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Surprising spaces

PUBLISHED SAT, NOV 28, 2009 02:00 AM
MODIFIED SAT, NOV 28, 2009 07:17 AM

COURTESY OF JAMES WEST



The main living space features sustainable materials: soapstone countertops, concrete floors and recycled wood.

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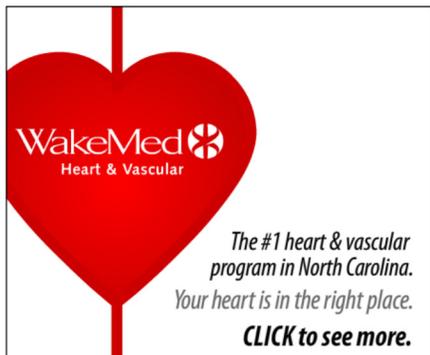
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A contemporary gem makes its home in historic Oakwood Park, near downtown Raleigh. The Martin Residence incorporates significant elements of both contemporary and sustainable design and enlivens its street, yet it sits comfortably among its bungalow neighbors.

The four-level house sits high on its site, and a garden of native plants leads to the front door. Its large windows, concrete western wall and straightforward facades whisper of modernity, but do not shout.

Architect Tina Govan has worked and lived in Japan, and this experience has fed her design on several levels: Elements of profound beauty and use of well-considered materials exist throughout this house. The Eastern influence can be felt throughout in its sense of serenity, the easy flow of inside and outside spaces, and the efficiency of interlocking spaces. It can be seen in the carefully designed details, the choices of natural materials and the thoughtful positioning of its elements.



The site posed several challenges, but the architect and landscape designer turned these into assets. First, the lot is small - 2,700 square feet -- and has a steep sideways slope. However, the slope allowed the architect to include four levels within the area allowed by Raleigh's zoning code.

The original intent was to retain and improve the original house and a large tree in the front garden. But early investigation revealed significant structural problems in the house, and the tree could not withstand the stress of construction. Each was removed, but traces of them remain. The new house was built on the footprint of the old; a beautiful tree now grows in the same spot as the old.

A winding path moves through the native plant garden, up to the front door and the first special element: a wooden bench that appears to extend through a glass panel from the front porch into the entry hall (actually, it's built on both sides of the window).

Natural light

The main level of the house is predominantly an open room with a galley kitchen that leads to a spacious living/dining room. The living room in turn opens to an outside space of matching size - a second living room - and to the garden beyond. The living area is a feast of sustainable, sensuous materials: The kitchen countertop is velvety soapstone; the solar-heated floors are sealed, ground concrete aggregate and recycled wood.