

FAÇADE

Photo by Nathan Kiriman



Instead of standard-issue sheetrock, Baltic birch planks are used to transform a prosaic lower level into a Zen-like retreat. It sheathes walls and defines various activity rooms, including a guest bedroom underscored with a raised plinth that juts out into the main living space for added architectural cachet.

and irregular foundation walls. “Calling it choppy and inefficient was an understatement,” Radutny notes.

To fulfill their mandate, they had to devise a fluid and elegant way to rationalize the disjointed space and give it a cohesive demeanor. Inspired by the limited existing conditions, they dreamed big and came up a program that blends a novel floor plan with inventive building materials.

The layout relies on a series of softly curving walls to skirt the basement’s orthogonal perimeter and divide it into six distinct activity areas that include a living area, wet bar, bedroom and walk-in closet, bathroom, yoga room and storage space (see diagram). The walls also streamline the basement’s awkward geometry and provide graceful new boundaries that anchor an extensive system of ceiling soffits to hide mechanical and structural elements. Their edges are angled in or out rather than straight up and down at 90-degree angles, an astute design tactic that lightens their visual load with a bit of architectural intrigue.

The materials palette uses a mainstream staple—Baltic birch plywood—in an unconventional way. “It comes in 4-foot by 8-foot sheets, so we cut the sheets up into 4-inch by 24-inch strips and laid them like masonry bricks to create the new curvilinear walls,” Tebben says. They take no more space than standard-issue sheetrock walls, which rely on 2 x 4 studs, but are easy to build and sport a stunning façade that emulates woven wicker and is penetrated by light and air. “Building them is a forgiving process because little imperfections in the

Hooray for Bali Wood

CREATIVE THINKING TURNS A CONVENTIONAL BASEMENT INTO A TRANQUIL RETREAT

As architectural vernaculars go, Norman Rockwell-sweet and Zen-sleek are worlds apart. But that didn’t keep homeowner Chris Martins from requesting an unlikely pairing of the two styles from her Chicago architects, Vlad Radutny and Paul Tebben of Studio Ide.

“We have a very traditional home,” Martins says of her quaint village-style house in west suburban Geneva, “but I told them that when we walk downstairs, we want to be transported to a tranquil five-star Balinese resort. It would be like taking a stay-cation.”

Complicating matters, Martins also wanted the space to be “open and airy” and actively multipurpose, with areas for living, sleeping, exercising and entertaining as well as a spacious walk-in closet off the bedroom, a storage room for seasonal items and a spa-quality bathroom.

Tall orders for a 1,500-square-foot walkout basement with only two windows; space-guzzling and chaotically configured mechanicals; irrationally sited support beams; ceilings that ranged from 7.5 to 9.5 feet high;

material and the stacks don't show," says Radutny. "And the effect it achieves pays homage to the Asian concept of translucent screens."

To give the space further architectural cachet, the architects and their contractor, Harder Brothers Construction, also underscored the bedroom with a raised plinth clad in cork rather than the slate tiles that sheath the rest of the floor (except for the yoga room, which is also cork). It juts out beyond its Baltic plywood partition, a design strategy that "plays with proportion in the space and gives it a sense of separation from the living area," Tebben points out. "When you step up you feel like you're entering another realm."

Other design devices enhance function and make the space seem more expansive. In the bar, a set of French doors leading out to the patio left a space too narrow for adequate behind-the-counter working room, so the architects dreamed up a staggered set-up that didn't block the window, but gave sections of the bar more 'leg' room. And in the yoga room, the architects capitalized on the formwork of the 24-inch wide concrete walls, cladding every other section with space-enhancing mirrors. They make the room feel larger, reflect light and fulfill a purpose, given the room's mandate.

Today, Martins admits the scheme was originally "hard to wrap my mind around," but now "can't imagine living without" the transformative and tranquil space. > **Lisa Skolnik**



A model at left shows the way soft curves were used to streamline the space's awkward geometry and define activity areas. The Baltic birch planks were stacked like bricks to build the walls (below left), which were shored up with temporary braces (top right below) as building guides until completed. Interior walls, such as the one defining the guest bedroom below, are translucent.



Photos by Nathan Kirkman

Showing Wheel Commitment

PERKINS+WILL CYCLISTS ON A ROLL

Bicycle enthusiasts at Perkins+Will are riding high these days. In the three years since they launched Perkins+Wheeler, a program that encourages employees to bike to work, they have logged many miles, burned calories and thwarted CO2 emissions.

"People who are into cycling are really into it," says Mark Jolicoeur, AIA, principal and veteran bicycle commuter. "There aren't a lot of in-betweeners. Some people think we are crazy."

The firm had a long-standing and close-knit subculture of cyclists, but in 2008 a few of its members suggested greater formality. They devised a record-keeping system to track their miles and calculate the environmental impact. They also established rules: for instance, participants must wear helmets, and they must equip their bikes with headlights and taillights. Major contributors to the effort are architects Gelacio Arias and Ute Tegtmeier, AIA.

The program's goals include clean, efficient transportation and good exercise, says Jolicoeur, who makes the 16-mile round-trip between his Oak Park residence and downtown office almost daily when he's in town.

"There's also a reconnection to the environment [that] you just don't get when you're inside a car, bus or train," he says.

About two dozen of the firm's employees, male and female, pedal to work more or less regularly, although as seasonal temperatures plummet, so does the number of riders.

"About two of us ride in January," says Jolicoeur, who rode three days the first week of 2011. "Cold rain is the most challenging. If it's 95 degrees and raining, that's kind of fun. If it's a cold rain, it's pretty miserable. I've done it, and I've got rain gear, but it's not something one seeks to do."

The February blizzard kept everyone off the streets and bike paths for a week, but they were back in the saddle the next week.

Results are tallied at the end of each year. Top-mileage >