

HOMES

& GARDENING



NEW HOME ON THE SAVANNA

By NANCY NGO
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Joe and Molly Stormont loved living in St. Paul's MacGroveland area. But as their family grew, they needed more space.

"We had two kids, a third on the way," Joe said. "We knew we were due to have another bedroom and that kind of thing."

They started searching in St. Paul and the surrounding area. As timing — or possibly fate — would have it, they came across a new development in the suburb of Grant on a swath of land they were very familiar with.

Joe and Molly, who both grew up in Stillwater, started dating their senior year of high school. They remember driving past the farm fields just minutes from their houses.

"It was just beautiful, especially when the sun was coming over it," Joe said. "Even back then when we were still in high school we said 'I wanna live there.' That was 10, 15 years ago."

STAR TRIBUNE / AIA HOME OF THE MONTH

The home in the new White Oaks Savanna development coexists with surrounding prairie, building "into" a hill rather than on top of it.



Photos by Spacecrafting

Top, black metal-clad windows and a dining area composed of modern, clean lines amplify the savanna backdrop. Above, the house's 1 1/2-story front was designed to be as unobtrusive as possible.

A new development called White Oaks Savanna was being built on the land they had long admired. The residential community includes 200 acres reserved for savanna and another 115 acres for organic farming. The rest is earmarked for 30 architecturally designed houses on 5- to 7-acre sites.

"It was a bit of serendipity," Joe said.

The couple had been living in a 1925 Spanish-style house complete with a red tile roof and many original features still intact. For their next house, they wanted a modern farmhouse. They hired Christopher Strom and Eric Johnson of Christopher Strom Architects in St. Louis Park to lead the charge.

The result, dubbed EyeLand at White Oaks Savanna, was the first house completed in the development. The project has also been named a 2022-2023 Home of the Month winner, a partnership between the Star Tribune and the American

See **AIA** on H6 ►

HOMEGAIZING

1950 rambler is a charmer with park views

By NANCY NGO
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When Jere Blanchfield was house hunting in the early 1990s, he felt he hit the jackpot when coming across a house on a corner lot across from Hiawatha Golf Course and blocks from Minnehaha Parkway.

On top of that, the house in the Ericson neighborhood of Minneapolis had been well maintained by the previous two owners and had a charm to it.

"The previous owners took good care of it," he said.

Sure, the midcentury modern rambler, built in 1950, was due for a refresh. It wore a lot of pink — on the walls, framing the storm windows, in linoleum tile and even as the main hue for the refrigerator.

"The bones were great. It just needed a new set of clothes," he said. "With a golf course and a park on two sides of it, the sightlines were so good I wasn't afraid of having to paint and carpet and

See **HOMEGAIZING** on H3 ►



Photos by Spacecrafting

Top, living room has new windows and Berber carpet. Above, the rambler is surrounded by green space.

Making a rental space all your own

By KIM COOK • Associated Press

Even though she was moving into a rental apartment, Alexa d'Argence was eager to put her personal stamp on it.

"Loving my space is more important to me than my security deposit. So I just went for it with paint, shelves, window treatments and upgrading the medicine cabinet," says d'Argence, who as a senior designer at BAR Architects in San Francisco knows something about creating a stylish space.

"My landlord actually appreciated the improvements. I'd say, consider changes that add value, and that wouldn't be removed if you moved out," she says.

Nondesigners might not feel as comfortable doing that, since most rental agreements stipulate that you can't permanently change anything. Another approach: Strike up a conversation with your

See **RENTAL** on H2 ►

STAR TRIBUNE/AIA HOME OF THE MONTH

Home of the Month appears in the Homes section the first Sunday of every month. The program, a partnership between the Star Tribune and the Minnesota chapter of the American Institute of Architects, features architect-designed houses selected by a jury of experts. The houses represent a range of prices, styles and locations.



NEW HOME ON THE SAVANNA

◀ AIA from HI

Institute of Architects (AIA) Minnesota recognizing top residential designs.

Home on the savanna

When it came to the new house, the Stormonts, both in their early 30s, knew what they wanted.

"We wanted our yard to be a big flat area, but we wanted to have a walkout basement," Molly said. "The biggest thing for us is we knew we were going to need four bedrooms on one floor and we knew we wanted space to entertain because we both have big families."

They also wanted to keep it affordable.

"We had to keep it pretty simple, we're a young family and building a home is quite an endeavor, both timewise and financially," she said. "We kind of relied on Chris and Eric to design a space that was functional for our family and that we could afford."

"The land and sightlines were also very important," Joe added.

Located in an open savanna amid a backdrop of rolling hills, gentle valleys and heritage trees, the house offered magnificent views and could be seen from all vantage points.

"Because it's located at one of the highest points [in the savanna], it's very visible from all sides. So all four sides become very important," Strom said. And "each side of the house has different elevations."

The architect team relied on three ingredients: scale, color and proportion. Rather than building on top of the hill, the house was tucked into it. And the house's 1½-story front was as unobtrusive as possible against the savanna backdrop.

The exterior is "quiet," accented by mostly black metal-clad windows. Two windows — off the garage and an upper-floor nursery — are light blue in hue, to illuminate the two front gables. Placing the largest window in the house in the bulky garage seemed to defy convention if the goal was to make the house unobtrusive.

"It's a bunch of smoke and mirrors," Strom explained. "It actually decreased the scale and distorted the proportion."

Tucking in

The back of the house slopes down into a wetland. And while the street side of the house has a smaller profile, the wetland side reaches to 2½ stories. That would be where the walkout features Molly had hoped for could be etched into the design.

Grading was key. The main-floor gathering spaces were connected to the backyard with an on-



Photos by Spacecrafting

The back of the house slopes down to a wetland. While the street side has a lower profile, the back of the house has an additional floor with a walkout, which was on the homeowner's wish list. Core living spaces — kitchen, dining area and family room — are connected. A window off the main floor hallway looks out onto ancient oak trees. "It just perfectly frames it," said homeowner Joe Stormont.

grade patio that wouldn't require railings, allowing for unobstructed views of the savanna. Past the patio, the grading was gently sloped downward to accommodate a basement-level walkout and continues until it eventually meets with the wetland.

With the hillside house at a 360-degree exposure, the architectural team had to be equally thoughtful about all the exterior sides, not just the front and back.

On one side, attention was drawn away from outdoor mechanics and utilities in view of the main road by incorporating triple farmhouse-style gables that break up the monotony and gradually increased in size, drawing one's gaze upward.

And sometimes modern touches don't require a huge splurge, but rather a good idea.

"For scale, we went with a shingle that was 50% larger than a typical shingle," Strom said. "It reduced the roof from being too rooey because we have a lot of architecture on the roof. It's not an expensive decision, but we thought it was something that worked really well."

An inside look

Inside, core living spaces — the kitchen, dining area and family room — are connected. It's where Joe and Molly can entertain and spend time with their kids. They also can keep an eye on their youngsters when they're outside playing.

The first floor also houses a formal living room separate from the other spaces.

"To me, it's the one space that's left untouched by kids'

toys," Molly said. "It's a little bit of a sanctuary for relaxing that doesn't make us feel like we need to clean up and it's a nice escape from the chaos of the rest of the house."

While the lines of the house are clean and modern, some traditional elements were incorporated into the design, such as millwork and shaker-style cabinets. Molly wanted to pay tribute to the house in St. Paul by adding a laundry chute and putting glass knobs on doors.

For the Stormonts, the house is everything they were looking for — practical and functional in design, modern in its farmhouse look — and more.

There were things they didn't think to ask for, but are glad the architects incorporated into the design. For one, there's poten-

About this project

Eye-Land at White Oaks Savanna, the first house completed in the new White Oaks Savannah development in Grant. The site is on an open savanna with 360-degree exposure, requiring the architects to think about animating all sides of the home.

Designing Firm: Christopher Strom Architects.

Size: 3,440 finished square feet.



Strom



Johnson

Project Team: Christopher Strom, AIA; Eric Johnson, AIA; Elizabeth Akkerman, Assoc. AIA.

General contractor: Redstone Architectural Homes.

Interior design: InUnison Design.

Landscape architect: TVLS.

Structural engineer: Bunkers and Associates.

tial for expansion. A four-season porch could be added between the kitchen and the pantry. And should the couple want one-level living in the future, there's room for an addition on the main floor for a bedroom. The basement, which is unfinished, could also be built out.

"We wanted a house that we could afford but we didn't need all the extra bells and whistles," Molly said. Still, "they had the foresight that, 'Yes, these are our needs now with our young family, but what would we need for this to be our forever home?' They made sure we weren't handcuffing ourselves and limiting any future design."

And that's a good thing. Because with three kids ages 2, 4 and 6, and another due in spring, they're already thinking about finishing part of the basement to give the kids more room to roam.

The Stormonts also appreciate how the windows capture the views, from the expansive dining room windows that overlook the valley to a smaller window in the hallway that looks out on a 100-year-old white oak tree.

"It just perfectly frames it," Joe said. "We didn't ask for this, but we know that this was very intentional. They thought of what this would look like through the changing seasons and maximized the beauty around us."

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