



LESSONS FROM JAPAN

A Lexington couple's downsized master bedroom puts into play what they discovered in Yokohama: Smaller is better. BY MARNI ELYSE KATZ

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RETURNING TO THEIR Colonial-style home in a Michigan suburb after nearly four years in Yokohama, Japan (the country's second-largest city, roughly 30 miles south of Tokyo), Bettina McGimsey and Michael Sortor realized just how much of their 2,400-square-foot American house was wasted space. So, a year later, when the family relocated to the Boston area, the couple came armed with the floor plan of the residence they called home in Japan, determined to find a more efficient living space.

When the first house they set their sights on buying didn't work out, they had just a week to find another. They settled on an old, modified Cape in Lexington. "At 1,311 square feet, it was even smaller than we wanted," McGimsey says,

"but we saw its potential." In September 2009, a month after closing, they hired Boston architect Bill Boehm to rethink the upstairs space.

Now working with the couple again on phase two of the project, focusing on the first floor and the facade, Boehm remembers his initial impression of the house as "a neglected, sad-looking little thing." The upstairs was tiny, consisting of just two bedrooms, one on either side of the stair landing. With two school-age children, a son and a daughter, the family needed three bedrooms, preferably all on the upper level. And they needed at least one more bathroom; the house had just one.

Still, they decided not to expand the home's footprint. In-

stead, Boehm increased the square footage on the second floor by reworking the roofline. He raised the steeply pitched roof 2 feet and rebuilt the back with a much flatter pitch, thereby reclaiming floor space that was otherwise lost under the low-sloping ceilings. Boehm says, "In a traditional Cape, only about 60 percent of the floor area on the second floor is useable before the roof cuts in; we were able to claim about 90 percent."

The second-floor changes made room for a master bedroom and bathroom, plus two bedrooms and a three-quarter bath. While only 180 square feet, the master bedroom is light-filled, open, and airy. "Living in Japan gave us a sense of how space can be used more efficiently," McGimsey says. "This



"At 1,311 square feet, it was even smaller than we wanted," Bettina McGimsey says of the Cape-style house that she and her husband bought, "but we saw its potential."

bedroom does that; it's very functional and feels really spacious." It's a place to sleep and get dressed; there is no sitting area, television, or desk. "We had a couch in our bedroom in Michigan," says McGimsey. "We never sat on it; I piled clothes on it."

A queen-size bed and two night stands fit perfectly in front of the master's two dormer windows. Determined not to waste an inch, Boehm found space between the wall of the master bedroom and staircase on the other side to create a narrow bookcase. An IKEA dresser neatly fills a niche in the opposite wall; carpenters from Beasley Custom Builders of Melrose added trim and put the dresser on risers so it sits above baseboard, giving the piece a built-in look. Three IKEA wardrobe units got the same treatment.

"Those irregular niches are the kind of odd spaces you can end up with when you dormer a roof," Boehm points out. "Some people just close up the wedge. We left it open and built furniture into it."

Since the roof had to be re-framed, Boehm took the opportunity to add a trio of skylights. One, above the steep staircase leading up from the main level, fills the narrow hallway with light during the day. The other two, one of which opens for increased air circulation, are in the master bedroom, above the wall opposite the bed.

"When you're sitting on the bed looking up, the moon shines through, and it's gorgeous," McGimsey says. "It's one of my favorite design aspects of the house." ■

Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

BEST FIT Bettina McGimsey and Michael Sortor's bedroom is just 180 square feet (facing page); wardrobe units from IKEA sit on a riser, giving them a built-in look.