

# New England HOME

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## **THE NEW ELEGANCE**

Effortless blends of  
glamour and ease



# Stellar Transformation

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A TOP-TO-BOTTOM RENOVATION GIVES A VERMONT HOME THE STAR QUALITY ITS STUNNING MOUNTAIN LOCATION DESERVES.

Diverse rooflines to break up the mass of this hillside residence are among the renovations that turned a rather ordinary house into a spectacular home. Other changes include larger windows to take full advantage of magnificent mountain views and a custom-made observatory for even more distant views.



**LEFT:** A floating circular staircase leads to the second-floor bedrooms and continues to the observatory. **BELOW:** A prized pewter collection and a ready supply of wood are tucked into shelves adjacent to the fireplace. **RIGHT:** An upper story was removed to give the great room its high ceiling and an abundance of windows.

**T**ruth be told, it wasn't love at first sight. When Rick and Martha Wagner, who live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, first saw the house that would become their second home in what travel writers (rightly) call "picture-postcard" Stowe, Vermont, they weren't completely smitten. "It was nice, but it didn't really feel 'Vermonty' or 'mountainy,' especially given its spectacular location," remembers Martha.

"There was nothing wrong with the home," Rick says, "but its design was more suitable for Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard."

But the site! "Incredible!" says Martha, as Rick nods his head and adds, "Really spectacular 360-degree views."

The two-acre lot is part of the 650-acre neighborhood of Robinson Springs, and sits snugly above the tree line overlooking Mount Mansfield, Vermont's highest peak and home to Stowe Mountain Resort. The chance to buy a house with such million-dollar views sealed the deal.

Not long after moving in, the Wagners began thinking about renovations they'd like to make. They updated the kitchen first, adding new cabinets, appliances, and an island, and beefed up the structure of the kitchen and dining area with timbers from an old barn.

Still, the 4,000-square-foot house was drafty. It even shook, creaked, and



**PROJECT TEAM**

**Architecture, interior design, and landscape design:**  
Cushman Design Group

**Builder:**  
Donald P. Blake Jr.





**LEFT:** Reclaimed vintage barn beams and iron tie rods anchor the renovated kitchen that is now flooded with light, thanks to new, generously proportioned windows. **RIGHT:** Like much of the house, the bright, airy dining room is designed with invitingly neutral colors that, rather than compete with nature, invite it in.



“Talking with Martha and Rick, it was clear they wanted a house with more of a ‘Western modern mountain’ look and feel,” says designer Milford Cushman.

groaned when winds roared over the top of Mount Mansfield and came crashing broadside into it.

And there was the view—or the lack of it. The house’s relatively small windows didn’t take full advantage of the site’s beautiful vistas. “Also,” explains Rick, “I’d been bitten by the astronomy bug, and I’d gotten tired of lugging and setting up my seventy-pound telescope outside only to have to take it back in when clouds appeared or it started to rain. I wanted my own observatory.”

With a renovation list this long, the couple agreed that it was time to look for an architect.

Enter Stowe-based architectural designer Milford Cushman. “Talking with Martha and Rick, it was clear they wanted a house with more of a ‘Western modern mountain’ look and feel,” says Cushman. “And they were understandably anxious to open up the view and bring the outside in.”

In what he terms “a true collaboration, not just cooperation,” Cushman worked hand-in-hand with the couple and radically redesigned the structure. “They were the best kind of clients,” he says, “working with us to take ideas to a point and then saying, ‘We like your direction, do what you think is best.’”

Cushman’s firm offered a complete design and remodeling package with everything from structural changes to a deep energy retrofit to landscaping to lighting design, including numerous artistic details such as custom-designed fixtures.

The observatory was a special challenge. Martha didn’t want it to obscure the view, and neither she nor Rick wanted it to dominate the house. And there were complicated structural issues. Says Cushman, “I had never built one before, but thanks to an astronomer friend, I knew that it was paramount to minimize vibration. I knew it would be a challenge, but it

**BELOW:** The sculptural tub in the master bath is tucked into its own cozy alcove with a close-up look at the outdoors. **RIGHT:** Continuing the idea that it's all about the view, the owners chose warm, neutral colors and simple, clean furnishings for the master bedroom.

would also be a very fun, completely cool project.”

To help with the design, equipment, and installation, the Wagners turned to private observatory expert David Miller in Durango, Colorado.

The couple wanted to keep the footprint of the existing house, but agreed to gut a second story above the living room to give the space twenty-foot-high ceilings and expansive windows. Cushman also repositioned the master bedroom to the end of the house, offering more privacy than its original location just off the living room.

Walls and ceilings throughout were taken down to the studs to make way for new insulation and

mechanicals. Outside, the house got a new roof and a new deck, and Cushman and his team revamped the landscaping. New stone walls, terraces, and sitting areas, including one with a fire pit, make the most of the views and serve as outdoor rooms to enjoy during the warmer months.

“Renovating can be like playing 3-D chess,” says Travis Cutler, vice president at the Morrisville, Vermont-based contracting firm Donald P. Blake Jr. “New building is relatively easy, but it can be a challenge not to damage existing spaces when you are opening up all the walls, redoing the electrical, and adding insulation.”

For example, instead of working around the kitchen, his team disassembled the entire kitchen, cabinetry and all, and stored it during the renovation. “It turned out to be cheaper and safer,” says Cutler.

Weatherproofing the building was also important. To combat winds that can gust to seventy miles per hour and winter temperatures that can drop to minus twenty, Cushman chose triple-pane glass for windows





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Most windows, like these in the porch-like sitting room, have no window treatments to hide their clean lines or mar the view. Rick Wagner peers out of his professional-grade observatory. To maximize the home's hilltop site, the designers added several exterior patios and seating areas while opening up the view side of the home with massive windows.

“Thanks to an astronomer friend, I knew that it was paramount to minimize vibration. I knew it would be a challenge, but it would also be a very fun, completely cool project,” says Cushman.

and doors and used insulation for walls and ceilings with a thermal-resistance value of almost double the existing code. “We wanted to over-design this house for the long run,” he says.

The home's interior design is minimal, with a palette dominated by off-whites and grays. Floors are white oak stained gray, casing material is Western fir, and the ceiling is basswood, chosen because it has no grain and won't compete with the floors. Natural materials, such as steel, iron, and glass, are used throughout the house. “We didn't want to fight with the exterior but bring it in,” says Cushman. While the bedrooms have shades or blinds, the rest of the windows are left unadorned, letting abundant natural light wash through the house.

As soon as the Wagners walked into their newly

renovated home, they knew they'd gotten exactly what they wanted. “That mountain view!” says Rick, “It's the first thing you see when you walk through the front door, and it's something everyone enthuses about. It was a remarkable transformation.”

But there's another view that is even more awe-inspiring. Thanks to a sophisticated computer-linked system, Rick can press a button or two on his laptop to open his observatory, aim his telescope at a distant galaxy, and send the picture to an oversize LED screen in his living room. Recently he and Martha and their guests sat in comfort and peered into the Horsehead Nebula in the constellation Orion, some 1,500 light years away from Earth. How's that for a view that is out of this world? ■

**RESOURCES :** For more information about this home, see page 184.