



asia MANOR

THE FAMILY LIVED IN JAPAN FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS BEFORE RETURNING TO THE MIDWEST. FROM THE STREET, THE HOUSE IS CLASSIC ST. LOUIS. BUT INSIDE, YOU'RE IN THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN

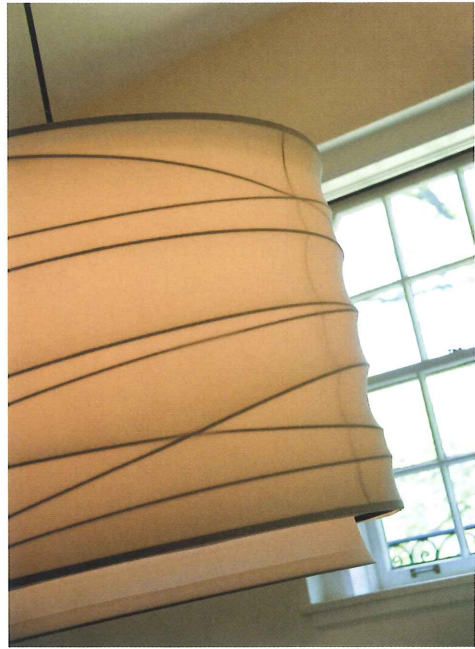
By **Susan Caba** • Photography by **Alise O'Brien**

Americans are accustomed to thinking of the kitchen as the heart of the house. Not so much the master bath. Communal bathing hasn't been warmly embraced in this country. But in Japan, the bath is a social experience. This stucco house on a winding Clayton street near the Polo Field has both the kitchen that Americans love and a master bath reminiscent of a Japanese bathhouse.

On returning to the United States after a long stay in Tokyo, the homeowners—a couple with several children—incorporated the convenience and amenities of modern America with the serenity and space-sharing efficiency of Asian homes.

From the street, the house couldn't be more St. Louis traditional—a handsome two-story home dressed in dark khaki stucco with a red tile roof. You open the door expecting a formal entry hall, living room and dining room, Chippendale furniture and the dark luxury of fine wood.

Which is all that the new homeowners *didn't* want when they went shopping for homes a few years ago. "We actually don't like traditional. But we didn't want to come in and raze the house to build something modern," says one of the homeowners, who declined to be named. So they compromised. Rather than tearing down the house and replacing it with something modern, they maintained the venerable 1906 exterior.



But inside, they created a box: pale, airy and full of light.

"The client's goals were simple," says architect Helen Lee of Tao + Lee Associates, who reconfigured the interior. "Create generous, open, communal spaces to match their active, informal lifestyle and make every square foot usable on a daily basis."

"They organized their design decisions around the family's lifestyle," adds interior designer Dana Romeis of Fibercations, who worked with Ms. Lee on the interiors and furnishings. "If something was not going to be used *and* enjoyed by the family, it was not going to be *had* by the family."

At just shy of 5,000 square feet, the house is not particularly large, by some standards. Ms. Lee's client had just finished reading *The Not So Big House* by Sarah Susanka when she was shopping for property in St. Louis. Ms. Susanka's philosophy is that houses should be tailored to serve the way people live and make the best use of space, rather than being built bigger as a matter of prestige. The philosophy resonated with the homeowner, who wanted her living space to encourage family togetherness.

"We were trying to create something flexible to mesh with the family's modern lifestyle," says Ms. Lee. "It was really important to them to have the whole house flow from one space to another."

The couple's design choices were influenced by their 18 years in Tokyo. The whole family speaks Japanese and has incorporated some of that country's traditions and habits into their own lives. Rather than dedicate various rooms to single uses, the Japanese treat their residential areas as flexible spaces suitable for many uses. In this house, "rooms" are designated by furniture, not walls.

The Asian sensibility is subtle, more a matter of attitude than decorative or structural embellishments. To start, shoes are abandoned just inside the front door and traded for socks or slippers. The entry floor is a rough golden quartzite, to mark the transition from the outside to the rest of the house. Large windows open the space to the back yard, again an influence from Japan, where nature tends to be regarded with greater reverence.





An open staircase, with a steel railing, is reminiscent of a Japanese *tansu*. These traditional stepped cabinets, used as storage for bedding and as staircases to sleeping lofts, are often the only substantial furniture in a Japanese home. Almost an abstract sculpture, the metal railing fulfilled a desire for something light and unobtrusive that provides an easy visual link to the upper level. Built by Zahner, the same metal fabrication firm that works for famed Los Angeles architect Frank Gehry, the staircase is the focal point of the otherwise spare interior.

"The concept wasn't to make a Japanese house, but to incorporate modern design and functionality to fit this family's needs," says Ms. Lee.

The most visually Japanese space is the master bathing room. First of all, it is about the size of a large walk-in closet. The walls and floors are covered with blue-green glass tiles—"watery and wonderful," says Ms. Romeis—creating a sense of entering a place of cool, summery shade. The ceiling is cedar, a building material that is very popular in Japan. Tiny Japanese stools provide seating under the two showerheads, which are used before entering the big, stainless steel-lined soaking tub. Though they have their own bathrooms, equipped with showers and bathtubs, the kids in this family prefer this one.

If there is anything here that is overtly Japanese, it is the furniture. The kitchen—which was opened to the main living space and nudged back a bit—is outfitted with figured maple cabinets and woven grass shades, an allusion to the screens used in Japan to separate spaces.

The barstools in the kitchen, says Ms. Romeis, are "a true prize. They are each turned from one piece of walnut—amazing!" They were customized by Chris Lehrecke from designs he adapted a few years ago, based on traditional stools used in rural Japan. The custom-made dining table also suggests the Japanese practice of using beautiful wood. Made by Tucker Robbins in New York, it was constructed from one piece of reclaimed wood from Indonesia—originally 40 inches wide by 14 feet long. Robbins cut it in three to construct panels for the table's base and the top.

A color scheme of warm sage green and gold contrasts with the cool spaciousness of the living areas. Ms. Romeis ordered a low, Asian-inspired coffee table so the children could do homework in front of the fireplace while sitting on the floor. It sits on a small custom rug inspired by a piece of Japanese textile the homeowner gave Ms. Romeis a few years ago.

"The pillows in this room are all custom-designed in-house," says Ms. Romeis, who is herself a well-known designer of textiles. "We sent the homeowner shopping in Tokyo for an array of fabrics. We asked that she find both old and new traditional textiles.

"She sent us a great pile, including an old obi, tiny bits of indigo-dyed cotton and short yardages of ikat and printed silk, cotton and linen. We cut them up and arranged them into pieced pillow covers."

"This house is about movement—the extension of space and the extension of the living areas into the outdoors—to create a feeling of spaciousness and functionality," Ms. Lee says. "The homeowner knew exactly what she wanted: the sense of being able to see all and hear all that was going on in the house." 