

Change of View

Julie Snow Architects didn't just remodel this frequently expanded New England-style cottage in Minnesota but reinvented it as an open home for an active modern family.





The glass curtain wall is Patti and Robbie Soskin's living room is an energy-efficient commercial window system. Seating flexibility is the rationale for Minotti's modular Hamilton Island sectional. Its pieces fit together almost like Lego bricks. Following an architectural theme of light and dark, white upholstery offsets natural wood in Brest Comber's restored Jersey chairs and Brent Comber's custom table. The photo portrait near the piano is by Alec Soth; the Le Corbusier-style dog bed with white leather is from DogStar.com.



Two years ago, this open modern home was just a cottage—really. It was an accumulation of bits and pieces added

over the years with a vine-entwined colonnade to mark the front entry. Located in a first-ring suburb outside Minneapolis, it was built in the 1940s and had one intimate room after another filled with floral prints. But homeowners Robbie and Patti Soskin, sweethearts since high school, were reinventing themselves (not for the first time). Their change would also affect their three children—Jorie, 22; Zach, 16; Maddie, 15—and Edith, a Havanaes (a member of the bichon family, and the national dog of Cuba).

Patti explains, "When my business partner and I opened our restaurant [Yum! Kitchen and Bakery, in nearby Saint Louis Park] in

2005, it gave me a new perspective on modern. I liked the open, clean space. I began to feel comfortable with stainless steel—even the scratches. That was the turning point for wanting to do the house."

Then, when a growing Zach began to hit his head on the ceiling of his bathroom in 2006, the conversations about a renovation got serious. The Soskins knew about Julie Snow's work: Julie Snow Architects had designed an addition to their children's school and done work for a friend. Noted for modern, open and light-filled commercial spaces, Snow takes very few residential projects each year (she spends a lot of time in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where



she's a visiting professor at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design). But the Soskins were persistent.

"I first met Robbie and Patti in their home," says Snow. "It was a warm, sweet cottage filled up with some very nice personal collections. It had seen many additions over the years and was really a jumble of structural elements. There were even two garages, on different sides of the house. They said to me, 'We're into a more open, modern lifestyle.' Well, I looked around at all their stuff and said, or thought, 'Really? Are you sure?'"

Then, she recalls, Patti (an amazing cook and hostess) said, "We have 50 to 60 people here for Thanksgiving dinner." Snow tried to imagine where. But Patti went on to describe how the family lived—or wanted to live—in their home.

They touch and hug all the time. They cuddle on sofas. They cook and eat together every day and have guests for dinner several

nights a week. Lovingly demonstrative is their lifestyle of choice. It is their way with friends as well as family, and they needed a home that would express that spirit of togetherness, of invitation, of casual, abiding celebration.

Finally, Snow was convinced they weren't kidding, and a match had been made. The Soskins had outgrown the home—not in size (it was already almost 5,000 square feet) but in style. Enclosed rooms that keep people apart would no longer do.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN REED FORSMAN
This page: Soskin, a partner in Yumi restaurant, laid out the kitchen with her team, selecting a palette of materials that includes acrylic (for counter-tops), stainless steel and glass. Opposite: The heart of this home is the dining area, where the Soskins gather daily (here Patti offers Edith a treat). The walnut BDOV Slab table has a bronze base; Poltrona Frau L2 chairs are wenge and leather; the pendants are from Ochre.

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What the Pros Know

Julie Snow Architects has created numerous outstanding commercial buildings but doesn't take many residential projects, so when the Soskins hired Snow's team, they understood what came with the package: a toolbox filled with all the tricks of the commercial building trade. Take the wall of windows in the Soskins' living room. "Minnesotans appreciate their changing seasons," explains project architect Tyson McElvain. "With the long winters, they like feeling connected to the outdoors year-round." So the architects found a commercial glass system to meet the demands of harsh northern winters and give the Soskins an uninterrupted view. Each window is 1" thick (two 1/4" glass panels with a 1/2" pocket of air sandwiched between), and the conductive aluminum frames are insulated with plastic. "The most important factor is to supply warm, dry air to the inside of the window to prevent frost buildup at the base," says McElvain. It is easily done with vents in the floor.



The Soskins' design team
from Julie Snow grew to include
designated project architect Tyson
McElvain and interior designer

Connie Lindor (who has also trained as an architect). The builders, Streeter and Associates, came on board early to manage budgets and structural matters, which project manager Bob Near credits with the success of the final product.

"There was a question at one point whether there should just be a new house," says Snow, "but the Soskins were into taking the bones of their own home and reinventing it." The plan was never to enlarge the home significantly but to maximize the existing footprint. In the end, the living room was bumped out five feet, and only one room was added—a screened porch near the family's media room. But the existing footprint was radically reconfigured, and every single surface was transformed.

The Soskins were intimately involved in the process. "Robbie claims to be a novice at modernism," says McElvain, "but he helped make decisions on a few key elements." To that, Robbie, who is a partner at Compass Marketing in Minneapolis, responds, "We laid out a standard: Design, not decoration. It was the guiding principle. We were learners. And it was an amazing process."

Then things got personal. "We loved where they were going," says Patti, "but Maddie kept saying, 'Why are we changing our house? It's perfect the way it is.' She, especially, always feels cold and needs a warm home. We needed this modern house to be warm and inviting in feeling."

This page (from top): This kitchen has three islands for prep work and casual meals as well as a freestanding pantry; Maddie Soskin (left), with her friend Jillian, at the breakfast bar (Square Guest stools are from BODW). Opposite: To help with the exterior transformation, the landscape architects (Coen + Partners of Minneapolis) stripped away extraneous growth planted over the decades.



Building on themes of dark and light, the architects began to select materials to address the matter of warmth (while avoiding traditional red

wood tones). They liked the dark floors, a carryover from the cottage, so they specified Brazilian walnut and stained it twice in an ebony tone for an almost opaque, paintlike finish. From the ground up, materials lighten. A single natural wood is used throughout the home for cabinetry—wenge, known for its fine, straight grain and naturally dark, rich color. Whitewashed oak strips are used as sliding doors, particularly in the kitchen, but have the presence of a movable wall. Selected walls are finished with ethereal white Venetian plaster by decorative painter Darril Otto.

The kitchen, which Patti helped design based on her professional restaurant experience, is long and layered. Each and every surface and utensil was given careful design consideration. The result is handsome and efficient with lots of choices for sitting—for eating, working or socializing.

Connie Lindor worked with the Soskins on furnishings while construction was coming to a close. They began by taking an inventory of everything the family owned, from the 1940s vintage art to collections of dishes and fabrics. "I have never seen people transform so dramatically from one style to another," says Lindor. She encouraged her clients to keep a few things they valued. The vintage mercury-glass collection that landed on the dining table and some inherited and handmade dishes displayed in the kitchen cabinets tether the Soskins to their past life.

This page (right): The new screened porch faces the media room across an interior hall; the slate flooring extends seamlessly to the adjacent covered terrace. A custom-designed porch swing masquerades as a daybed (a family favorite); the stunning chair is Ross Lovegrove's Lovener for the renowned modernist Dutch firm Moooi. Top: A view of the porch and the renovated rear facade from the backyard.









Of the furniture, **Lindor** says, "It was very important that it be flexible. One night they're on the sofa watching a movie. The next night, it's a party for 50.

The furniture we chose is modular and can easily be moved." Favorite resources included *Arkitectura in Situ* in San Francisco for the Italian upholstery and occasional tables. Patti had a picture of a dining table, and Lindor recognized it immediately as a piece from BDDW's collection (the company has a showroom in New York City)—but they had it custom-sized to seat 12.

Naturally, the design team came to know the Soskins over the two years they created together—shopping for furniture, then stopping for wine and dinner in San Francisco, selecting finishes over Patti's cappuccinos and homemade chocolate-chip cookies. They observed Robbie and Patti Soskin's warmth for each other, counting the numbers of people who move in and out of the home daily—which Robbie explains: "We don't look at it as entertaining. It's just how we live. We love sharing this place." Even daughter Maddie,

who hates the cold, likes the new home. Says Maddie, "It's like living in a snow globe in the winter."

Meanwhile, Snow had a life lesson in the intangibles of modern living that can't be quantified in the architecture. "This place isn't about a glass curtain wall," she says. "Patti and Robbie give modernism a warm name. No one is coming here to look at the art. Although it is good, this is not a museum. Here, the dog is on the sofa; there are no worries about red wine. People eat at this table every night. It is vivid living." Clearly, change is good.

This page (from left): The master bath features a graphic floral mural with tile by Bisazza and a design inspired by Moooi, and a rubber-dipped Son of a Blush seat by Blu Dot; the master bedroom has a simple wall of wenge cabinets and a leather Potrona Frau bed. Opposite: An imposing Cube tub from WetStyle in the master bath balances the custom white-lacquered vanity and full-figured square mirror.



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Details

[1] The Soskins' dream team: From left, Tyson McElvain, Julie Snow and Connie Lindor, all of Julie Snow Architects.

[2] A pair of Oclure *Arctic Pear* chandeliers hang over the dining table, reflecting Patti Soskin's collection of vintage mercury glass, which sits below.

[3] Connie Lindor filled the media room with a Flexform *Groundpiece* sectional. The dark textured fabric and no-maintenance black leather arms keep anyone from fretting about heavy use or spills. The Soskins' collection of musical instruments from world travels stands in a corner; art on the built-in shelves was from a sale of student work at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

[4] "I like to be on the computer late at night, and Patti goes to bed earlier to read," says Robbie Soskin (pictured). So that they could be in the same room, the couple decided to put their desk in the bedroom, where a freestanding wenge wall separates the sleeping and work spaces visually and houses the necessary technology.

[5] "Clerestory windows are far more effective than traditional skylights at bringing in light, setting up views of tree canopies and the sky," says McElvain. "The trellis element is a way to create a transition from the interior to the exterior." This one is made of aluminum to create perfect 90-degree corners.

[6] The powder room reflects Patti's preferences for playful glamour. Philippe Starck's vanity for Duravit is a sculptural, modern sink. The design team found the oversized Baroque-style mirror in Miami at Niba Home, a favorite store for accessories. ●

See Resources, last pages.

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