

# SHAPE SHIFTER

In Menlo Park, a modern home transforms to suit an active family's needs.

WRITTEN BY KIMBERLY OLSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN MERKL



**Architecture:** Howard J. Backen and Kirby Lee, Backen & Gillam Architects **Interior Design:** Emily Turner Barker and Marie Turner Carson, M. Elle Design  
**Home Builder:** Wakefield Mist, NorthWall Builders, Inc. **Landscape Architecture:** Janell Hobart, Denler Hobart Gardens, LLC



A contemporary abstract painting by Melissa Herrington hangs above a Gustavian table from Lief in Los Angeles. Hanging over it all is an Apparatus pendant sourced from Garde in Los Angeles. The lighting design throughout the home is by Vita Pehar Design.

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hen a couple started looking for what they imagined as their “50-year home”—one where they could raise a family and, later, host their grandchildren—they had a wish list

that was daunting. They needed an abode that was comfortable for kids but also felt right for entertaining. A place where guests could be easily accommodated and where occasional off-site business meetings could occur. After an extensive search, nothing on the market delivered, so they decided to start from scratch and hire a team to bring their dream house to life. Working with architects Howard Backen and Kirby Lee, designers Emily Turner Barker and Marie Turner Carson, and builder Wakefield Mist, they set about making a serene family home in the midst of a busy neighborhood in Menlo Park.

The new dwelling sits back from the property line, creating privacy, while walls of windows and retracting glass doors connect the rooms with the surrounding gardens by landscape architect Janell Hobart. A protected heritage oak tree, which now sits in the courtyard, dictated the design of the residence. “Because of the way the doors pocket into the walls, you can see right through from the courtyard to the lawn and this majestic tree,” says Mist. “It makes for a seamless indoor-outdoor connection.”

For optimum flexibility, the abode’s public spaces were designed to assume various roles. The covered porch off the main living area, for example, is a favorite hangout spot for the family. But if they open the interior doors and drop the screens, it magically transforms into a more sheltered gathering space for up to 50 people. During the design process, the team carefully considered how guests might circulate through the home during social functions. “We imagined people entering the space and gathering for cocktails in the courtyard, and then flowing through the living area onto the lawn to enjoy dinner or maybe a band,” Lee says.

Aesthetically, the owners envisioned a California-casual vibe. “They initially wanted a traditional,

white shiplap, clapboard home,” Lee says. “Over time, they felt that look didn’t fit with the site, and we transitioned to a more modern take on a farmhouse.” To that end, the team used dark, combed-wood boards on the exterior, “that create a lot more texture,” says Carson, who worked on the project with Barker, her design partner and sister. “Then we took that exterior treatment and brought it inside, but stained the boards white to keep things light and bright.”

With plenty of sunlight streaming in through windowed doors that pocket away, the team opted for a slightly darker hue on the walls in the library-dining room. “That room is wrapped in books,” says Carson. “A lot of dining rooms don’t get used unless you’re eating, but by adding these beautiful bookshelves we made it a multifunctional space where you can dine, relax or study.” A stylish oval dining table doubles as a spot to spread out reading material or work on projects. “It’s like one of those cool, traditional center library tables,” Carson notes. Like the dining room, the kitchen also has flexibility of use. It features two islands—one with barstools on both sides for casual meals and another designed with meal prep in mind—as well as a larger family dining table. “It also opens up to the covered porch with the fireplace and places for outdoor dining,” Carson says. “In this home, the elements of a good lifestyle are packed into every room.”

Collaboration between the design team was key throughout the project, with intention guiding every step. “We examined everything, including small day-to-day routines,” says Lee. “For instance, in the kitchen, we designed a station for the kids to make their oatmeal in the morning, creating a little work triangle for them for efficiency.” Mist adds, “When you walk through that house, there’s a reason to everything in it. We all put a lot of thought into every piece of the project.”

Today, the owners say they seldom want to leave—and they have little reason to do so. Lee says she can understand the feeling. “When I’m there, it definitely feels like it is its own little oasis equipped with everything you would need.” ■

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Clad in bookcases, the library-dining room features an oak table by B.B. for Reschio surrounded by barrel-back chairs covered in a Moore & Giles leather. A cluster of Bomma hand-blown glass pendants provide light. Two bespoke armchairs and a vintage table from Galerie Half in Los Angeles create a cozy fireside reading spot.



The family room, which opens to a covered porch, offers two conversation spots. A pair of armchairs from Loro Piana flank a bespoke stone-topped coffee table, while custom sofas offer seating for television viewing. Overhead is a dome pendant by March, and a stylish Gérard floor lamp provides reading light. The rug is by AM Carpet & Textile Design.



**Left:** Cylindrical pendants by Ames Ingham hang in a corridor near the striking modern stairway. The metal railing was fabricated by Fable Inc., while the wooden treads and risers were made by Coyne Stair Inc.

**Opposite:** In the breakfast area, an oak Interieurs dining table is paired with linen-canvas-and-oak chairs by Design Collectif. The fiberglass-and-stainless-steel pendant is by March.





**Above:** The kitchen opens to a covered porch for alfresco dining. The custom teak table is paired with Cat's Cradle dining chairs by Rose Tarlow for Sutherland. Michael Taylor Designs armchairs, covered in Perennials' Rough 'n Rowdy fabric, are perched near the fireplace atop a Mitchell Denburg Collection rug.

**Opposite:** Two kitchen islands topped with Calacatta marble offer plenty of space for casual dining, with teak-and-seagrass counter stools by James Perse Furniture. The lamps are by Lucca & Co., and the hanging pendants are by Ames Ingham. Black hardware from Jacqueline Nicolas Architectural Imported Hardware adds dramatic contrast to the white cabinetry.

The main bedroom offers treetop views from a graceful, linen-upholstered sleigh bed by Dmitry & Co, purchased at Una Malan. A hand-knotted bamboo-and-silk rug by AM Carpet & Textile Design adds texture underfoot. Armchairs from Thomas Lavin provide fireside seating. The chandelier is by Lucca Studio Design.

