and there is always lots of light in his projects.”

Mars’s plan creates squared-off blocks of space with a modern, pitched roof over one side. “The request was for modern

ARCHITECTURE: RANDALL MARS, AIA, Randall Mars Architects, McLean, Virginia. **CONSTRUCTION:** Thorsen Construction, Alexandria, Virginia. **KITCHEN DESIGN:** JENNIFER GILMER, Jennifer Gilmer Kitchen & Bath, Chevy Chase, Maryland.



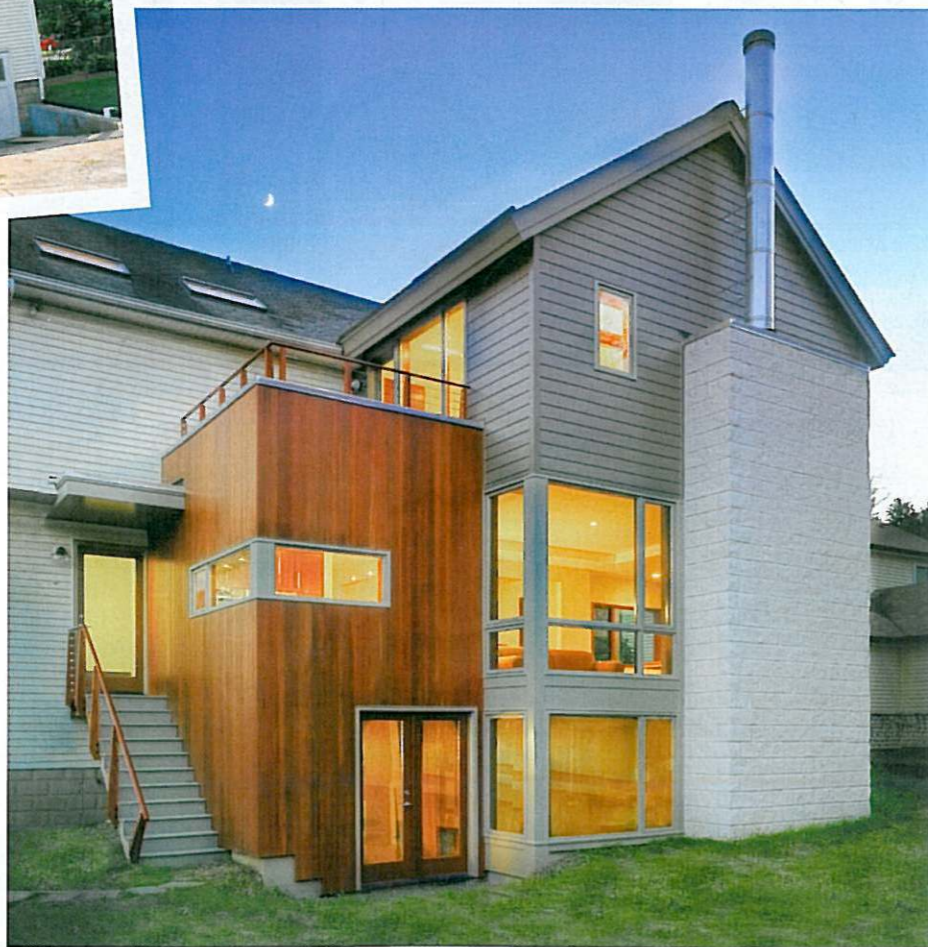
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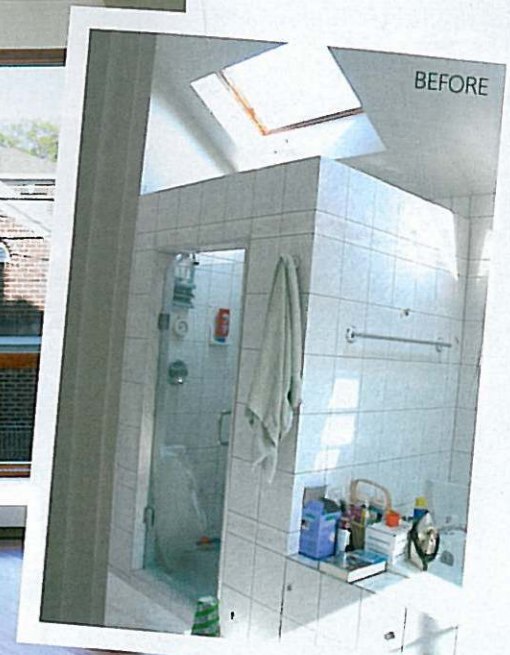
and the house isn't," Mars says, "so we had to transition." While the owners plan eventually to clad the whole house in gray HardiePlank, the siding now covers the addition—with the striking exception of one square section off the back that is clad in vertical mahogany panels. Eventually, says Mars, the modern accents that dress the back will "be brought around to the main part of the house too."

The focal point of the newly built family room is the fireplace, which covers the length of one wall. Adorned in a spare, charcoal-hued fiber-cement material called Eco-Cem, the wall blends seamlessly with the bluestone mantel and hearth; a panel of slate-like stone tile embellishes the space below the mantel-piece, and custom shelving has been built in to one side.

With a family of six (a fourth child was on the way during construction), the kitchen was a pivotal element for the Nifontoffs. To ensure its design met their needs, the couple called in kitchen



Architect Randall Mars replaced the traditional rear façade and wood deck (inset) with a contemporary structure. HardiePlank siding and mahogany panels (above) clad the new exterior; the chimney is covered in rough-faced concrete blocks. The addition offers an open interior plan that encompasses the kitchen (top).



designer Jennifer Gilmer. Like Mars, she was challenged to bridge the old and new styles of the house. "I designed a warm, contemporary look using dark wood cabinetry because [homes of that era] typically have dark wood already," Gilmer says, adding that "kitchens can be a little different from the rest of the house anyway."

Gilmer chose engineered horizontal-rift wenge cabinetry, using open shelving above the counters to create a light, floating effect. "Open shelves are a great solution for dishes," she explains. "Dishes naturally stack neatly and they are in use all the time so they don't gather dust." Backsplash windows bring in natural light and a wall of back-painted glass behind the cooktop adds color. Gilmer chose light Caesarstone countertops because "what's at eye level is what determines if a room appears dark or light."

Upstairs, the master bedroom flows into a roomy walk-in closet and bath complete with a skylight and glass-block walls that admit light while retaining privacy. Light and openness are, in fact, the themes of this renovation. "What I love about it," says Shannon Nifontoff, "is how it lets us live." ❖

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The kitchen opens into the family room (top), which boasts a fireplace and large-scale windows to let in the light. The previous bathroom (inset) has been replaced with a sleek master bath (above) bathed in natural light from a glass-block wall and skylight.