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The Good Life in
Upstate New York, p.88



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OPENING GAMBIT

AN ARCHITECT AND A
LANDSCAPE DESIGNER
POOLED THEIR TALENTS TO
CREATE THEIR VERY
OWN OUTDOORS-LOVING
LOS ANGELES HILL HUGGER.



With the pivot doors in Michael and Kathleen Ferguson's living room open, the climate changes little from the inside to the courtyard in front or the lap pool out back. Furniture includes a sectional sofa from Room Service and a low-maintenance woven chaise from Ikea. Right: Under the shade of a 60-year-old pepper tree, the front courtyard—with its pebble-mulch ground cover in lieu of grass—flows directly into the house.







"I WANTED A HOUSE WITH CITY VIEWS," SAYS MICHAEL FERGUSON, "WHILE MY WIFE, KATHLEEN, WANTED ONE THAT FELT CONNECTED TO THE EARTH."

Michael, an architect and principal of Los Angeles-based Space International, and Kathleen, a landscape designer who heads her own eponymous firm, had been looking for a place to build a home for themselves when they stumbled on a lot in the historic east-side residential neighborhood of Mount Washington. It offered killer canyon views and a giant pepper tree. The young couple (soon to be joined by baby son Cole) was sold.

The sloping site, however, wasn't without its challenges. Density restrictions in the area meant that the Fergusons could build on only 50 percent of their 4,200-square-foot property. Their response was to develop a modest three-bedroom, two-bath plan that makes the most of outdoor space by linking the ground-floor rooms with a series of sunlit terraces. "The way the rooms open directly to the outside makes the house feel much bigger than it is on paper," Michael says.

Inside, the living, dining and kitchen spaces are combined into one lofty central room. Walls of floor-to-ceiling pivoting glass doors open into a front yard, where a shady pebble garden lies underneath the majestic pepper tree, and into the sunny backyard, where there's a lawn and a lap pool. When the doors are open, the room feels like a cantilevered porch. "When we first moved in," remembers Kathleen, "we had doves flying through the living room and a family of squirrels upstairs keeping the electrician company."

Left: Sculptural built-ins abut the fireplace (and hide the television screen). After dark, the hedge outside the windows is uplit, making the dark walls recede for dramatic effect. The photograph at right is by Laura London. Right (from top): The kitchen countertop extends through the plane of the house onto the patio; even in this heavily populated neighborhood, the house still manages to maximize its natural surroundings.

PRODUCED BY LAURA HULL. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN ELLIS.
WRITTEN BY KATHERINE E. NELSON.





WHILE THE first floor exposes the living areas to the outside, the second floor, which houses the sleeping areas and bathrooms, has a more intimate feel. Instead of the dramatic pivot doors below, Michael arranged simple punch windows to offer privacy from the outside, views of the canyon from inside.

"After the house was framed," says Michael, "I fine-tuned the window placement on site so we weren't staring at a telephone pole or the neighbor's air-conditioning unit."

The upstairs embraces the home's flowing layout—the master bedroom opens directly into a bathroom, which combines a walk-in closet, toilet, shower and bathtub into a single area. The home has few interior doors, like those between the bedrooms and the central stairwell. "We are a very open family, and we like that our design reflects that sense of sharing and openness, even in the more private areas of the house," Michael says.

Because the Fergusons are self-employed designers, young parents and first-time homeowners, keeping a lid on expenses was important. To minimize costs, they took on all of the design work themselves and acted as contractors and crew. "We were there seven days a week until the wee hours," says Kathleen. "We would be out on the patio on a Saturday night—still hammering!"

For the materials, Michael carefully selected lower-priced, off-the-shelf supplies, including concrete, birch plywood, drywall and plaster. "By using standard elements in an unconventional way, we were able to create an elegant design at an affordable price," he says.

Above: The master bath is organized into a dry zone for dressing and a wet zone with Ann Sacks glass mosaic tiles and windows that frame views of the canyon (since the arrival of Cole, the floor-level window has been modified for safety). Right: Flow from room to room and then to the outside is key to the home's layout. The bedroom opens through a wide passageway into the bathroom and through glass sliders to the terrace.



What the Pros Know

Artificial turf can be your friend—but not the Super Bowl-green kind of yesteryear. New technology and advanced color matching have resulted in artificial turf that is pleasant on the eye and toe-tickling to the touch. For Michael and Kathleen, artificial turf presented a fun, unconventional alternative to a wood deck. "It softened the modern edges of the space and was a great way to bring the green of the pepper tree foliage right to the edge of our bedroom," Michael says. "It creates the illusion of sleeping outdoors." Installation is easy: The turf rolls out like a rug. One thing to keep in mind: The fabric is designed to drain so leave room for water runoff. And Michael stresses that although artificial turf has great qualities such as low maintenance and drought resistance, it shouldn't be viewed as a replacement for sod. "It should be used in places where its synthetic nature can be appreciated. I like to think of it more like an outdoor carpet than a lawn," he says. See OCTurf.com.



LOW MAINTENANCE was also important to the young family, especially with the landscape design. Tough grasses, bamboo and shrubs made up the majority of plantings. For the lawn, Kathleen made an unlikely choice in laying down dichondra sod, which had been popular with 1950s modern homes. “It turned out to be the perfect choice,” Kathleen says. “I just trim it with a pair of scissors between the pavers. We never mow it.” A drip watering system also saves time because overhead spray doesn’t get on the building, a boon for a structure with so many windows.

Instead of planting grass in the forecourt, Kathleen opted for pebble mulch. It tidies up, she says, with just a quick raking before guests arrive. It has also proved to be one of young Cole’s favorite areas of the house. “He plays in it for hours just like a sandbox,” Kathleen says.

In all, construction of the home took about a year. While they admit that their design collaboration had stressful moments (“You could say that being your own client is a bit like giving yourself a frontal lobotomy,” Michael jokes), they’ve already begun working on a new project. To keep the creative energy flowing, they have started the design process all over again on another piece of property nearby. There’s one change to their approach: This time they’ve hired a general contractor so they can focus on making what Kathleen calls “the fun decisions.”

See Resources, last pages.

Above: Cole, Michael and Kathleen Ferguson enjoy the lap pool with their neighbor’s dog, Lucie. **Right:** Michael shows us why it is called a lap pool. **Opposite:** Kathleen installed dichondra sod between pavers off the living room. Dichondra, a warm-season ground cover, creates a carpet of green and doesn’t need to be mowed, the perfect low-maintenance choice. The bench is a Michael Ferguson design; the blue *Hoop* chairs are vintage.



