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The Lake Michigan modernist translation

Photography: Ashley Avila



For those harboring an affinity for the waterscape, the sheltered view of it from home overlooking shoreline can be a poetic experience. It can offer dramatic statement, grounding focus, or inviting spatial backdrop in which human connection and interaction blurs the boundaries between built and natural landscapes.

Perched high on a steep bluff with a survey of lake and ravine, this Lake Michigan home was designed and built with an awareness of and toward the water; capturing both clean functionality and a calm flow within its extensively remodeled walls. It is tucked within its landscape, among trees and terrain, and built upon an existing foundation. The modern-inspired exterior of contrasting dark metal and neutral façade greet those from the drive with a blend of simple lines and forms, and light touches of added warmth, such as in the details beneath overhangs and the oversized light fixture at the door.

From the shore, the two-story home—complete with a lower level walk-out—pays homage to its location and leverages a use of windows both functional and varied in size, an expansive wooden



deck, and stonework that blends into retaining walls and patio.

Designed and built by the team of Scott Christopher Homes in Grand Rapids, Sears Architects in Grand Rapids, and Riopelle Design Group in Grand Haven, Michigan for homeowners Darren and Paige Riopelle, the previously dated ranch residence has been transformed into a lakefront respite from a fast-paced professional lifestyle.

The approach

“When we first started the process, we were looking to downsize,” said Paige Riopelle, designer and owner of Riopelle Design Group. “We picked something on the lake, because we wanted to be on the lake; but we were very specific about the location. We wanted something close enough to town, but we still wanted our privacy and that is really hard to find.”

With the anticipation the perfect lot would take time to locate, the Riopelles discovered the site quicker than expected after walking through an older ranch-style home that had been up for sale for nearly two years.

“We decided we should just go in it as a frame of reference,” Paige Riopelle said. “The floor plan was similar to what we wanted, the flow was really good, it had a really good energy, and we could instantly see what we could do to it to make it ours.”

Familiar with the design and build process from both a homeowner and designer perspective, the Riopelles brought in the team at Sears Architects to help with the remodel project. Sears Architects is an award-winning boutique architecture and planning firm with a portfolio of projects representing private individuals, historic residential associations, and private developers. Throughout the years, the architectural and planning firm has completed work in Michigan, Washington, Florida, and New Jersey.

“They were looking to transform a dated, basic walkout ranch into an updated—and practically all new—year-round house suitable for their professional lifestyles and active family,” said Robert Sears, architect and owner of Sears Architects. “They wanted to add an entire second story and main floor master suite wing to the existing building envelope. We also redesigned and added many modern amenities to accommodate indoor and outdoor living.”

The design strategy also re-envisioned an existing second-bedroom-and-den on the first floor as part of the master suite; opened up the lower level to allow increased natural light and livable space; expanded and reoriented the kitchen with sightlines of the lake; omitted a formal dining room; and added spa-like bathrooms, a hot tub and sauna, and lower-level entertainment. While a stark contrast to the existing ranch, the home is intentionally kept simple with an organizing flow toward the lake.

“I think my favorite thing about the house is definitely the view,” Paige Riopelle said. “You can always change a house, but you can’t change its location typically.”

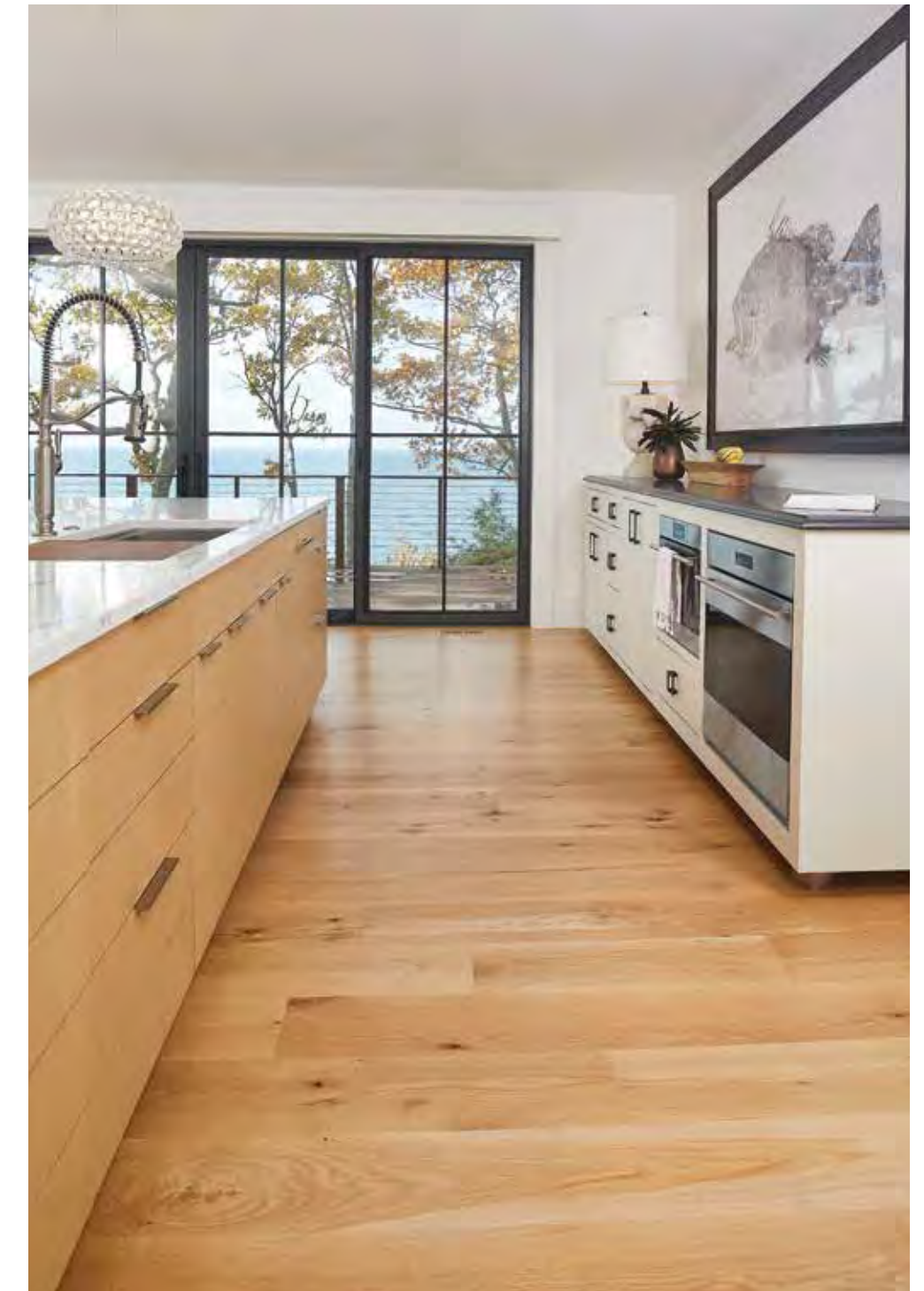
The build

Its site, however, did add a layer of complexity to the project based on its shoreline location and requirement of working with the Department of Environmental Quality, or DEQ, at the State of Michigan.

“Although it is one of the most beautiful, established Lake Michigan lots in the Lower Peninsula, various Michigan Department of Environmental Quality regulations had to be adhered to and approved due to its fragile dune location,” Sears said. “Septic, foundational, and structural updates had to be implemented within the context of the state and local zoning regulations as well for the owners to reach their design goals.”

It was at this point, the team turned to Scott Christopher Homes—whose professional craftspeople had been brought in early on in the design process—and its expertise working on shoreline and waterfront

properties, and navigating the often convoluted processes associated with governmental approval. A company with more than 35 years of experience, Scott Christopher Homes is a West Michigan builder offering custom home, renovation, and tailored services to clients as its team works with clients to deliver one-of-a-kind environments and spaces.





For Scott Christopher, founder and owner of Scott Christopher Homes, pursuing the industry as a vocation began at a very young age when his passion for building was fostered by weekends spent working with his father in the field.

“My father was in the industry and I was a kid that wanted to be a builder, that was all there was to it,” Christopher said.

Although Christopher didn’t have an opportunity to work alongside his late father who had passed of a heart attack while attending Western Michigan University for a degree in construction management supervision, he went on to work for a local

builder subcontracting homes for a couple years during a period in the early 1980s amid high interest rates.

“It was just brutal,” Christopher said. “I hired employees to do the work with me and basically [the local builder] sold the job and I built it. From there, I got busier and busier on my side jobs and went out on my own.”

Since then, Scott Christopher Homes has become a well-known name in the industry throughout the region as it built a portfolio of projects—nearly 60 percent of which are located on waterfront—from the southern Michigan border to Mackinac Bridge in the North. The builder’s portfolio is also in large part referral-based and Christopher attributes the success of the business partly to the time spent identifying true cost proposals upfront for projects, seasoned full-time project managers onsite, and having a civil engineer— fondly referred to as “dirt doctor”—as the general operations manager to help with drainage studies, zoning variances, and governmental processes.

“There are three things we follow in our company: treat people the way you want to be treated, be honest, and do what you say you are going to do. I’m not the perfect carpenter and we will make mistakes, but when we do make mistakes, simply judge us by how we remedy the mistake,” Christopher said. “The other thing I ask clients is if it is on their mind, let it be on the list. Don’t let something fester. If it bugs them, let us know right away so we can adjust it.”

The ability to navigate working with the DEQ and provide a degree of flexibility in the design and build process became an integral part of this Lake Michigan home project. Referred to the Riopelles by Sears Architects, Christopher said he was at a majority of the initial design meetings and was able to provide builder input and expertise really from the beginning.

Christopher also noted the homeowners had previously lived on the lake before and had a clear vision of what they wanted to build—or renovate—and having lived in a number of homes, they knew what worked for them and what didn’t. With the vision of a modern home in mind, the team initially began renovating the existing infrastructure working with the foundation that was there based on ease of DEQ permitting.

“Originally there was more of the home slated to be saved—the sub floor and exterior walls—but once we got into it, we saw the problems that there was behind the siding that wasn’t visible early on. It made most sense financially—and just for the good of the project overall—to take it down to the foundation,” Christopher said.

“The biggest challenge working on Lake Michigan is you are always dealing with the DEQ. You have to work within their rules and regulations; and one of the things we did early on when we saw we had to do more demolition than was originally planned, we got a hold of the DEQ,” Christopher added.

With DEQ approval for a modified permit, additional structure demolition, septic system improvements, and shoring up of foundation and walls were completed at the site.

“You have to be sensitive to the areas outside of the permitted work area and we have become masters of that over the years, because so many of our projects are on Lake Michigan in Critical Dune high erosion,” Christopher said.

The pivot

Christopher also noted the client involvement throughout the process was one of the elements that stood out to him about the project.

“The client was very involved and it makes for a great project. We are building prototypes, so as much information as they





can put on a plan is great, but still at the end of the day, it is a prototype and clients will change their mind,” Christopher said. “The architect will see opportunities, we’ll see opportunities, and the clients will see opportunities—the client was there almost every day and she has a great design vision. Her involvement made such a nice project.”

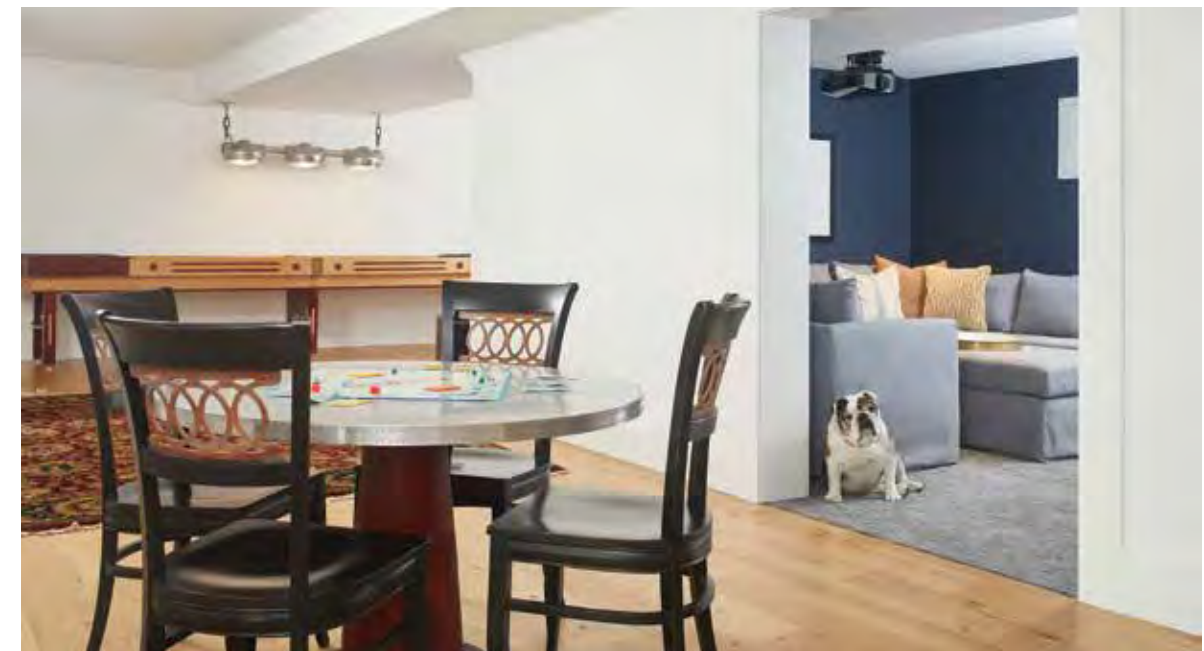
For the homeowners, the involvement and creativity afforded them throughout the process was an important and enjoyable aspect of the home renovation project. As someone who prefers remodels over a new build, Paige Riopelle said her favorite part of the process is changing things on the fly and being pushed to make decisions.

“You have to be sometimes more creative when you are working within boundaries versus a blank slate,” Paige Riopelle said. “We knew we had challenges and working with Scott Christopher through some of those challenges and brainstorming on what we had to do, versus what we wanted to do aesthetically—I loved that process and working through all those things.”

Darren Riopelle also noted they were able to be really creative in looking at the home and process, and even though they had an established plan, once the walls started coming down, they were able to do something different.

“It was going to keep as many walls as possible—and fireplaces—and when we got down to it, we really had to take all the walls down and we lost all the fireplaces. It allowed us to redesign the flow better,” Darren Riopelle said.

“We totally changed the original layout





from the first set of blueprints to what we actually finished with. I always liked that process, because putting it on paper doesn't always mean that is reality when you actually walk through it and start seeing things—and being confident to make those changes and say structurally can it happen or not? That was fun,” Darren Riopelle added.

The design

As existing bones gave way to the two-story picture of refreshing modernism, Paige Riopelle began bringing their vision to life throughout the interior of the home. Found-



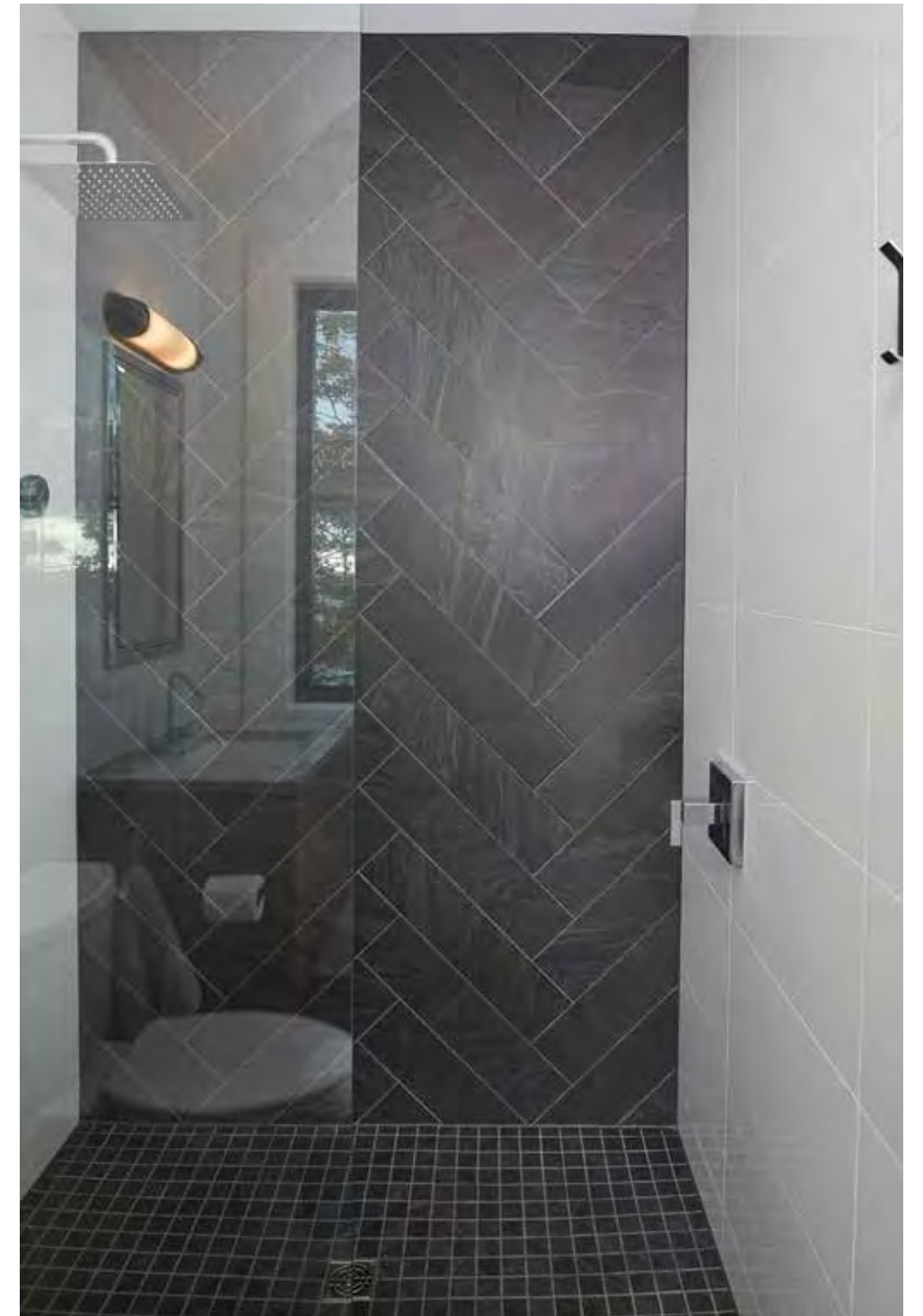
er of Riopelle Design Group, a spatial design firm focused on the hardscape of design for remodels and new construction, Paige Riopelle started by thinking about the outcome.

“Everybody works with a different budget, but regardless you have to look at what you value spending money on. To spend money just to spend money doesn't make a whole lot of sense. There is a balance between putting the investment in an area where you are going to value and you are going to appreciate every day, versus not,” Paige Riopelle said. “I start there...and pri-

oritize that list both functionally and aesthetically.”

Riopelle Design Group works with clients to create spaces reflective of their vision, feels and works great, and to facilitate a simple and enjoyable process. From cabinets, lighting, electrical function, flooring, and countertops, to working with homeowners at the architectural stage, Paige Riopelle said she strives to marry the relationship between the contractor, builder, and homeowner.

“I think a lot of times they don't always speak the same language, and so it is keep-



ing the project moving forward in both communication and helping the homeowners make decisions in a timely basis. A lot of times the homeowners just don't know what they don't know and they don't know where to go to look for things,” Paige Riopelle said. “It can be extremely overwhelming if you are picking out things for five bathrooms at a time, and helping each room have its own personality, but still create cohesiveness and a flow throughout.”

Self-admittedly passionate about working with the trades and being onsite sleuthing new solutions to address challenges,

Paige Riopelle said for their home, they spent a lot of time really thinking about the function of the space.

“The functional aspect of the house is really where you get your joy out of, I think, when things flow the way you want them to flow and they are instinctively where you think they should be,” Paige Riopelle said. “I think there is a lot of value there and we took a lot of time thinking about how we would use the house.”

From eliminating a dining room to recognizing the needs of future life stages, the thought process behind the design drove



many factors. Its location on the lake led to taking advantage of it as an asset—and not creating too many distracting focal points—and their own professional careers in part influenced the clean, albeit welcoming milieu of the home.

“You are paying to be on the lake, you should look at the lake; and keeping the softness and continuity throughout was important,” Paige Riopelle said. “I like how it is clean; it is still warm, it is not cold in any way, but it has very clean lines. We both live lives that are very busy with a lot of people and a lot of decisions, so coming into a house that is calming and clean—there is enough clutter in our heads so to get away from that is my favorite part of the house.”

The home

Shades of white and black, tempered by soothing wooden tones, are woven throughout the home to provide both backdrop and statement. Intricate detailing in bedframes and hardware lend personality and warmth to the home, as does the brilliant shades found in a bedroom, entertainment space, and bathroom. Personal lighting and artwork are threaded within, translating pure modernism into something distinctive and individual.

Kitchen cabinets, long labored over by both the artisanal craftsmen at Scott Christopher Homes and Riopelle, are complemented by white countertops and bar stools of gray fabric and black bases that line the island. Sightlines flow effortlessly toward both modern-inspired club chair and linear fireplace in the living space; and the blue waters beyond the raised outdoor deck.

Sears said the new house is a dramatic difference in style and size despite the existing ranch bones.

“The new design is clean and crisp modern,” Sears said. “This project was a huge team effort among Sears Architects, Scott Christopher Homes, and the homeowners. [Their] involvement and interior design skills were an integral part of this project.”

For Christopher, building one-of-a-kind projects, complete with their own challenges and enveloping-pushing design, is really exciting

“I absolutely love building and fixing up homes. I’m just passionate about it and when we have a client who is involved with a project and is passionate about—and having fun—it is that much better,” Christopher said.



