

SHEATHED IN COATED steel and painted plywood, the home has an industrial feel.



Kirk Williams grew up in Austin, Texas, a freewheeling city with a thriving contemporary architectural scene. So he was surprised, and a bit disappointed, by the more limited architectural palette in his adopted hometown of Burlington, Vermont.

"Austin has block after block of fun, funky modern homes," says Williams, a metalsmith and sculptor who moved to Burlington in 2001. "But the Vermont vernacular is much more traditional. I wanted to build a contemporary home, not necessarily to make a statement but to demonstrate what is possible."

His first step was to purchase a lot in a working-class neighborhood of Burlington, one of the few remaining empty parcels in the city. It's a small plot on a dead-end street lined with single-family clapboard homes. The property overlooks the Winooski River, which in its 19th-century heyday was packed with hydro-powered mills that produced everything from lumber and flour to paper and electricity, and the district still retains a blue-collar vibe.



His second step was to hire Christian Brown of Brown + Davis Design, an architectural firm based in nearby Jericho, Vermont. They had worked together on several projects, with Williams producing custom metal furniture and fixtures for houses Brown designed. "I was thrilled to have the chance to build something modern and interesting in Vermont," says Brown. "I've always been fascinated by projects that were deceptively simple. Kirk's house is basically a box that we worked hard to make interesting — and we did it on a limited and clearly defined budget."





industrial aesthetic, and because they are affordable, durable, and easy to maintain.

The layout is equally utilitarian. The first floor comprises a shared entry and mudroom, a 500-square-foot rental unit, a mechanical room, and two storage spaces that are accessed from the outside. From the entry, a staircase leads to Williams's apartment on the second floor. At 1,100 square feet, his unit feels surprisingly spacious, with 10-foot ceilings and large windows that face the sinuous Winooski.

Two small rooms that contain the bathroom, closets, and laundry, with a corridor between them, separate the living area from the bedroom. But because the enclosures have 8-foot ceilings, the space above them remains open and the apartment retains the free-flowing sensibility of a loft.

The bedroom is simple, almost spare, with a low bed, a small desk, a love seat, and a wall-mounted flat-screen television. A glass door leads to a deck that looks down on the tidy backyard, punctuated by a few raised garden beds, metal planters, and kinetic sculptures made by Williams.

The heart of the home is the combined kitchen, living, and dining room. Kitchen counters and Baltic birch cabinets line the south wall, while a compact island offers a sink and a few stools for seating. Williams made the metal stools, as well as the coffee table, side tables, and dining table, which are topped with cork. ("A miracle material from Mother Nature," says Brown. "Cork is waterproof, durable, easy to work with, antimicrobial, and relatively cheap.") Williams also built the stair railing, made from the rollers of a discarded conveyor belt that he found for \$75 at a steel-recycling center, as well as the sleek low-voltage pendant lights, made of aluminum and slumped glass.



AT GROUND LEVEL, two spaces, accessible only from the outside, provide storage and house the mechanical systems. (FACING PAGE, TOP) Williams, at left, and architect Christian Brown stand at the entry. Williams fabricated the metal planters (FACING PAGE, BOTTOM) and the kinetic sculptures that punctuate the backyard.



The finished house is a showcase for Williams and Brown not only for the quality of their work but also for their shared approach to design. Both men wanted to create a home that was practical and affordable and that stepped outside the traditional vernacular.

"I guess we were proselytizing to some degree," says Brown with a laugh. "And the house is a local landmark.... When it was under construction, a few of the older neighborhood residents would stop by and tell us they didn't like it. But now they're converts to some degree. Our goal was to show people some of the things that are possible in the architectural world."

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