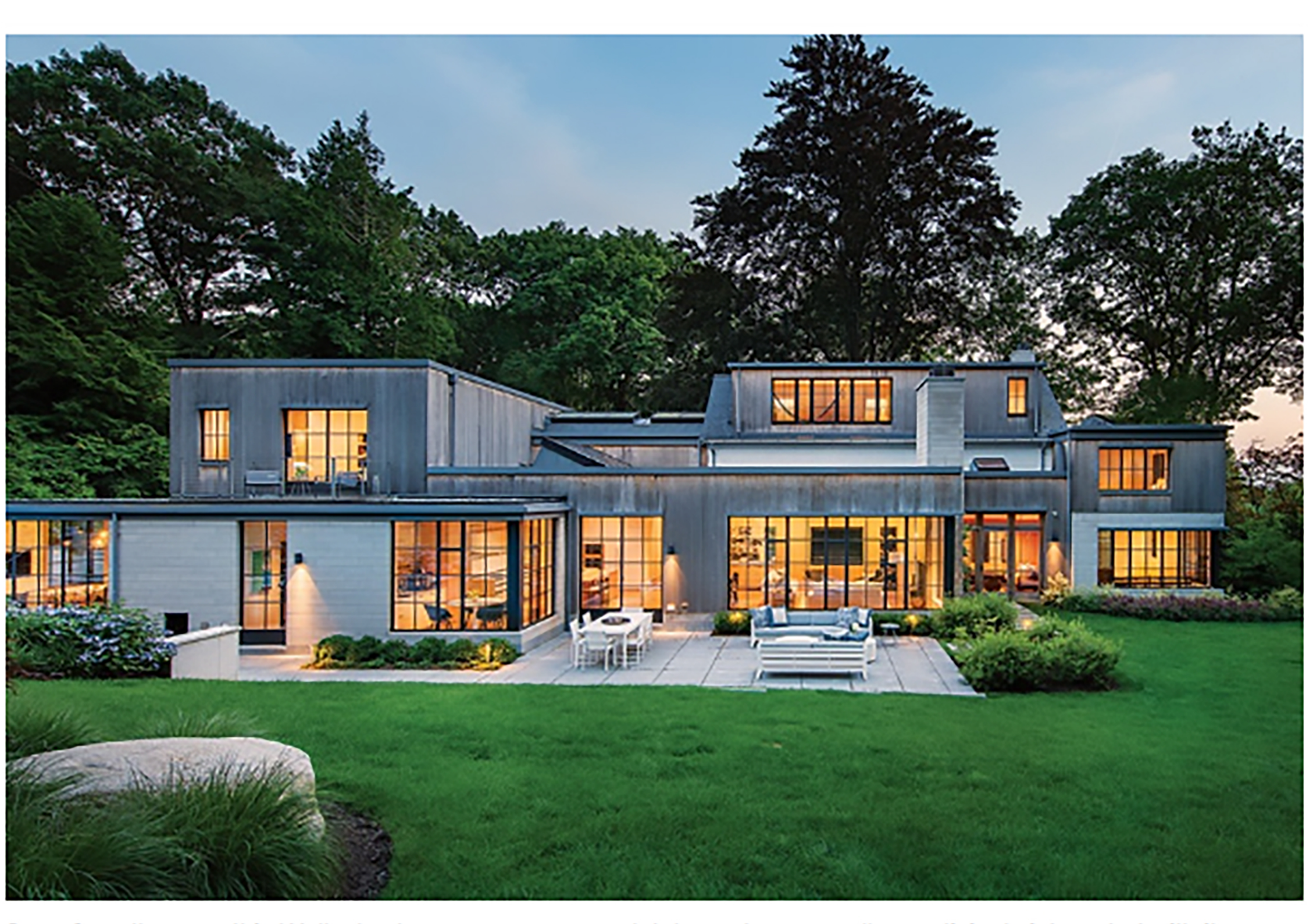
Boston

BOSTON HOME

Breaking Tradition

How an architect-interior design team turned a landmark demolition bylaw into one of the most interesting estates in MetroWest.

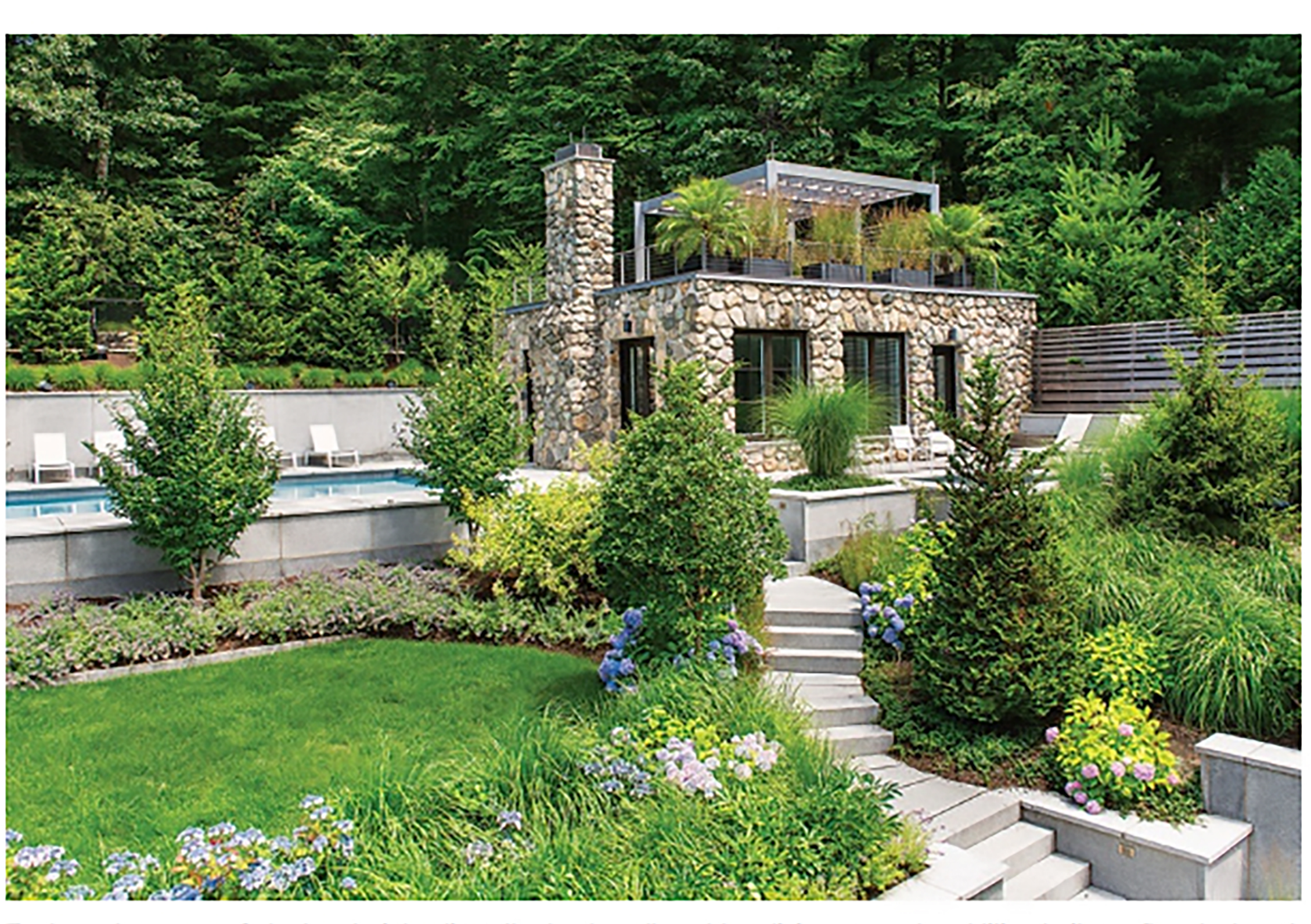
by KYLE HOEPNER



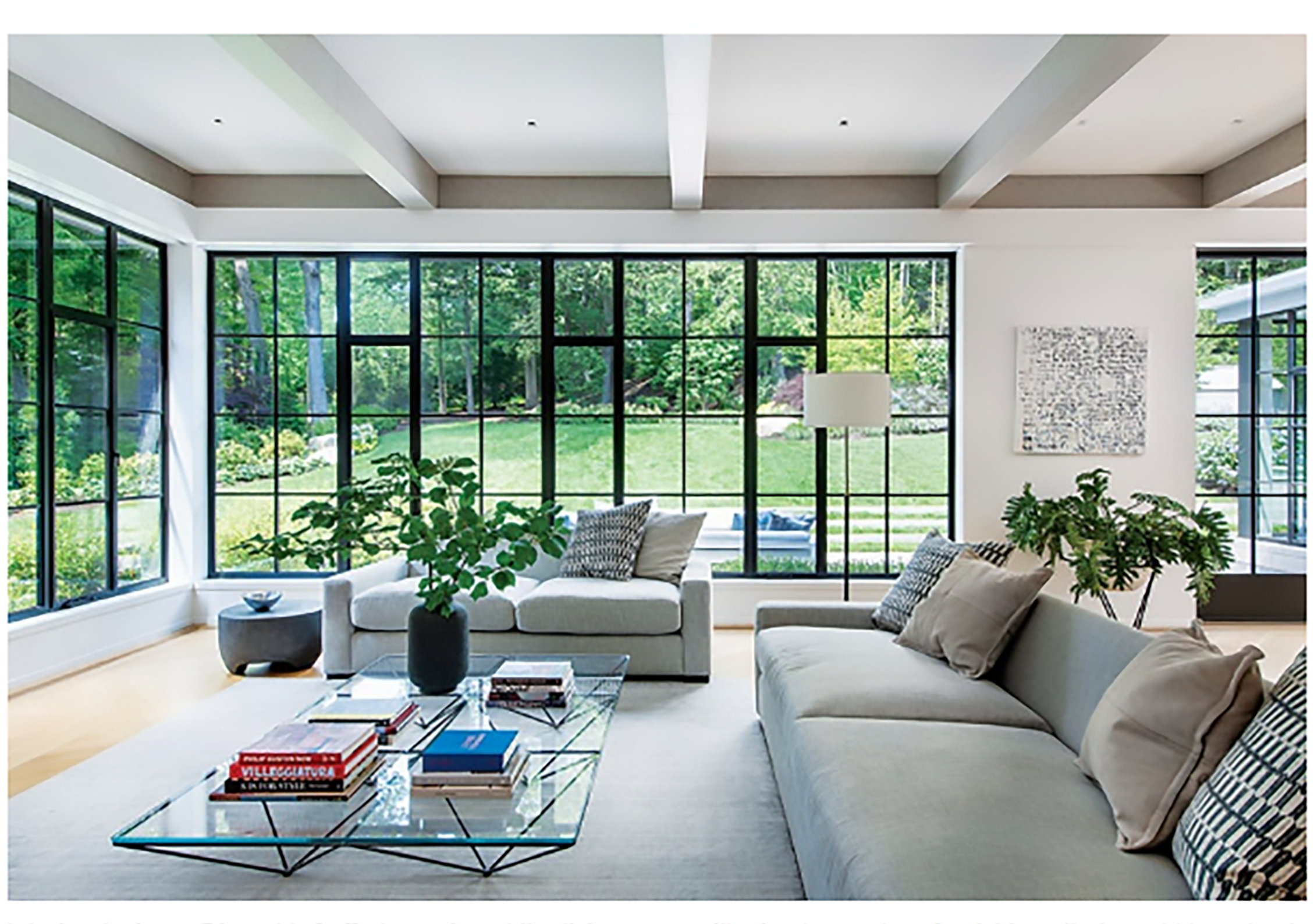
Seen from the rear, this Wellesley home appears completely modern as well as enticingly integrated with its backyard landscape. / Photo by Nat Rea

"I joke sometimes that we're making Wellesley modern, one house at a time," architect David Stern says with a chuckle—although it's not entirely a jest, since he and his business partner (and wife), interior designer Diane McCafferty, have gradually been doing exactly that. In fact, it was a mutual friend of clients for whom the pair had built a previous modern home who introduced their work to this property's owners.

This couple, Stern says, "wanted something that was not your run-of-the-mill suburban house." They had in mind an ambitious wish list of outdoor amenities—terrace, pool, pool house with roof deck, hot tub, tennis court, and more—that would prove very challenging to fit onto a shallow hillside site that rises some 35 feet from front to back. Another hitch: A 1930s center-hall Colonial, which the Wellesley Historical Commission listed as "preferably preserved," already stood on the lot—meaning that seeking to tear it down would invoke a 12-month demolition delay bylaw the town had passed in 2017. "I told our clients that it would be more complicated to keep part of the existing structure, but we could get started right away," Stern reports. "And the mission became a little different: How do we do that and still get the house we want?" For this project, the designers' conception of "modern" would need to be flexible enough to embrace, literally, a chunk of tradition.



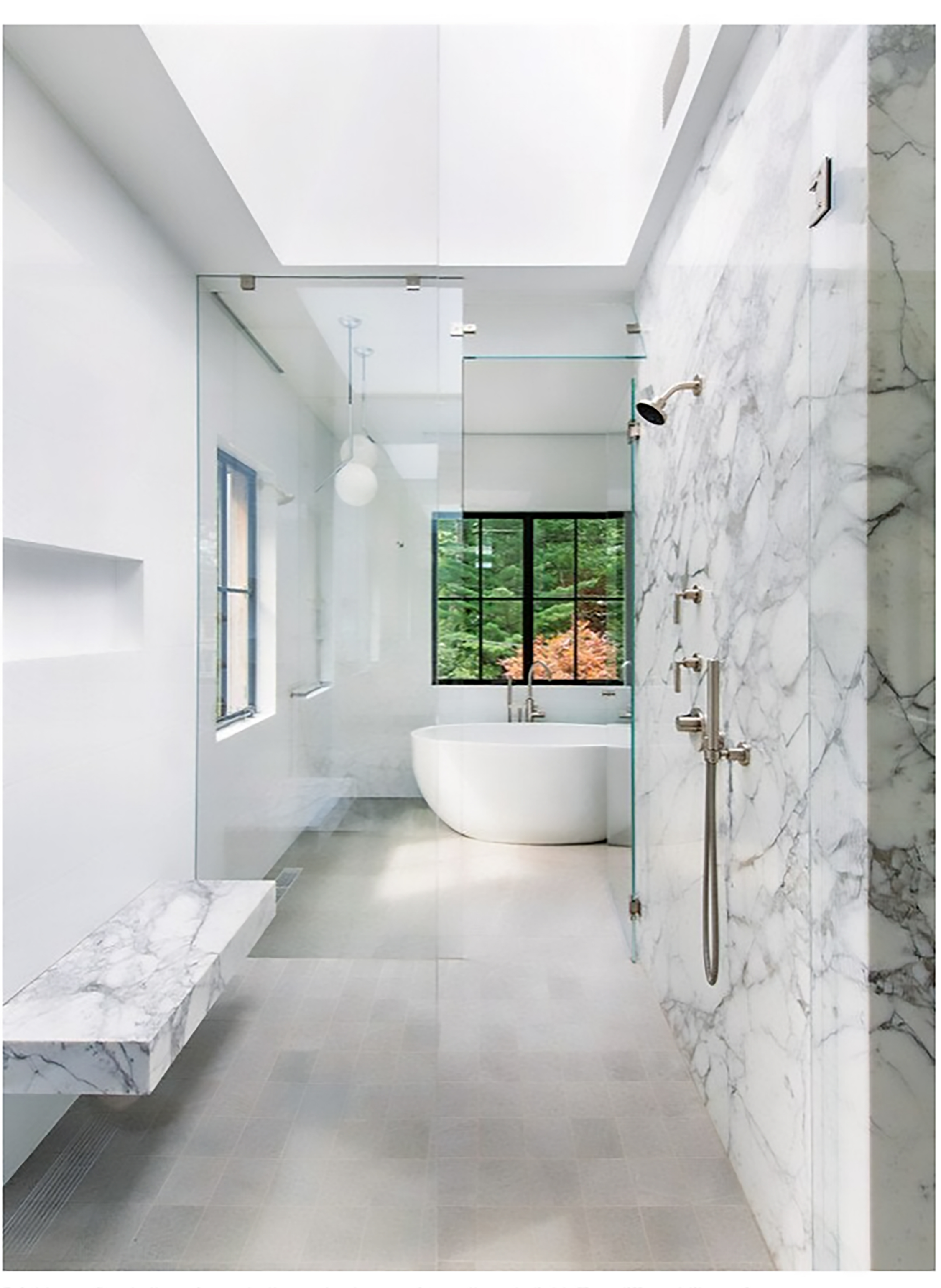
Exuberant masses of plant material enliven the backyard's outdoor living areas. In addition to its rooftop deck and pergola, the fieldstone pool house contains a living room with a fireplace and a Ping-Pong table, a kitchenette and dining area, a bathroom, a laundry room, and storage for toys and pool equipment. / Photo by Nat Rea



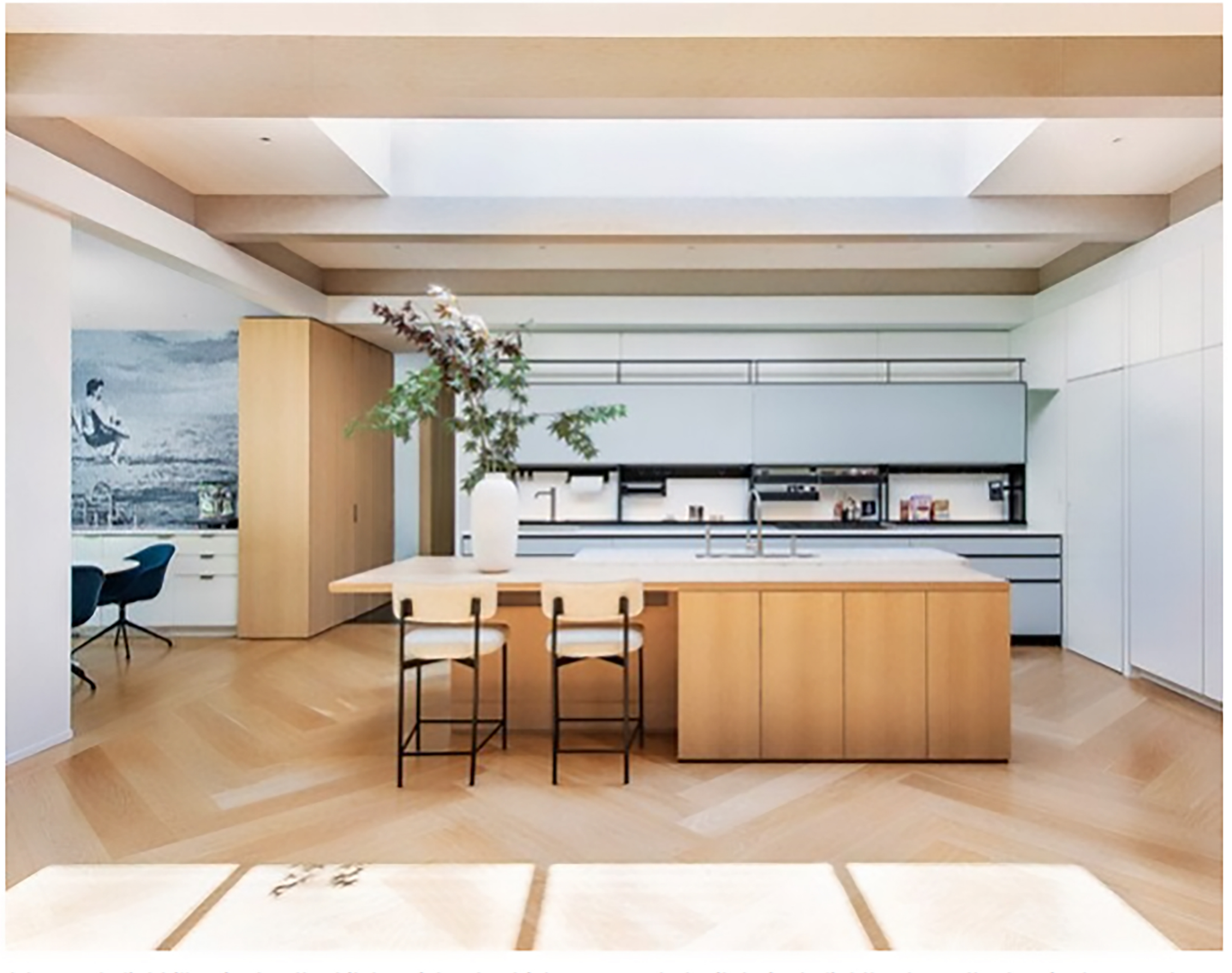
Interior designer Diane McCafferty equipped the living room with simple, modern furnishings that would be robust enough to stand up to two high-school-age boys, a rambunctious pair of Bernese mountain dogs, and one very large cat. Panoramic windows almost erase any sense of separation from the scenery outside. / Photo by Nat Rea

The older house is now an "object" embedded into a contemporary framework that wraps its sides and rear. Stern kept the core of the existing building, with modifications: a slate roof was put on, window openings were made taller, and eaves and dormers were simplified. The former wood-frame windows were changed out for steel ones, with an extra window replacing what had been the central front door. The steel windows, along with a coat of white paint applied over the originally red brick, give the edifice almost the feel of an art deco pavilion—helping, in a subtle way, to meld it with the present-day additions.

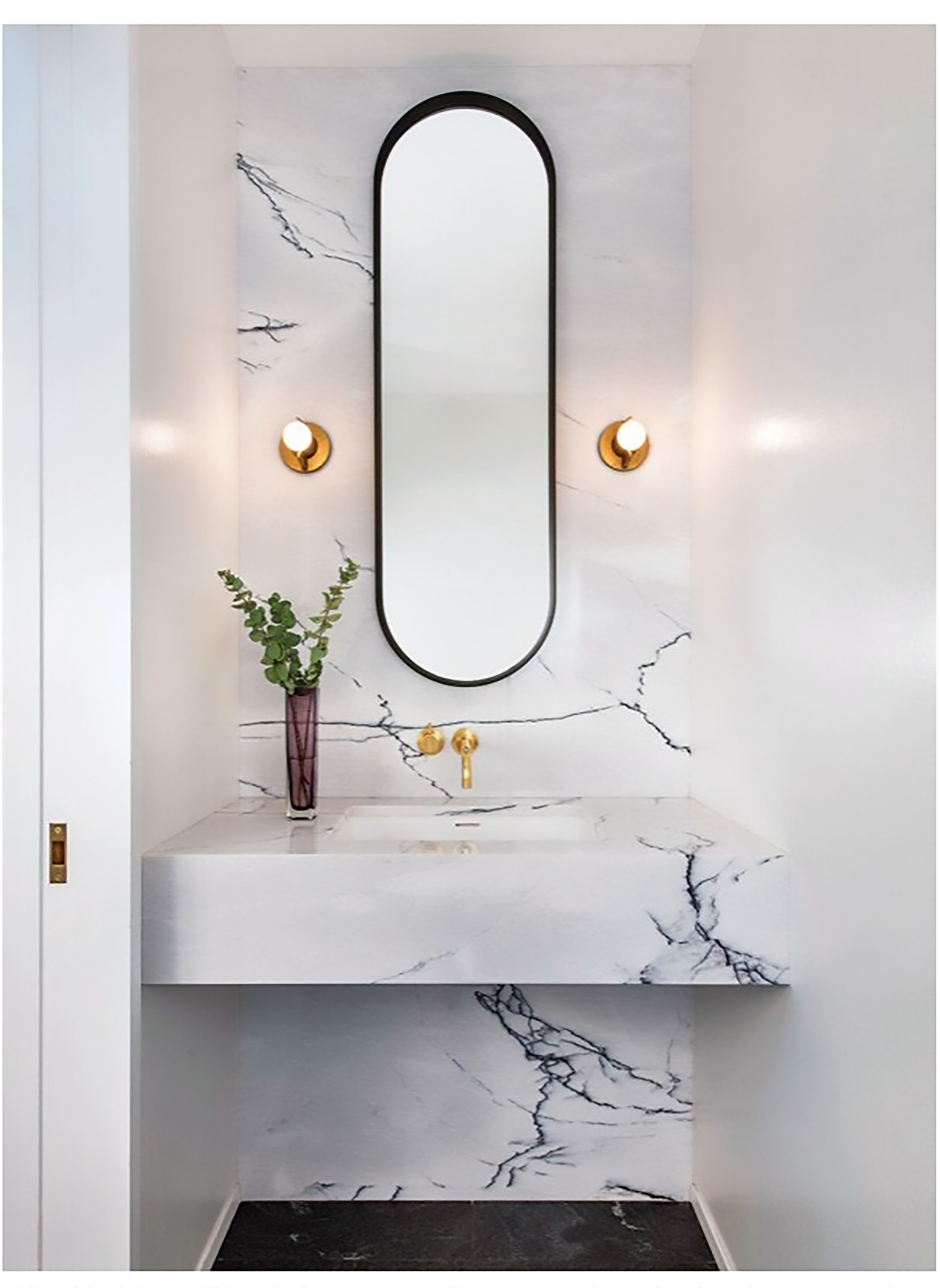
The home's interior is clean-lined throughout, a study in quietly seductive elegance. The floors are wide-plank oak (and Jet Mist granite tiles in a new, asymmetrically placed entry hall); a similar oak, lightly bleached, was used for cabinets, wall paneling, and other millwork. Expanses of richly veined stone sheathe fireplaces, the kitchen island, and bathroom walls and vanities. The architectural detailing, plain at first glance, shows a high degree of sophistication when examined carefully.



Brightness floods the primary bathroom's shower via another skylight. Two different tile surfaces—one gray, one white—create a subdued harmony with the central marble wall and floating bench. / Photo by Nat Rea



A large skylight illuminates the kitchen island, which appears to levitate just slightly above the herringbone oak floor. Sleek glass-front cabinets from Valcucine can close to conceal almost all of the room's functional elements, cooktop and exhaust hood included. / Photo by Nat Rea

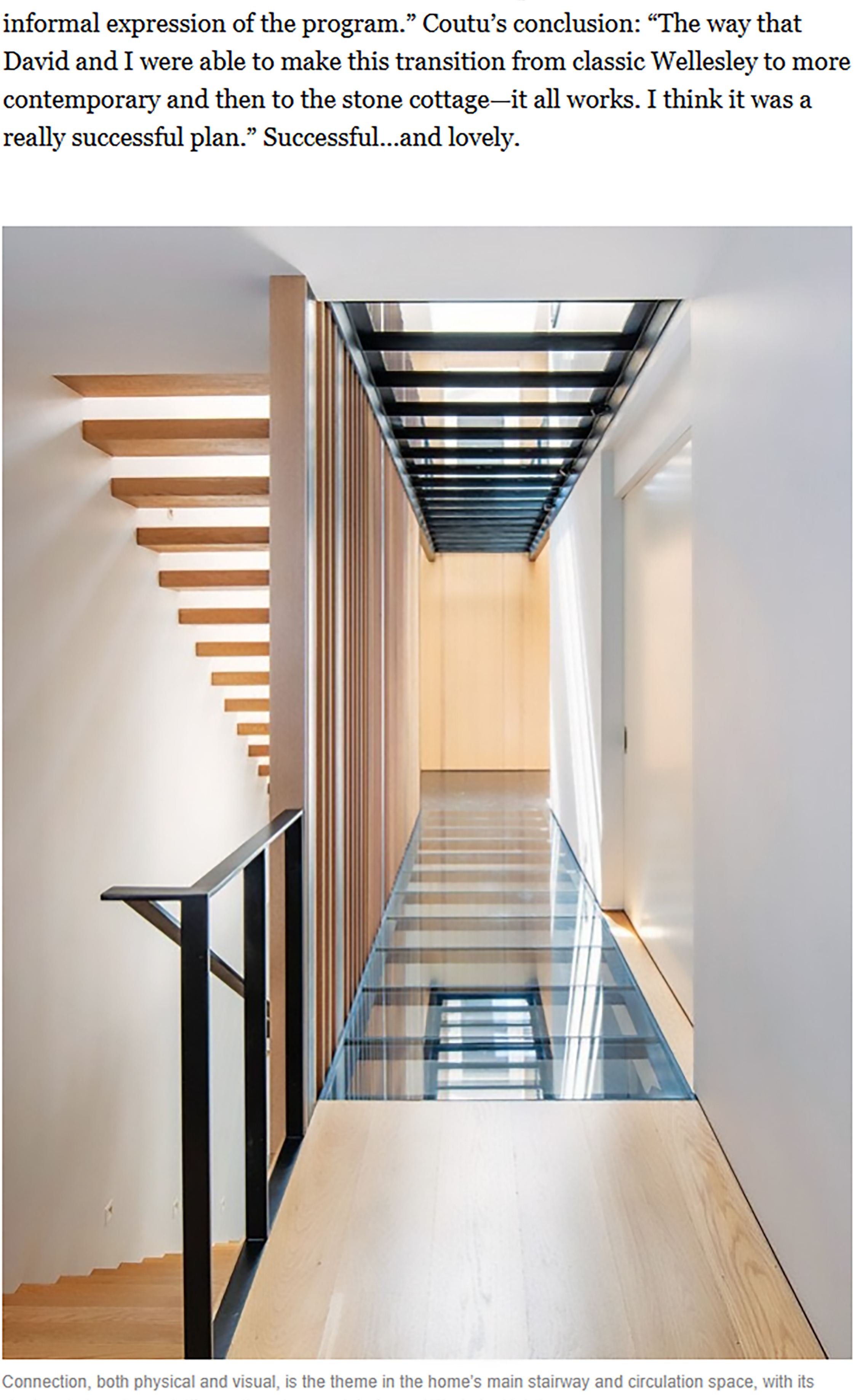


White veining in the Jet Mist granite floor looks almost like a photographic negative of the Lilac marble covering the sink wall in the front powder room. / Photo by Nat Rea

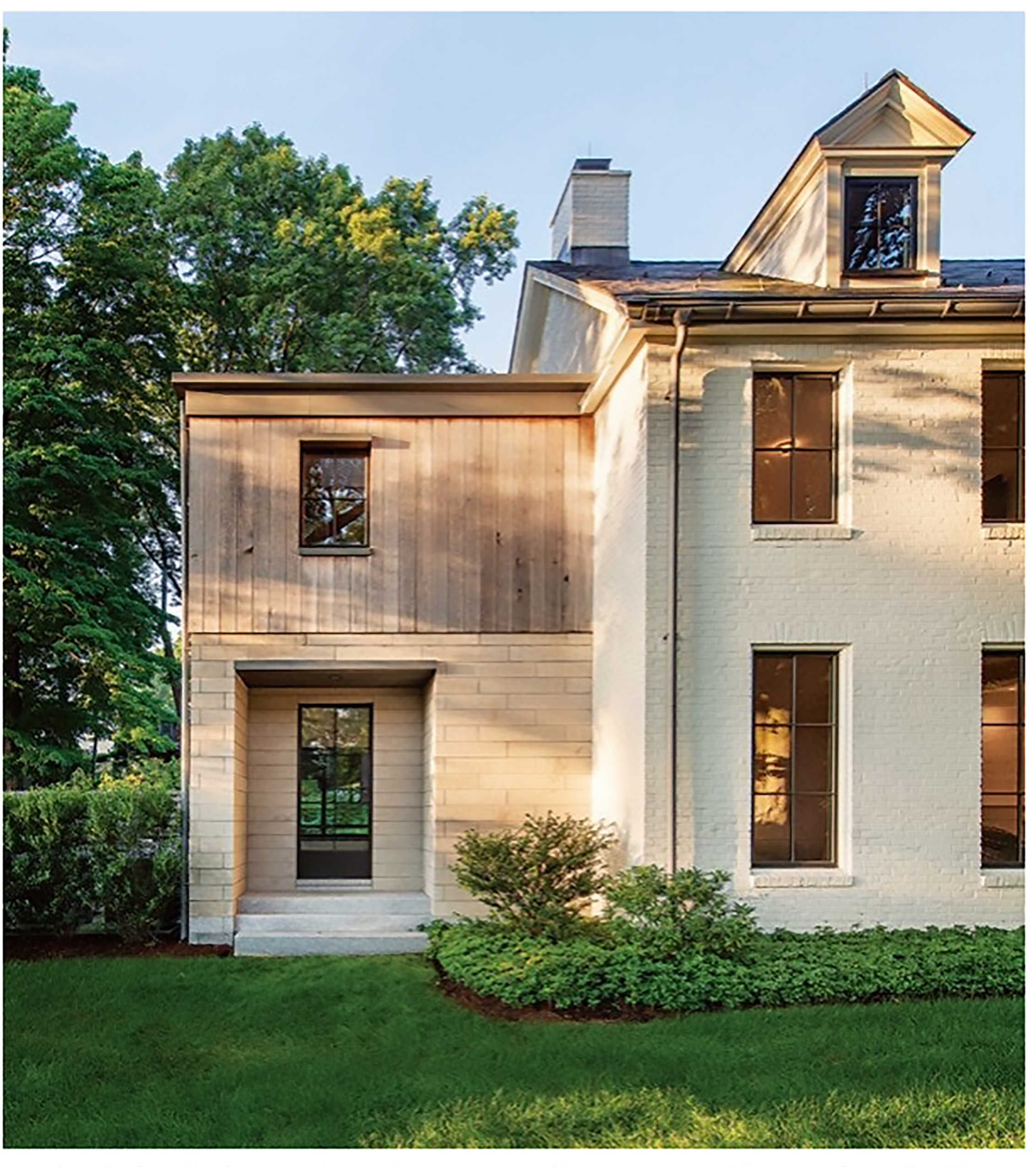
By far the most noticeable feature inside the home is a multistory "spine" of blackened steel and glass, an assembly of floors, railings, and stair supports that extends from the basement all the way up to rooftop skylights. "It's the crux of the design," Stern says, "connecting the spaces together vertically and horizontally." And, vitally, it allows natural light to penetrate deep into the interior.

In addition to the usual business of devising appropriately attractive grounds for the house, landscape designer Michael Coutu of Sudbury Design Group partnered with the architects to solve the knotty site-planning problems—particularly in the backyard. Granite steps and granite-faced retaining walls lead from the home's rear terrace up to a pool area that extends out from a rustic fieldstone pool house (converted from what was probably once a garage or cottage); a sheltered hot tub sits off to one side. Further stairs access an upper deck and pergola installed atop the pool house, which take advantage of glorious views to the west and southwest. A hidden path continues to the tennis court farther up the hill. Lush plantings of stewartia, Serbian spruce trees, hydrangeas, and ornamental grasses provide punctuation at strategic points and soften the masonry.

In the end, having to accommodate the earlier dwelling served as a springboard for the whole project. "There's a slight formality to the front of the house," Stern notes, "then in the back it explodes and becomes a more informal expression of the program." Coutu's conclusion: "The way that David and I were able to make this transition from classic Wellesley to more contemporary and then to the stone cottage—it all works. I think it was a really successful plan." Successful…and lovely.



Connection, both physical and visual, is the theme in the home's main stairway and circulation space, with its steel-and-glass floors, lattice wall, and open stair risers. / Photo by Nat Rea



Seen from the front, the limestone-clad contemporary parts of the house bookend the older brick section. The street-facing landscape is understated, with foundation plantings of holly, andromeda, and pachysandra ground cover. / Photo by Nat Rea

Architect & Interior Designer Stern McCafferty
Builder The Lagassé Group
Landscape Designer Sudbury Design Group