



# Midcentury MAKEOVER

On Falmouth Foreside, a savvy renovation of a treasured time capsule

by Rebecca Falzano // Photography Jonathan Reece

**B**efore the renovation, guests who visited the Falmouth home of Ben and Leslie Donovan\* faced a bit of a quandary. According to Leslie, “People would text us from the driveway to ask, ‘How do I get in?’” Rather than your standard, obvious front door, the main entrance was hidden: actually the door to the walk-out basement, it was accessed by walking along the garage to the side of the house, and brought guests in through the first-floor family room. Understandably, a clear way to enter the house was at the top of the Donovans’ must-have list when it came time to renovate.

For the Donovans, however, very little could have deterred them from buying this house on the Foreside, just a half-mile away from their previous cottage-style home on Foreside Road. The couple had loved their last house but, as Leslie explains, “When you live on the Foreside, you want to be able to see the water.” Over the years, the couple always kept an eye out for anything that came on the market with water views, but everything they saw was either out of their price range or required a teardown. Then, one day Leslie was walking their dog in a field near the Portland Yacht Club and saw a For Sale sign on a midcentury house

with a partial stone façade and views of the water. She ran home and looked it up online. Not only was it still on the market, but it was in their price range. The couple called their realtor, Linda MacDonald, who helped them sell their current home before even putting it on the market and also got them under contract for this one.

Rather than immediately renovate, Ben, a surgeon, and Leslie, a nonprofit consultant, decided to live in the house for a little while before changing anything. Built in 1964, the house was a time capsule. “You could tell it had been solidly built,” says Leslie. “It was all original, down to the shag carpets in every bedroom.” After half a year of living there, the Donovans had gotten a feel for the space and decided to start with a renovation of just the kitchen, which was small and walled off from the rest of the house. “I spend a lot of time in the kitchen,” says Leslie. “It’s the heart of the home, but this was such a tiny space, you couldn’t open the dishwasher and refrigerator at the same time, because everything was so tight.”

The couple hired Mary Adams of Kitchen Cove Cabinetry and Design in Portland to help them reimagine the room. When it became evident that some of the windows might

The exterior of this 1960s house in Falmouth was renovated by architect Kevin Browne and builder Josh Sevigny with a mix of white cedar shiplap and horizontal cement board siding in blue gray, which pairs well with the original stone façade of the garage. Homeowner Ben Donovan reworked the property’s natural water feature, reconstructing retaining walls and waterfalls, reworking the plantings to include only native Maine species, and building a stone bridge. “It’s like his yoga,” says his wife, Leslie.

*\*Homeowners’ names were changed at their request.*





The kitchen was the jumping-off point for the whole-house renovation. Kitchen designer Mary Adams of Kitchen Cove Cabinetry and Design helped transform what was once a series of a closed-off kitchen, dining room, and hallway, into an open kitchen and dining area. "In keeping with the modern design, we used sleek tall pantry cabinets on the back wall and a custom aluminum tambor to allow for plenty of storage, making sure the space can always be free of clutter," says Adams. "The use of the quartered figured Anigre on the custom cabinetry and alder on the interior of the windows allowed the space to stay light while adding warmth." The caramel tones in the Taj Mahl quartzite countertops and the brass accents in the pulls, faucet, and lighting bring more warm tones into the space. "Brass hardware and light fixtures from House of Lights are nautical but not overly beachy," says Leslie.





Prior to the renovation, the house had no obvious front door, bewildering guests who would have to enter from a door on the side of the house. Browne and Sevigny added a street-facing entry (opposite) with a clear identity.

The owners' bath (above) is located on an interior wall, so Browne added a window above the shower to bring natural light in from the bedroom beyond. Mary Adams from Kitchen Cove Cabinetry and Design chose Porcelanosa tile from Distinctive Tile and Design, chrome shower and vanity fixtures, and custom cabinetry in walnut.

need to be reworked, Adams suggested they call in an architect: Kevin Browne of Kevin Browne Architecture in Falmouth. Leslie was thrilled; she had served on a board with Browne and admired his work. They also hired builder Josh Sevigny of Sylvain and Sevigny, who has worked with Browne on several homes. "Once we had those three on our team, we never looked back," says Leslie.

As is often the case with renovations, the project grew bigger than Leslie and Ben first expected. "We'd never done anything of this scale before, so we were coming in needing to learn a lot," says Leslie. For example, they learned that, if they were going to rip down the ceiling, they might as well blow in new insulation and update the lighting. And if they were going to change *some* windows, they really should change *all* the windows on an elevation. They also learned that if you open up the ceiling and realize there had been a fire at one point, then you better make all the necessary structural repairs while you're at it.

The week that construction began on the house, the Donovans left for a two-week trip to visit their daughter who was studying in Copenhagen. As they traveled around Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, a light bulb went off in their heads. "We really started to get excited about what we were doing," says Leslie. "Previously we thought of modern design as sort of cold or austere (especially having come from a warm, cottagey home). But when you see these beautiful spaces, especially in Denmark, they are warm, inviting, and very natural, with a steady focus on function and comfort. No need for lots of other distracting details." The couple came home obsessed with all things Danish. (In fact, Leslie briefly wanted to reupholster the furniture in reindeer hide, but Ben convinced her it might be a bit much.)

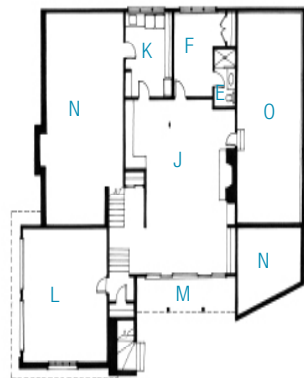
"The house had great bones to start with, but was in need of a transformation," says Sevigny. The first thing the team did was take down the walls around the kitchen, to open it up to the dining area and beyond. Adams selected cabinets made of anigre, a light





## FIRST FLOOR

## BASEMENT



- A Entry
- B Living Area
- C Dining Area
- D Kitchen
- E Bathrooms
- F Bedrooms
- G Owners' Bedroom
- H Owners' Bathroom
- I Owners' Closet
- J Rec Room
- K Laundry Room
- L Garage
- M Covered Porch
- N Storage/Crawl Space
- O Mechanical Room

The water-facing side of the house (opposite) was updated from white window frames with no grills to black window frames with grills "adding some definition," according to Browne. The decks with stainless-steel railings are original to the house and reinforced underneath with steel beams. "The previous homeowners had several parties and weddings here, so they used the decks as a dance floor, which we just think is so fun," says Leslie.

The living room (above) features the home's original stone fireplace wall with a new insert. Beyond, new windows designed by Browne showcase water views.

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(Opposite, clockwise from top left)

The waterfall edge Mary Adams designed on the countertops makes a graceful transition from kitchen into an open dining area. Browne changed the window pattern on this wall to allow for more natural light and views.

For a new front entry, Browne took inspiration from the rooflines of the rest of the house.

Browne brought the windows right down to the countertops. Retractable screens allow for unobstructed views. "When you're doing the dishes you're looking out the beautiful windows at the water," says Leslie. "That Cinderella moment never comes."

The dining area, a few steps up from the living room, is offset with a custom railing that Ben sketched out after a trip to a museum, brought to life by Nate Deyesso of DSO Creative Fabrication.

African hardwood, as well as quartzite countertops and a waterfall-edge island. Brass hardware and light fixtures are "nautical but not overly beachy," according to Leslie. "Mary wanted only natural finishes—wood and stone—to match what was outside so that the overall effect would be integrated and soothing," says Leslie. The dining area, a few steps up from the living room, is offset with a custom railing that Ben sketched out after a trip to a museum, brought to life by Nate Deyesso of DSO Creative Fabrication in Scarborough.

The living room was kept largely intact, including the the original built-ins that occupy a corner and the original stone fireplace, which was upgraded with an insert. The team reworked the bedrooms off the kitchen and dining area so that Leslie and Ben's three kids (ages 16, 19, and 21) could each have their own bathroom on one side of the house, while an owners' suite occupies a corner that faces the water. Browne added a wider entry hall to set off the opening to the two bedroom suites off the kitchen, where previously a bedroom had opened right into the dining room. Prior to the renovation, a dark, narrow

hallway next to the closed-off kitchen led the way to the other bedrooms. Now, with the kitchen opened up, the path leading to the private rooms of the house is light and airy.

"The natural wood on the interior—in the cabinetry and the built-ins—was one of the biggest elements that helped with the warmth of the space," says Browne. The team was worried about having too many kinds of wood, particularly on the ceiling, which is quite high. "We had a lot of conversations about what to do with the ceiling, which looked like a heavy stucco cloud," says Leslie. Browne chose V-match paneling painted white, which offsets the wood of the kitchen beautifully. "Now I feel like the ceiling just recedes in a comfortable way," says Leslie.

According to Browne, the biggest architectural feat was coming up with a window layout on the water side of the house that captures the view from every angle but doesn't feel forced. "We played around with a variety of ideas for the big gable end," says Browne. "We had this really high cathedral ceiling, but the windows weren't above door height, so we changed all that." Browne





added a little more definition to the windows, sometimes just by changing the grille patterns. In the kitchen, he brought the windows right down to the countertop and chose retractable screens for unobstructed views. "Opening up all these spaces, there's so much more light in here than there ever was before," says Sevigny. "All the windows that we changed, both inside and out, change the space dramatically."

Now, from those big view-filled windows, Leslie and Ben like to watch neighbors walking their dogs and kids skating on the frozen ponds in the winter. In the summertime, the Portland Yacht Club runs camps, and the kids will be out there rigging their boats and playing lawn games. "I love being in the middle of this little hubbub," says Leslie.

And as for that long-awaited front door? Browne designed it right where you'd intuit it to be—on the street-facing side of the house, seamlessly blended with roof pitches and textures pulled from the rest of the house. "Now there's more of a street presence to draw people in," he says. "The house, with its stone face, used to be a little forbidding looking," says Leslie. "But the new entrance warms the whole place up, and improves functionality. We no longer have people texting us from the driveway." There is one family member who hasn't quite gotten on board yet, though. The Donovans' dog still sometimes shows up at the downstairs side door, waiting to be let inside. Old habits die hard. **MH+D**

*For more information, see Resources on page xx.*

The owners' bedroom (above) is oriented toward the views.

#### BRIGHT IDEAS



- Energy retrofit
- Two-inch rigid insulation on outside walls
- New windows
- Air sealing around new windows
- Spray foam in rafter bays in cathedral ceiling
- Mini-split heat pump