

Ranch Reborn⁰⁵

Whole House Remodel

63



FACT:

Stepping an expansion back from the street allows for the addition of space while avoiding the impression of a house that's too big for the neighborhood.

FACT:

Leaving some existing structural elements as the core of a remodel is environmentally sound, and can also save time and permitting costs.

This update and expansion of a small ranch home featured extensive reuse of existing materials and an emphasis on remaining consistent with the context of the neighborhood.

The first time architects Randy E. Pimsler and W. Allen Hoss sat down with the owners of 213 Murray Hill Ave., a small ranch home in the Kirkwood neighborhood of Atlanta, “green” was not part of the conversation.

“Their main drive was to update the home, both inside and out, and to expand it. To tell you the truth, even today it’s not completely unusual for people to define their program in those kinds of basic terms,” Pimsler says.

“They asked for a master suite consisting of a sleeping area, bathroom, and closet. They also wanted a new living room, a screened-in porch, and needed to address some circulation issues within the home,” he says.

But as the principals of Pimsler Hoss Architects, long-time partners steeped in environmentalism and sustainable building practices, worked on the preliminary design of the project, what they initially saw as a somewhat conservative project began to change.

Although Pimsler says he doesn’t know how long the clients had owned the home before he came on the scene, it was clear that the owners had done only some minor interior remodeling in the past.

What had changed, however, was the surrounding neighborhood, with redevelopment of several blocks adjacent to Murray Hill Avenue causing property values to rise.

“It really was a case, I think, of the homeowners seeing more and more possibility with each pass we made at the design,” Pimsler says. “As a result we went from what had been a very brief initial meeting to a situation where they encouraged us, in their words, to push the envelope on this a little bit.”

The firm came to the project on the recommendation of Carroll Bell, a realtor who delves into small remodeling projects from time to time, and her partner Kathryn Aldrich, who specializes in interior design.

Before taking on this project, the architects and the women had worked on two commercial and two custom residential projects and found they enjoyed working together. As a result, it was a no-brainer that Bell would serve as the general contractor for the project, while Aldrich would do the interiors and the lighting.

The challenges were twofold—the first was how to



BEFORE

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PROJECT DETAILS

- > **Location:** Atlanta
- > **Builder:** Carroll Bell
- > **Architect:** Randy E. Pimsler and W. Allen Hoss, Pimsler Hoss Architects www.pimslerhoss.com
- > **Interior:** Kathryn Aldrich



After a significant remodel, the home is larger and more efficient but still fits into the context of its mature residential neighborhood. Among its most striking features are ribbon windows and railings. Below: The original modest ranch was in serious need of a facelift.

expand the home while keeping it appropriate to the context of the small homes that surrounded it.

"The one thing no one wanted was to create a McMansion," Pimsler says. "Therefore it was critical to maintain the scale of the one-story homes on either side of the project site and across the street."

To that end, the architects focused on adding to the rear of the structure, using the slight rise on the lot as an asset. But that led to grappling with a second challenge—creating an addition while preserving the 150-year-old tree that stood behind the existing house.

"They wanted a master suite and a living space on the back of the home, and it


was clear that was going to need to be a two-story addition because of the tree we wanted to maintain," Pimsler says.

The solution was to "step" the building's new height back from the street. That way, while the entire exterior would be remodeled, the effect wouldn't be overbearing.

Over the ensuing eight months, the project team reused existing materials such as siding, concrete, and metal railings in new and innovative forms. For instance, ribbon windows in both horizontal and vertical planes create varied and complex spaces within the residence.

"Unlike many 'green' projects today, we didn't relocate the building or change its footprint in terms of its orientation to the sun.



 The combination of vertical and horizontal windows captures as much natural light as possible in the master bedroom.

We worked with what we had,” Pimsler says. “So I think the green line on the project is most likely from the perspective of adaptive reuse and from the emphasis on building context, and then all the building materials.”

Puzzle Pieces

Pimsler, a native of New England and at one time, a practicing psychologist, says he first became interested in sustainable design and construction during the energy crisis of the mid-1970s.

“[The crisis] had a severe impact on our lifestyle up there, waiting on lines for gasoline and what not, and as a result, I joined the New England Solar Energy Commission,” he says.

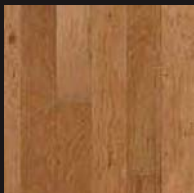
His fellow commission members loved his passion but told him he needed to learn how buildings actually worked if he was ever going to turn good ideas into meaningful strategies. In response, Pimsler went back to college, earning degrees in architecture in Connecticut and at the University of Tennessee.

“I’ve essentially made green building and energy-efficient



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design a part of the work I've done ever since," he says.

For his part Hoss, a graduate of the Georgia Institute of Technology, is a founding member of the Southface Energy Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to promoting energy-, water, and resource-efficient workplaces, homes, and communities throughout the Southeast.

Pimsler Hoss Architects was founded in 1991 after the principals both made the short list for a project for the City of Atlanta. Instead of competing, the two decided to jointly offer their services to the city, and they've worked together ever since.

"So we probably have a vernacular in green architecture that predates the current green building movement, and we have to constantly remind

ourselves not to take that for granted because so many folks are in that market right now," Pimsler says. "We just think it's like drawing on the computer and working on the building code and the accessibility code, it's just another piece of the puzzle to us.

Adaptive Reuse

Adaptive reuse projects came naturally to the firm.

"We do a fair amount of work and projects that are focused on an existing building where we are changing the use—for example, a factory or a warehouse that becomes a condominium or loft development. We have a huge portfolio of those," Pimsler says.

"But the idea of saving those spaces and add-

 The remodel expands and updates the original home with a master suite with bath, living room, and screened porch.

KEY GREEN FEATURES

➤ **Adaptive Reuse.** While a few basic rooms were preserved, much of the small ranch house was gutted, providing the project team with ample opportunity to reuse siding, concrete, and metal railings.

➤ **Preservation of Historic Landscaping.** A primary focus of the renovation was the preservation of a 150-year-old oak tree on the project site.

➤ **Low-VOC Finishes.** All coatings are either low- or no-VOC products to promote and protect indoor air quality.

➤ **Northern Exposure.** Southern homes are particularly susceptible to intense heating from the sun. As a result, the project team kept glazing on the south, east, and west side of the house at a minimum and used most of the glass in the home's north side.

➤ **Contextually Appropriate Design.** Architect Randy Pimsler believes "green" doesn't begin and end with products. According to Pimsler, having a structure conform to the context of its surroundings should also be considered a sustainable strategy.



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Simply by extending the house's roof line in the front, the architect was able to mask a taller addition to the rear that tripled the size of the existing home.

BEFORE



AFTER

IN THE WORKS

Presently, Pimsler Hoss Architects is engaged in several "green" projects, although most of them fall into the commercial category.

One exception is a mountain home outside of Atlanta. Unlike 213 Murray Hill Ave., this project incorporates passive solar heating, and sustainable building materials were a significant consideration before and during construction.

"When it comes to residential projects, I would say that, across the board, clients are different from what they were even five years ago, and that's a direct result of the amount of information that's been disseminated in the intervening years in regards to sustainable design and green building," Pimsler says.

"In the past, sustainability was something we achieved by including very sound building practices in our drawings and working with builders who understood what we were striving for, but now I'd say clients have raised the bar just a little bit for everybody," he says.

"On this project, the performance standards of various materials were very much a concern," Pimsler continues. "We sized the heating and plumbing equipment; we knew what the glazing would be and what its anticipated impact would be on the efficiency of the home; and we oriented the building on the lot to bolster its efficiency."

The home will have a small footprint, built on two and a half loft floor levels. Pimsler and his associates spec'd engineered wood floor framing, blown-in cellulose on the walls and roof, closed cell insulation in basement walls and rim joists, low-e windows, high-efficiency heat pumps with programmable thermostats, building orientation along east-west access with limited glazing on the east and west, overhangs on the southern glazing, recycled carpets, post-consumer recycled tiles, low-VOC paints, and solar hot water heating.

ing on, in our opinion, led to cost savings for the client in a rather significant way, from the use of existing materials, existing fixtures, and even from the perspective of the City of Atlanta's permitting process," he says.

In putting the house back together, the renovation team focused heavily on the building envelope, Pimsler says.

"We didn't go crazy trying to use the latest and greatest green products, but did use good quality insulation, and with the stucco that we used on the outside of the building, its got kind of a double layer of insulation," he says.

"The windows were manufactured by Jeld-Wen—not super high performance, but insulated glazing throughout," Pimsler adds. "And we kept most of the glazing on the north side of the building to keep the solar impact, which can be fairly intense here in the South, to a minimum."

Pimsler was particularly pleased with preserving the very large and very old Oak tree adjacent to the home, a tree that he says, "is still there and a beautiful piece of wood."

"I think the success of this project is evident in the fact that now that it's aged a bit, it doesn't jump out at you, but rather fits in quite well with everything around it," Pimsler says. "It belongs."