

# remodeling

YOUR TOOLBOX FOR SUCCESS

## THE BIG 50

Best practices  
from this year's  
top remodelers



Darryl Rose,  
Get Dwell,  
Winnetka, Ill.









Photo: Ben Benschneider/OTTO

# Current Affairs

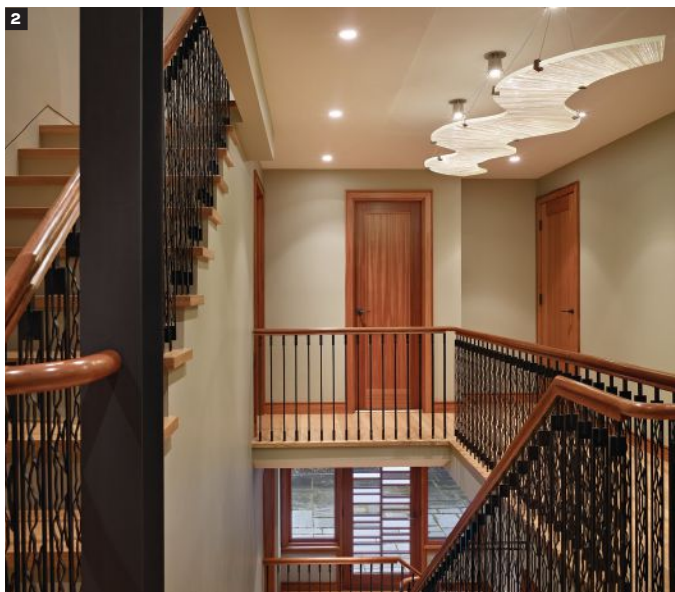
A strategically targeted remodel puts the finishing touches on a much-updated Seattle residence.

/ by [Bruce D. Snider](#)

Remodeling projects are infamous for outgrowing their original scope, but architect Nils Finne and builder Mark Vassallo knew that wouldn't happen with this 1920s Seattle home. "This was the fourth project I did with the owners," says Finne, whose earlier interventions included a new kitchen, a remodeled living room and master bedroom suite, and a stone-paved backyard terrace that doubles as the roof of the home's below-grade garage. This time around, the work would consist of a new study and master bath, a reworked stairway, and a reconfigured third-floor suite. That and no more, Finne says, "because we had done everything else." Limited scope doesn't always mean limited impact, however. This culminating project expands and enriches the owners' experience of their house, rounding out its character with an Asian-inflected modernism that blends seamlessly with the original building.

**Red Zinger.** Replacing an existing sun porch, the red cedar-clad addition contains a new study at the first floor and a master bathroom and dressing room above.





### CHEERING SECTION

The addition occupies the footprint of an old single-story sun porch, with a study on the first floor and a master bath and dressing room above. Finne stretched the volume of the second-floor space with a series of projecting bays. One, which turns the southeast corner of the room, contains an L-shaped vanity cabinet; two smaller versions wrap twin built-in dressers with countertop windows on three sides. The arrangement elevates the everyday routines of washing and dressing, says Finne, who asks, “How many dressers do you know that have their own little bays?” The abundant light is also great for choosing clothes, he adds.

To lighten the addition’s exterior appearance, Finne developed an innovative building section. Rather than cantilever the second-floor structure to support the bays, he directed Vassallo’s crew to suspend them from the roof’s I-beam rafters using steel structural tubes. “If we hadn’t hung them, the bays would be much heavier looking,” Finne says. “We had to put in some amazingly big steel headers,” he adds, but carrying the loads overhead allowed the carpenters to frame the bays’ undersides with floor structures shallow enough to hide within the cabinets’ kick spaces.

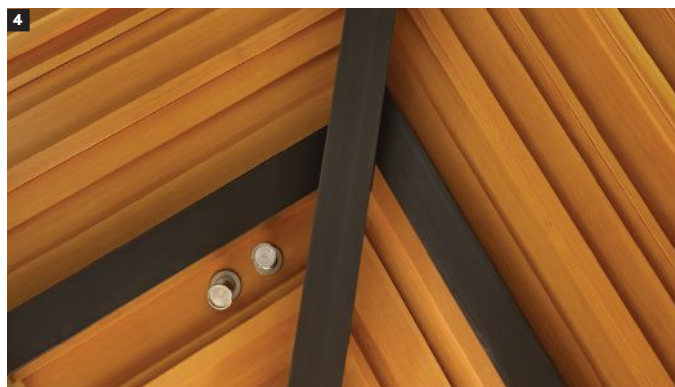
To make Vassallo’s life even more interesting, Finne specified custom recessed shades that disappear into pockets in the ceiling. “There’s an unbelievable amount of effort in planning for those shade pockets,” Vassallo says, “and it goes all the way back to the steel, to the early structural work. Then there’s wiring, tolerances, motor size and location, getting the shades to line up so there are no gaps, access to the pockets ... and on a remodel, you don’t even have control of the original conditions; that adds another layer. We definitely scratch our heads to make those things come out right.”

### PIECE INITIATIVE

In the course of his career, Finne has assembled a portfolio of architectural elements—steel hardware fittings, CNC-milled cabinet faces, lighting fixtures, and more—that unify his body of work and allow clients to enjoy custom designed pieces without bearing the full cost of product development. Here, the master bathroom is fitted out with Finne’s twisted steel robe hooks and towel bars—“We use them on pretty much all of our projects,” he says—and a pair of steel-framed mirrors with integral LED lighting, also of his design. Suspended in front of the vanity cabinet’s window wall, the latter elegantly do their job without obscuring the view outside.

The steel balusters that transform the home’s central staircase also drew from Finne’s catalogue, with a delicate abstract design laser-cut into  $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch steel plate. “The pattern had already

**1.** Three window bays extend the master bathroom and dressing space. Copper panels in a shoji-like pattern are a subtle Asian reference. **2.** Laser-cut steel balusters with a custom sapele rail cap modernize the stair hall while paying due respect to the home’s traditional style.



been road-tested," says Finne, as had the asymmetrically carved sapele cap rail, but the railing assembly still required a custom installation. "It's very difficult to predict how something like that will perform," Vassallo says. "We modified how the pieces were installed as we learned more about how the installation was performing. We [developed] some methods of adding rigidity without detracting from the design concept."

For the 8-foot glass light fixture that hangs in the stair hall, Finne scaled up an earlier 18-inch-long version, arranging colored glass rods on a sheet of tempered glass, fusing the assembly in an oversize kiln, and laser-cutting it into a serpentine shape. The result is striking, but unlike Finne's other custom gear, it will remain unique to this house. "I'll sell the mirrors; I have a small inventory," he says. But in spite of receiving numerous calls requesting a duplicate light fixture, "I will not make that again for anyone," he says. "The installation was really tough. It took us six hours to hang that one light fixture."

### 'JIM'S CEILING'

Drawing from a repertoire of previous patterns and designs also frees Finne to devote more attention to the completely custom areas of a job. "So many of the things that Nils brings to the project are first-time ideas that are unique to the job," says Vassallo, who offers the master bath ceiling as a prime example. Assembled from Douglas fir stock in a variety of widths and thicknesses, the composition walks a fine line between order and chaos. "There is a repeat to the pattern," Finne says, "but it does have a random feel. The repeat is about every 24 to 30 inches."

The task of projecting that pattern onto the room's complex ceiling plan fell to lead carpenter Jim Hovick, a 25-year Schultz Miller employee and master finish carpenter. "That ceiling was called 'Jim's Ceiling,'" Vassallo says. "He was absolutely the right guy for the job." And Hovick's input went beyond scribing the multitude of fir pieces to plaster walls and steel beams. "Because of the ceiling geometry, he did a lot of figuring out in the field," says Finne, who considers jobsite feedback essential to the success of such one-off designs. "You really can't anticipate every condition," he says. "You can draw a lot, but there's a point at which you have to stop drawing."

"Nils is very open to input from the trades and the carpenters, to hearing someone say, 'If you can make this a quarter-inch larger, we can use a different material and save some money,'" Vassallo says. When working with Finne, he adds, "we use a lot of mockups—with light fixtures, trim details, cabinetry—prior to investing in the actual production. We do elaborate things out of cardboard and foam. Often that yields refinements." —Bruce Snider is a senior editor for *CUSTOM HOME* and *RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECT*, sister publications of *REMODELING*.

**3.** Limestone floors, sapele cabinetry, and Douglas fir wall and ceiling paneling lend warmth and texture to the master bath.

**4.** Exposed steel roof framing provides a crisp counterpoint. **5.** One of the two built-in dressers. **6.** Many of the room's fittings, including the lighted vanity mirrors, towel bars, and this robe hook, were drawn from architect Nils Finne's portfolio of designs.