

# SENSE OF PLACE

Returning to a childhood home, a family honors the past while designing for the present | WRITTEN BY William Morgan | PHOTOGRAPHED BY John Horner



SEVERAL ROOMS WERE combined into a unified space that includes living and dining areas and the open-plan kitchen. A muted color scheme adds to the sense of serenity. The Japanese-style meditation room can be seen just beyond the cooking island.

A limited footprint, low ceiling heights, immovable load-bearing walls, and a cookie-cutter facade — with all its imperfections,

the 1950 gambrel-roof Colonial-style house Katie McDonald grew up in would have been easier to tear down than renovate. Yet, Katie and husband Scott McDonald would have none of it. “By working with the existing house,” says Katie, “we honored the history of my parents’ lives there.”

Like many New Englanders who leave the region, Katie, a holistic health coach, dreamed of returning to her roots. When her father died a few years ago, she and Scott and their son,

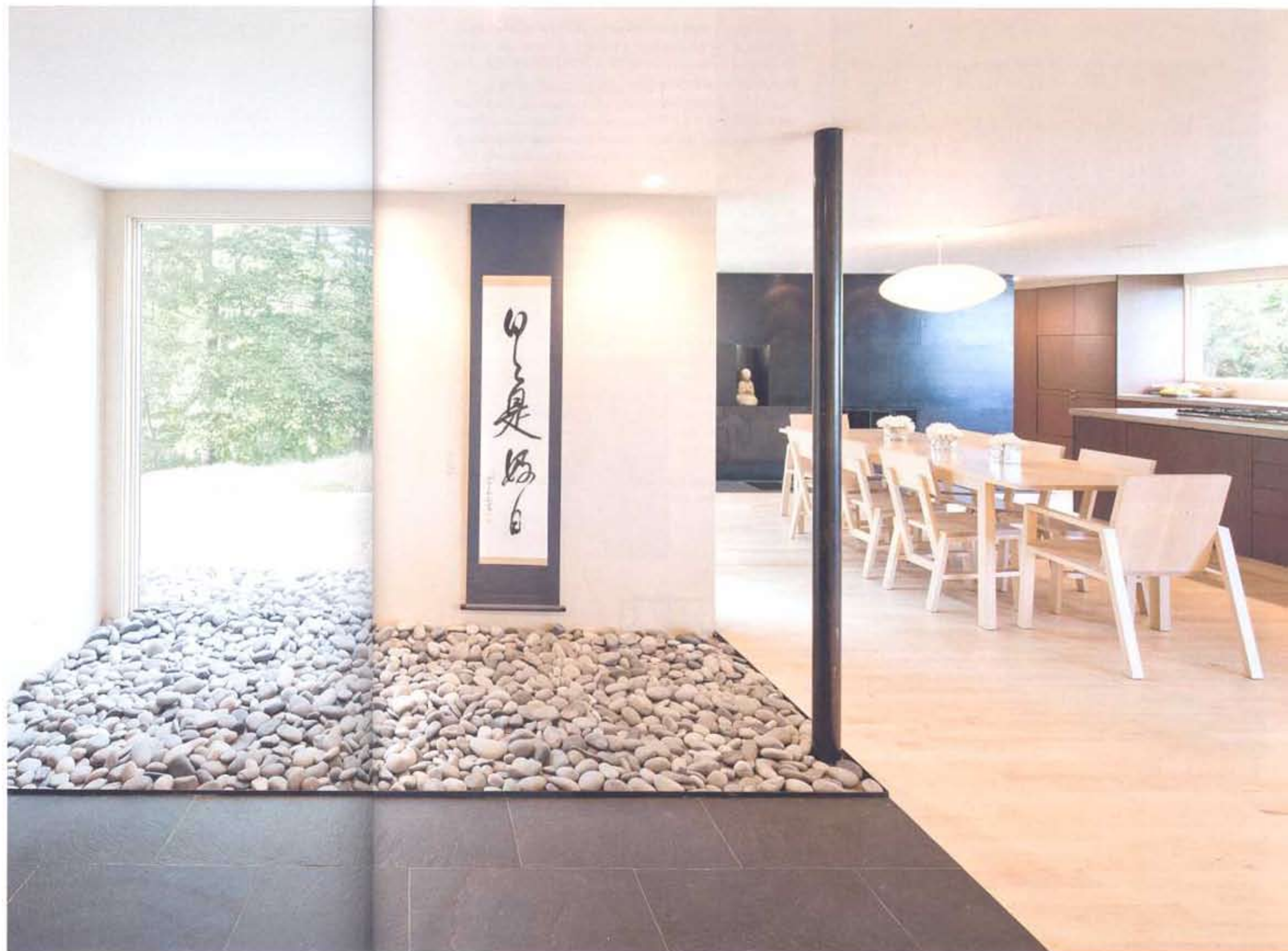
**ARCHITECTURE**  
**3SIX0**  
**ARCHITECTURE**

Sage, now 10, moved into the family homestead in rural Rhode Island. With the help of 3SIX0 Architecture in Providence, they transformed a house frozen in time into one in tune with their contemporary contemplative lifestyle.

The couple had lived in San Francisco and more recently upstate New York, where they occupied a 1907 Prairie Style house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. They wanted to get away from the too-cozy ambience of the Wright home, but, like the great architect, they admire Japanese culture, so they wanted meditative spaces with “a calming glance to the ever-changing water view,” a view the original house ignored. Indeed, the building had no particular relation to its site. The delightful



THE BONES OF the 1950 house (LEFT) are still here, but its new spirit is entirely contemporary (BELOW). Beach stones in the entry hall (RIGHT) recall a Zen garden and extend beyond the window to the outdoors.





wooded setting abuts protected wetlands and overlooks a small river just at the point where it expands dramatically before heading for the ocean a few miles away. From the house, only trees, water, and the occasional bald eagle are visible.

SSINC's project manager Jack Ryan began by simplifying the envelope of the 2,900-square-foot Colonial. This shoe-off family wanted the house divided to combine quiet spaces, such as library, office, and meditation room, with a family-centered zone. The main block of the original house became a single, open family room built around the serene kitchen, with a fireplace at one end and a new wall of sliding doors looking out to the river. A white maple dining table parallels an equally simple island topped by a slab of polished concrete. Built-in wenge cabinets reinforce the simplicity. "We strove to dedicate space for everything," says Katie, "so that clutter did not distract us or create mental clutter."

Beyond the steel-wrapped fireplace wall is a 12-by-14-foot meditation room based on the Japanese tatami module. A new floor-to-ceiling window is covered with a rice-paper shop panel, split horizontally, so that when it is snowing, any reference to the sky can be cropped out of the view to create a more Zen experience. A Buddha in a tokonoma, or small shrine, reminds the couple "to stay true to our daily practice," Katie says.

**THE LIBRARY (LEFT),** lined with shelves filled with books and Asian collectibles, doubles as a guest room.

## BATH

### DESIGN DECISION

#### *Quiet Luxury*

The master bath offers spiritual nourishment in a serene setting. Stone tiles from China surround the soaking tub (not shown), which the owners say is "too tempting to resist," yet the inspiration is thoroughly Japanese, with a modern riff on the traditional bathing ritual. A large skylight (right) illuminates soft gray walls and provides natural light above a pair of sinks set in rough New England slate, on which, in a reprieve from the harnessed world of texting, Scott and Katie McDonald hand-write notes to each other in chalk on the blackboard-like material.



Before



- 1 SCREENED PORCH
- 2 ENTRY
- 3 FORMAL DINING
- 4 DECK
- 5 KITCHEN
- 6 LIVING ROOM
- 7 INFORMAL DINING
- 8 FAMILY ROOM
- 9 BATHROOM

After



- 1 OFFICE
- 2 LIBRARY
- 3 DECK
- 4 ENTRY
- 5 LIVING ROOM
- 6 PLANNED TERRACE
- 7 KITCHEN
- 8 DINING AREA
- 9 MEDITATION ROOM
- 10 BATHROOM



**DESIGN DECISION**  
*Center Stage*

The renovation project began with the idea of redoing just the kitchen. In the new house, the kitchen is the heart of the family living area — one might even say that the house is the kitchen, as everything emanates from the fireplace and cooking area. Katie McDonald, a raw food guru and teacher, says, “My clients come to the house

to learn about an aspect of wellness in greater depth. We study the history and healing of Japanese green teas, create nourishing smoothies, introduce meditation, make and munch on raw desserts. The kitchen serves as a means of building community and a place for healing.” Red oak, white pine, and wenge wood set the backdrop

for family food preparation for Katie, Scott, and son Sage. Flush cabinets keep clutter to a minimum. New windows frame the view of water and woods. That same landscape can be experienced from the upstairs deck (ABOVE RIGHT), the prow of which is the most prominent exterior element.



A palette of soft earth tones provides a sense of calm in the more public area of the house. The entry hall, which connects the family area with the library and office (the former formal dining room and screened-in porch, respectively), is paved with black Vermont slate and features an indoor garden of small smooth stones that the McDonalds collected from nearby beaches. It extends outside the floor-to-ceiling window, reinforcing the link between house and nature.

**FOR MORE DETAILS: SEE RESOURCES**

Upstairs, the new master suite has a light-filled bathroom built around a Japanese-style soaking tub. The bedroom is minimally furnished with just a bed and a chair, but features two important additions: a large dormer that provides a grand view of the river and a private deck.

On the exterior, the dormer and the facade of the living room below are framed in clear white cedar, so that the older house is still evident, but the house's new role and its link to the outdoors are emphasized. The extreme corner of the house and the deck above form an acute angle, reflected by triangular cedar decking that extends the living room space outdoors, where a planned terrace will continue toward woods and water.

This old homestead has been redefined — and while the McDonalds recall times when they questioned the financial soundness of their decision, they are secure in the results. “Nieces and nephews launch kayaks and our extended family gathers here with fond memories of what was,” says Katie, “as well as appreciation for what the house has become.”