

SPRING 2025

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# ARCHITECTURE **DC**


## Living Arrangements

The Annual Residential Design Issue



### Inside:

Aging Split-Levels Get Facelifts  
Artist Gains a New Studio and Family Room  
NoMa Finds its Center  
Supportive Housing Expresses Residents' Aspirations



The renovated front façade includes an extended dormer and a wood door surround.

# Fresh Haircut

## Renovation Brings Order to a House with a Split Personality

by Denise Liebowitz

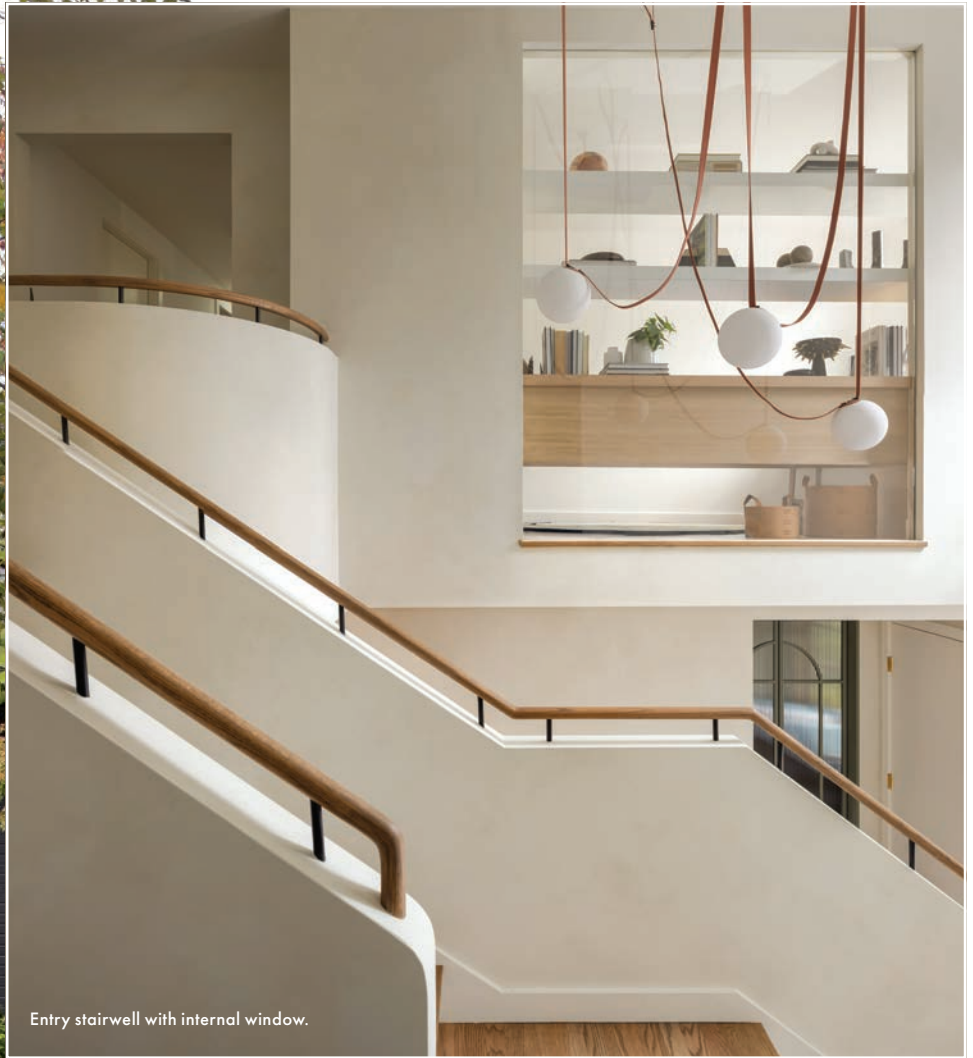
“It’s a mullet,” the architect pronounced when first stepping into his prospective client’s home. “It’s all serious business up front and the party’s in the back!”

The architect was **Michael Rouse, AIA**, principal architect of **MPR Architects**, a Washington-based firm specializing in residential projects. He was assessing a dated 1950s Cape Cod split-level that had received a rear addition about 20 years previously and was now in need of an overhaul. Fortunately, the homeowner shared the mullet view in that her front door opened directly into a rather ordinary low-ceilinged living room, which family and visitors quickly traversed to

reach the modern addition and its kitchen and great room beyond. “We never used that living room and we didn’t even want that kind of formal space,” said Rouse’s client.

When the client and her husband purchased the house in 2021, they knew they would renovate given their demanding jobs and two small children. The Somerset community in Bethesda, Maryland, was just the kind of neighborhood and school district they were looking for, but their new home needed work.

“This project modernizes a 1950s home to meet today’s post-pandemic needs, where separate space for



Entry stairwell with internal window.

All photos © Jenn Verrier Photography, except as noted



The front façade before renovation.

Courtesy of MPR Architecture

work and an open floor plan for living are essential,” said the architect. “There was no sense of progression into the space and no connection between the front of the house and the rear addition. We developed a design that brings together the previously disconnected parts of the house through a singular exterior scheme and a striking double-height foyer on the interior.”

Rouse’s team began with the street façade, extending the dormer of the Cape Cod and adding a window that created a lofty entry and flooded the interior with natural light. The old stair was replaced with an elegant partial-wall stair topped by a simple

**Project:** Buteau Residence,  
Bethesda, MD

Architect: **MPR Architecture**

Interior Designer: **Ella Scott Design**

Landscape Designer: **Bethesda Garden Design**

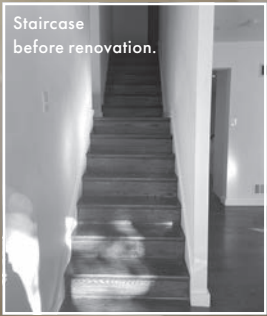
Structural Engineer: **The Capitol Structures Group**

Audiovisual Consultant: **POWERHOUSE**

General Contractor: **Fine Point Construction**

wooden handrail that, when it reaches the upper-level landing, curves to form a whimsical balcony overlooking the foyer below. Rouse is quick to credit the design of the stair to Sandra Meyer of Ella Scott Design who knew the homeowner previously and shared her sense of style.

The unused living room was transformed into a home office that is connected to the now spacious foyer with custom metal-and-reeded-glass doors that let in light from the entry while affording privacy to the office space. The double-height space is lit with a dramatic modern globe chandelier.



Staircase  
before renovation.

Courtesy of MPR Architecture



Renovated stairwell.

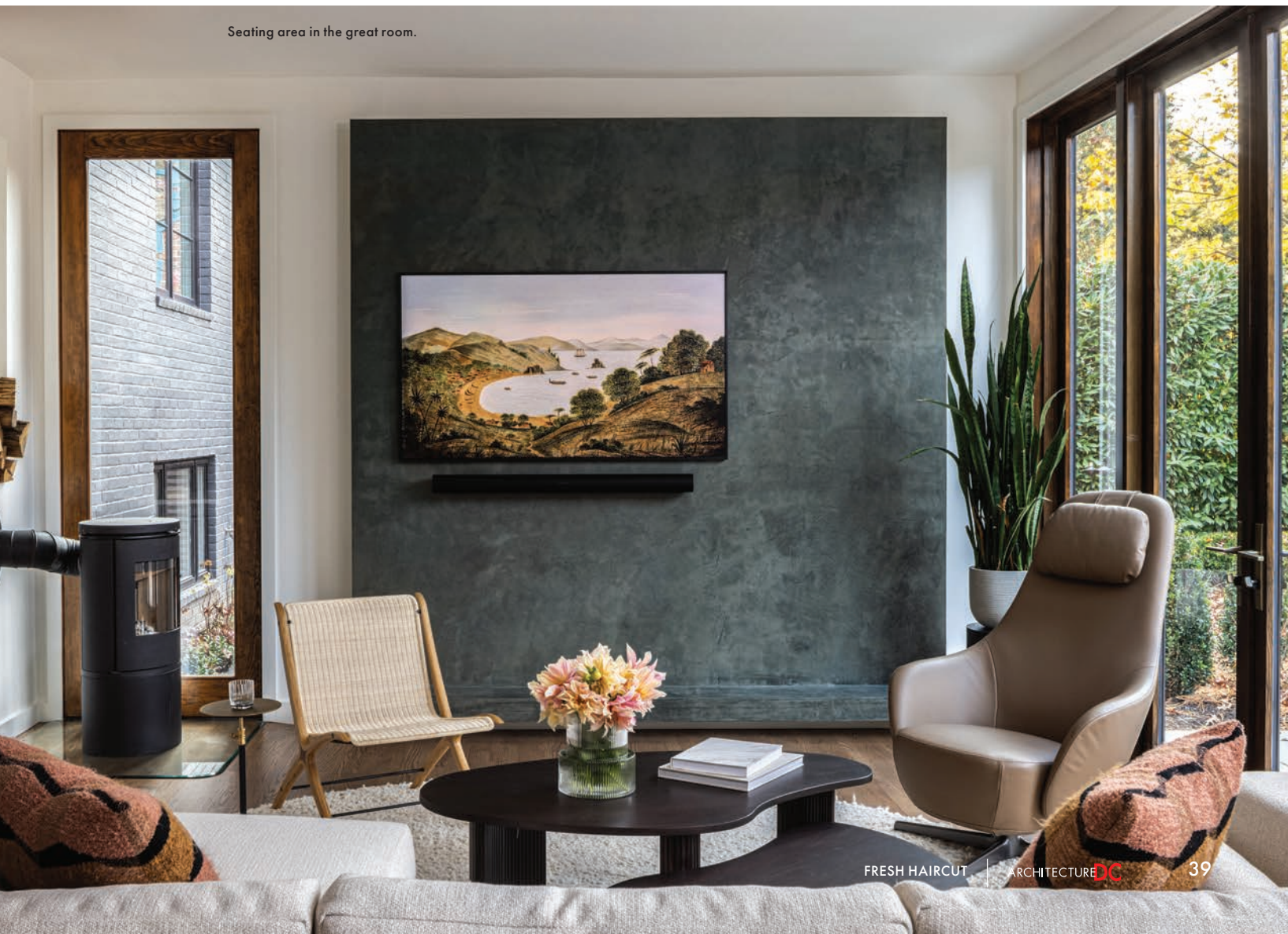
A generous hall leads to the rear addition and reconfigured kitchen. Gone is the range set into the island that the homeowners considered a safety concern for small children. With space taken from the former unused living room, the once too-small kitchen now extends into a spacious pantry ("My favorite room in the house!" volunteered the client). Backsplashes of Brazilian quartzite natural stone with swirling veins of grey, custom oak cabinets, an island offering plenty of work and dining space, and a recessed bar featuring black tile and brass shelving all combine to form a functional space with a distinctive aesthetic. An adjacent dining area features contemporary lighting, a custom stone table, and a built-in banquette covered in faux leather for family-friendly dining. Floor-to-ceiling glass doors open to the back garden and an architectural wall in the great room is finished in a dark limewash that dries to a weathered patina and visually anchors the large space. The existing white oak flooring throughout was retained and refinished.

Returning to the entry, a few steps lead up to two bedrooms and a bath, and a few more steps reach the primary suite, a guest room and bath, a second home office, and laundry space on the upper level. A striking feature of the foyer is the large interior window of the



Dining area in the new great room.

Seating area in the great room.







Rear façade with new bay window in the primary bedroom.

upper-level office that overlooks the stairway and is designed to share natural light and bring interest to a bare, too-vertical wall.

One of the main goals in reconfiguring the upper floor was to open the primary bedroom to views of the back yard. Remarkably, the earlier addition had no windows overlooking the landscaped garden, thus forfeiting the best vista in the house. The MPR team remedied the problem with an expansive floor-to-ceiling window and gained additional square footage by enclosing a small exterior balcony to accommodate an enlarged primary bath.

On the exterior, white siding was replaced with dark gray Hardie cladding and the front door was given a makeover. The wood of a projecting entry with a protective canopy and small bench brings texture and warmth to the dark gray of the rest of the structure. Substantial white stone slab steps lead to the clearly defined entrance. The consistent exterior design treatment continues around the house to the rear elevation with the same dark gray color punctuated by wood accents.



Rear façade before renovation.

“As soon as Mike told me my house was a mullet, I started to love his humor,” recalled the homeowner. “I wanted this project to be fun and I wanted to be a collaborator, not just another annoying client. I’m a television producer, I’m creative, I like color, and I like funk and quirk,” she said, referencing the flamingo-in-stilettos wallpaper in the powder room. “Mike had great ideas, he saw things I didn’t, and we had fun.”