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Raising the Ranch

A 1970s home in Guilford is elevated into a modern, luxurious space for the whole family.

BY JENNIFER CARMICHAEL



"I believe that the kitchen is the heart of a home, so we ensured that the kitchen was central to the design plan. People can now gather in the kitchen to chat and hang out while others are cooking."

Pleasure islands: The homeowners were initially taken aback by the designer's suggestion of two islands in the kitchen. But now they're popular spots for family meals and entertaining between the kitchen and living room during large gatherings.

Albert Laguna and his wife Sandra Hernandez enjoyed living in the Beaver Hills neighborhood of New Haven, but they needed more space. With a 2-year-old daughter and Sandra's mother coming to live with them during the pandemic, it was time for a larger home. They found a 2,500-square-foot raised ranch in Guilford with 2,000 extra square feet of usable space downstairs to accommodate an in-law suite. But they needed help renovating it.

"We were intimidated by the scope and complexity of the project," says Laguna, who moved with Hernandez from Chicago to New Haven in 2012 to take a faculty position at Yale University. "What seemingly would be an endless stream of decisions, large and small, was a lot to take on with our busy schedules."

After finding Design by the Jonathans online and liking their portfolio, he called the New Haven-based firm. Senior designer Lana Nguyen came to the house in August 2021 and reconfigured the space with them in real time. And Laguna's Realtor recommended Rich Spotlow of Heritage Home Improvements out of Guilford. Together, they provided a clear map forward for the 1971-built home.





Walls were removed in the master bath to open the space and create a modern, spa-like retreat.



Another resort-like space, the primary bedroom isn't just for sleeping—a seating area with a love-seat and cubed tables offers a nice spot to relax.

Having lived in smaller homes previously, Laguna and Hernandez also had never experienced a renovation, let alone consulting a design professional. But with Nguyen on board, they started to figure out their style and lived in a faculty apartment on Yale University's campus for a year while the design team did its work, completing the project in June 2022.

"Their taste leaned modern," says Nguyen, who designed the living room, kitchen, primary bedroom and bathroom. "And we stayed true to keeping things straightforward, simple and clean, all while conscious of keeping costs down. There are tricks that we try to find to focus the eyes on a particular area or spend money on this section but less on another."

Many older homes have different layouts and accommodations that don't quite work in today's world, Nguyen says. For instance, opening up the living area allowed for gathering and a more significant island. Because the space is very long, Nguyen's plans allowed for two 8-by-4-foot islands, each offering lots of storage. And since Laguna often works from home, a second island gave them a workstation.

"I love to cook, so the kitchen design was important to me," says Hernandez, deputy director of Cheshire Public Library. She provided feedback to her husband, who worked more closely with Nguyen because his work schedule is more flexible. "I believe that the kitchen is the heart of a home, so we ensured that the kitchen was central to the design plan. It needs to be functional to use for everyday cooking as well as for larger cooking proj-

ects. People can now gather in the kitchen to chat and hang out while others are cooking."

While keeping the windows and doors in the same location, Lana chose white stock cabinets, which kept shipment on time and cost down. The upper and lower cabinets are two tones, with the upper ones lighter to blend in with the surrounding space. Two glass cabinets flank the oven hood to give symmetry to the room.

Wood plays a tremendous role in warming up the space, from the hood detail and door trim to the ceiling beams to the flooring, which was restrained to a darker, richer finish. Lighting, too, plays a part in keeping it cozy. Pendants over the window were essential since the skylight over one of the islands hindered illumination. Two big pendants over the second island are round for a lighter, modern feel.

The Asian Statuary marble backsplash from Tile America is a subtle, herringbone pattern and the countertop is Venezia Marble's Calacatta Borghini Quartz. Nguyen intentionally mixed black and brass finishes because she believes it makes the space more lived-in and fun. "I always tell clients that you can do this, but be very intentional with what you want to do with it," she says.

The blue island contrasts nicely with the black soapstone fireplace, which Nguyen had re-clad. A coffee table mimics the fireplace, bringing balance to the room and helping to move the eye through the space, says Nguyen, who worked with the couple to choose window treatments, rugs, lighting and the rest of the furniture.

Upstairs, Nguyen transformed the primary





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bathroom into a spa-like getaway. With a gray-cream palette, it's minimal and modern. The previous layout needed to be updated and more cohesive. And while spacious, the room needed to be used to its advantage. "We got rid of all of the walls to open up the space," says Nguyen. "We kept the toilet where it used to be because moving plumbing lines is a big expense."

A free-standing vanity and tub give the room a light, airy feel. A herringbone pattern on the bathroom floor adds interest without being too busy. Small hexagon tiling on the shower floor contrasts with larger and darker tile work on the walls, which helps it recede. Dark finishes for the hardware, detail around the mirror, and lighting give the room an edginess.

"The bathroom is my favorite area in the home," says Laguna. "It's so beautiful and relaxing. I love the whole modern aesthetic. It's a great place to unwind after a long day."

With plenty of room in the bedroom, Nguyen created a seating area with a loveseat and soft cubed tables where they can relax and hang out. The space exudes calm, with soft, neutral earth tones and furniture with rounded edges, as opposed to the living room's dark marble and more angular pieces. The previous closet doors with mirrors were redone and now subtly blend in with the wall. And two new closets allow for more storage.

"Having all this open space in the house is wonderful, especially when my large, extended family visits," says Laguna. "Plus, it's been a lot of fun exploring life on the shoreline after years of living in densely populated urban areas." ■

Every home has a story

Each month we share the story of a Connecticut home, including new builds, additions, renovations, restorations, plus interior designs. If you'd like to see your home featured, send a summary of what makes it special, along with 3–5 photos, to editor@connecticutmag.com.