

SUMMER 2015
FREE

ARCHITECTURE DC

Tailored to Fit:

Residential Projects
Emphasize Quality
Over Size



MICHAEL ROUSE
AIA
2801 ADAMS MILL RD NW APT 104
WASHINGTON DC 20009-2210

Post. Standard
U.S. Postage Paid
Hagerstown, MD
Permit No. 93

Inside:

Ranch Renovation Reflects Universal Design Principles
Architects' Home/Office Communes with Nature
Bridge-Like Country House Spans Geological Gap
Micro-unit Apartments Exemplify Efficiency



Renovated front facade of the Somerset residence by Hamilton Snowber Architects.

Photo © Stacy Zarin-Goldberg Photography



Living room, with walnut paneling inspired by the material palette of mid-20th-century modernism.

Photo © Stacy Zarin-Goldberg Photography

Ranch Redressing

Makeovers Give Similar Suburban Houses Distinct Identities

by Denise Liebowitz

Somerset, the sought-after community tucked between Bethesda and Chevy Chase in Montgomery County, Maryland, is actually an incorporated town founded in 1890 when five government scientists purchased 20 acres of tobacco farmland for residential development. As the town grew, it was careful to preserve its green parkland, big trees, and tranquil feel, and over the course of the 20th century, residents built a pleasing mix of Victorians, Colonial Revivals, split levels, and ranch ramblers on spacious lots. Somerset has kept its small-town heart in the shadow of the big city and demand is high for the town's good schools, safe streets, easy commute, and neighborly vibe.

Two families recently found their way into this desirable enclave through similar suburban ranch houses that were both in need of major makeovers to meet the needs of 21st-century family life. The renovations of these homes involved adding only minimal square footage to their original footprints and retained their modest, neighborhood-friendly street profiles.



The front of the house before renovation.

Courtesy of Hamilton Snowber Architects

Mid-Century Modern Meets Stylish Universal Design

"We wanted something that felt contemporary, but also kept the integrity of the original house; we didn't want it be something other than what it was," said Katherine

Coleman of the 1954 mid-century modern she and her husband, John Coleman, bought with the intention of updating. The couple had been happy with their traditional Chevy Chase, DC, house, but by the time their disabled son was one year old, they knew they needed a home that could accommodate a wheelchair. First, as they explored making their existing house wheelchair accessible, a neighbor suggested they talk to an architect who lived just down the street. It quickly became clear that retrofitting that house to conform to accessible or "universal design" standards was not feasible, but fortunately the Colemans had found the architects who would lead them into their next home.

"Once we decided to buy something for renovation, I had imagined that we would spend a lot of time interviewing potential architects," said Katherine Coleman. "But we liked Chris and Mike immediately, they seemed to 'get' us right away and were totally sensitive to our needs." She was referring to **Christopher Snowber, AIA**, and **Michael Rouse, AIA**, of **Hamilton Snowber**

Project: Somerset Residence, Somerset, MD

Architects: **Hamilton Snowber Architects**
 Interior Designers: **Christie Leu Interiors**
 Landscape Designers: **Thorne Rankin & Associates**
 Structural Engineers: **Shemro Engineering**
 Accessibility Consultants: **Strategies for Independent Living**
 General Contractor: **CarrMichael Construction**

Architects. The Colemans' must-have list was not very long: a flat-ish lot, a more-or-less horizontal floor plan, and a garage or a carport, because a friend with a disabled child had advised them that wet wheelchair tire marks on the living room floor were so annoying. Most importantly, the Colemans wanted their son to be able to use every part of the house—every bathroom, every floor, inside and outside, was to be accessible to him.



Kitchen, with lowered sink counter that can be used from a wheelchair.

Photo © Stacy Zarin-Goldberg Photography



New elevator.

Their search ended in Somerset. “Most people target Somerset and then start looking for a house, but for us it was the reverse. We saw the house first and only then realized what a great community this is,” explained Coleman.

The suburban ranch-style house was modest, but it was nicely situated on a flat lot, had a carport, and with more than 4,100 square feet, enough room inside for parents, three kids, and an elevator. “It was a time capsule, down to the flamingos in the pink-and-black master bath,” recalled Coleman. “We were only the second owners of the house and it really had not been touched.”

“We renovated and upgraded the house inside and out without changing its square footage or footprint,” said Rouse, who served as project architect. The renovation involved both “moving around some walls and correcting the original.” On the first floor, the architects slipped the elevator into the entry hall closet and made room for it on the second floor by lifting up dormers on the front

side of the roof. One of the dormer windows is actually part of the elevator shaft. It was the homeowners’ idea to put a window in the elevator, so riders get an outside view as they arrive at the top floor. The new dormers also flood the second-floor landing and its kids’ homework area with natural light. Two bedrooms and a bath for the family’s two daughters complete the top floor.

Downstairs on the first floor, two small bedrooms were swept away to make room for a large, open-plan space accommodating the living room, dining room, and kitchen. Explaining the choice of walnut for the bold architectural features on the fireplace wall, window and door casings, and stair, Rouse said, “Because the clients wanted to retain the mid-century aesthetic, we pulled from that materials palette.” The walnut panels that encase the opening between the first-floor entry and living room actually extend up to the second floor to form a bookcase in the study area.



Main staircase.



The rear deck is only 14 inches above the ground and is edged with a wheel stop instead of a railing.

Off the living room is the family room in what had started life as a porch and was later enclosed as a sunroom. The architects demolished the by-now dilapidated structure and rebuilt it within the same footprint. In reconstructing this space, the architects lifted its flat roof to echo the gable at the other end of the house. The only addition to the house is the small mudroom that connects to the carport and accommodates a 15-inch wheelchair lift.

The existing oak floors were retained and all patches and extensions were carefully matched to the original. The kitchen, with its blue glass tile and Caesarstone counters, is fully accessible and includes a lowered second sink that can be used from a wheelchair. Also on the first floor are the master bedroom suite and the son's bedroom with a fully accessible bath. The renovated basement area includes a playroom, guest suite, and laundry.

Outside at the front of the house, the wheelchair ramp is fully integrated into the entry design and nearly disappears from view. The rear of the house is close to grade level with only a 14-inch drop-off from the edge of the deck, so by using a wheel stop, the design team was able to forgo a railing. "The house is totally accessible, but you wouldn't know it; nothing looks or feels institutional," said the clearly pleased client.

"The house is modern without being cold," Coleman continued. "Both John and I grew up in traditional houses and we were concerned that this might be too big a departure for us, but we both have loved it from the beginning. I thought architects drew plans, handed them to you, and walked away. Chris and Mike stayed with us every step of the way and cared so much how the house would work for us."

Suburban Ranch Gets Ready for the Future

Elsewhere in the Somerset neighborhood and at about the same time, another rambler of approximately the same vintage and aesthetic was undergoing a complete makeover with many similar objectives. Here the client was Falcon Construction, a development company that would be looking for a purchaser as soon as the whole-house renovation was complete. The firm hired **McGraw Bagnoli Architects** to bring this nearly 5,000-square-foot house up to date.

"They wanted a modern redo of this traditional ranch, and the existing structure had enough space to create a roomy, open floorplan," explained **Adam McGraw, AIA**. "The original low-scale, horizontal line was appealing and we wanted to play with it so that from the street you could see the original form of the house."

Project: Ranch Somerset, Somerset, MD

Architects: **McGraw Bagnoli Architects**

Landscape Architects: **Jennifer Horn Landscape Architecture**

Structural Engineers: **Norton Consulting Engineers**

General Contractor: **Falcon Construction**