

CALM REVERIE

An Annapolis home and garden embrace
modern Japanese design

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A fixed, 16-foot-wide window visually connects the lower-level viewing room and garden. Christian Liaigre furniture rests on a Fort Street Studio rug. Linen wall covering by Donghia envelops the serene space; Jet Mist granite floors and mahogany trim sound an organic note.

A sliding door detailed with wooden slats (below) connects the lower-level viewing room and a caterer's kitchen. The team employed a similar motif on an accent wall in the breakfast area and family room (opposite), albeit in a lighter palette. Granite slabs define the fireplace. A reupholstered Saarinen chair pulls up to an Ethnicraft table.



If dropped by helicopter into this riverfront garden of ornamental trees, stone pathways and a raked-gravel bed, visitors might assume they've landed in rural Japan rather than on a residential property overlooking Aberdeen Creek near Annapolis.

The garden has grown and flourished for more than 20 years. Inspired by a trip to Japan, the owners originally hired landscape designer Shin Abe of ZEN Associates to conceive a traditional Japanese garden on their one-third-acre site in 2002. "We fell in love with the Japanese aesthetic," explains the wife, a philanthropist. "We wanted a peaceful escape from the cacophony of the modern world."

The garden is set between the couple's contemporary, three-bedroom residence and a slope down to the creek and a dock. Abe paid homage to the estuary environment, devising a scheme that roughly mimics the shape of the Chesapeake Bay. A bed of white gravel—a common expression of water in Japanese design—

Renovation & Interior Design: Rina Okawa, LEED AP; Landscape Design: Shin Abe, ZEN Associates, Inc., Woburn, Massachusetts. Renovation Contractor: Andrew G. Smith, Winchester, Millersville, Maryland.

unfurls on the property's lower elevation. Massive stones form a bridge across the expanse, leading to steps accessing an upper garden. Japanese black pine, weeping cherry, azalea and dwarf mondo grass embellish the landscape, also dotted by boulders, a water feature and hidden benches built for quiet contemplation.

Five years later, Abe returned to create a pocket garden visible only from the owners' bedroom and adjacent home office. Called a *tsubo-niwa*—a garden that in Japanese tradition measures precisely two tatami mats wide—this walled refuge features a sculpture that he fashioned by slicing and reassembling a single boulder.

Abe, who trained in Kyoto under a master landscape designer, marvels at how the project has evolved over the years. "It is probably the best garden I have ever built," he muses.

But the work didn't stop there. In 2017, the owners enlisted ZEN Associates to design the first of several upgrades to their 5,000-square-foot, 1970s-era home. They tapped Rina Okawa, a lead interior designer at the Massachusetts firm, to revamp their dark and dated lower level. There were two mandates: Create a stylish viewing room where they could screen their vast video art collection with guests; and foster a stronger indoor-outdoor connection to the garden.





“We make spaces that are simple, but also warm and soft.”

—Rina Okawa

In step with Abe’s landscape, Okawa articulated Japanese design principles in her approach. “Our clients wanted to push the concept of *ma*, which means the appreciation of negative space,” she explains. “The room needed balance to make it peaceful and calm. Nothing could be too loud.”

Choppy windows and builder-grade finishes gave way to a sophisticated, finely crafted realm. Think mahogany millwork, honed-granite floors that extend seamlessly outdoors and a 16-foot-wide, floor-to-ceiling window framing a dramatic view of the lower garden. An up-lit cove ceiling gives the illusion of height while a drop-down screen is ready to roll.

“We selected comfortable furniture with nice forms—mostly by Christian Liaigre,” Okawa says. “And we kept it pretty monochromatic since we didn’t want to conflict with the colors of nature.” She points out that the room is wallpapered for warmth and texture. “We make spaces that are very simple,” she reasons, “but we are also keen to make them warm and soft.” Winchester, a Maryland builder that had previously completed several upgrades to the home, executed ZEN’s design.

The two firms recently collaborated on a main-level makeover. During covid, the owners tired of their cramped kitchen and its adjacent sitting area, where outdated windows didn’t do justice to the garden views. “We wanted to bring the outside in and modernize the kitchen with a Japanese aesthetic,” says the wife. “I wanted it to be functional, flexible and forward-looking.”

Okawa transformed the space with fresh, modern millwork in rift-sawn white oak. She expanded storage and cooking space and introduced a light, natural material palette. Larger windows near the sink and floor-to-ceiling glass in the family room shifted the focus outdoors. A curved, up-lit cove ceiling unifies the areas. “I know how hard it was to make that curve perfectly,” notes the designer. “But Winchester made it work.”

A built-in breakfast banquette and sculptural furnishings in autumnal hues promote lounging without blocking the scenery. “When I view the garden from the new space,” reflects the husband, a retired business executive, “it elevates my spirit and transports me. It’s so peaceful.”

Inspired by the work of Japanese artist Toko Shinoda, Okawa designed the family room’s free-form abstract carpet, which was fabricated by Stark. “I played with a curved shape and straight lines to mimic natural forms,” she reveals.

Clockwise from right: Curves prevail in the revamped family room, from the Minotti settee and Holly Hunt swivel chairs to the rug inspired by artist Toko Shinoda. A curved tray ceiling embedded with LED lights crowns the open space. The new kitchen’s clean-lined custom cabinets boast countertops in Dekton. In the spirit of *kintsugi*—the Japanese art of repairing a break—Rina Okawa sketched a motif to mark the point where the home’s new and existing oak floors meet. The builder, Winchester, skillfully executed her creation in epoxy and gold leaf.





Wooden slats, echoing ones in the viewing room, detail a family room wall. “Repetition, a common element of Japanese design, creates texture and richness. But it must be precise,” says Okawa. “If the slats aren’t precisely repeated, it will be off-balance.”

Another Japanese principle came into play during a dialogue about flooring—namely, how to transition from the darker, existing oak of the foyer to the paler white oak installed in the redo. The wife brought up *kintsugi*—a Japanese practice that repairs broken pottery with lacquer or powdered gold. Okawa ran with the idea. She designed a motif, implemented by Winchester using epoxy and gold leaf, that celebrates the confluence of old and new.

Winchester’s Andrew Smith credits the project’s success to the team’s years of collaboration. “One of the things that’s been so enjoyable is the creative license our clients integrated into the process,” he contends. “It allowed for a lot of input and interaction.”

The owners are thrilled by how their property has evolved, indoors and out. “We’ve traveled a whole lot in our lives,” says the husband. “Now, we’re ensconced in what’s around us and the serenity of being here. We really don’t want to leave.” ■

SOURCES OF NOTE

Cabinetry & Millwork Fabrication in Viewing Room, Family Room & Kitchen: Miles Enterprises; 410-789-1212. Refrigerator & Freezer. subzero-wolf.com. Windows & Doors: tradewoodindustries.com. Breakfast Area & Family Room Wall Covering: aestheticswall.com. For a complete list of resources, see homeanddesign.com.



Clockwise from top: The lower garden is loosely shaped like the Chesapeake Bay. A new window in the existing living room offers uninterrupted views of the upper landscape. A stone sculpture by Abe adorns the pocket-sized *tsubo-niwa* garden, as seen from the wife’s office. Back cushions in Great Plains performance velvet on the breakfast room’s custom banquette play off the owners’ ceramics collection.