

# A Clean, Green, Treetop Retreat



Wide screen panels provide a sense of enclosure in the ample sitting area. The shape of the space allows for nearly 360-degree views of the home owner's wooded lot.

What do you do with a big box of a house built in the

1970s, back when stark and dark were the bywords of contemporary architecture? Ronda Cole was faced with that dilemma when she moved into a 3,500-sq.-ft. home in McLean, Va., a suburb of Washington, D.C.

McLean,  
Virginia

For all its space and surrounding trees, the house had no personality and no connection to the outdoors. Cole wanted light and “windows all around,” and she wanted to keep construction green, so tearing the place down and starting over was not an option. She wanted privacy and comfort, and she wanted to enjoy her lovely wooded lot in any weather.

She called in architect Lorena Checa, who describes her design as “instinctive and completely informed by the land.” The result was a home reborn as treetop retreat, complete with a gazebo-like screened porch that sits away from the house but is connected by a suspended bridge.



Looming over trees and a walkway to the front of the house, the modern screened porch is linked to the main house by a connecting bridge with views on both sides. Surrounded by nature, the porch creates a feeling of separateness and solitude.



Going with the flow of the home, the connecting bridge leads into the kitchen; beyond it, only a few more steps bring visitors to an open deck.



The porch beckons all the way from the other end of the house, where trees flank a walkway and frame a view of the distant space that seems to be floating in air.



## Stepping Lightly on the Land

The modern, fan-shaped porch looms over wooded walkways, its roof sloping from 8 ft. to 12 ft. high at the widest part of the structure. Broad screen panels open up the views. “We wanted the space to be sculptural and to feel as though it was about to take flight,” says Checa.

Standing two stories tall, this porch isn’t for the faint of heart. Built on round steel pillars the color of tree trunks (six under the porch and two adjacent to the house), the porch “steps lightly on the land,” says Checa.

The homeowner can access the porch from her breakfast nook off the kitchen. She can see it from anywhere in the backyard and from below on the side path that directs guests to the rear.

The porch shape echoes the half-circle foyer in front. Its curves soften the steep, wild lot, as well as the sharp and angular house to which it is attached. It connects visually to the surrounding decks, which are wrapped with durable steel cable rails that seem transparent. Checa chose a warm gray paint that weathers well and redwood accents on railings for contrast and warmth. Deep overhangs protect the porch from rain, snow, and the hot summer sun.

With an eye on green design, Checa used environmentally friendly materials throughout the renovation, including Trex, a composite material made of plastic and reclaimed wood, on the porch and surrounding walkways and decks. To keep intrusive lighting to a minimum, the architect used outdoor lighting judiciously and added dimmers inside.

The success of this project, she says, is how comfortable it *feels* on the property, and how well it stands in harmony with nature.



There’s a sculptural balance between the free-form porch and the severely angular contemporary home that was reborn, thanks in large part to the addition of the new porch.



Curves soften the edginess of the fan-shaped space. The porch has a light industrial feel with steel bolts and wires; its roof rafters stretch across the ceiling, open-armed, to the sky.