



Photography by Heather Anne Thomas

Modernism With a Southern Accent: Inside an Eichler-Inspired Tennessee Home

The fact that there are few homes like this in East Tennessee didn't deter this couple

By [Mary Jo Bowling](#) Jun 13, 2016, 9:30am EDT

Curbed's weekly original tours series takes you inside homes with eye-catching style and big personality—from modern tiny homes to pedigreed midcentury gems and everything in between.

Every week, our House Calls feature takes you into homes with great style, big personality, and ineffable soul. Today we look at the Farragut, Tennessee, home belonging to Scott and Anne Wilkerson, a couple willing to march to their inner design drummer. For them, the only way to get their dream house was to build it.

The couple is the first to admit that Modernism is not the prevailing style in their small town, which sits just outside of Knoxville. Yet the Wilkersons are drawn to the style like [Charles and Ray Eames](#) were drawn to molded plywood. Scott was introduced to [midcentury design](#) by a college girlfriend (the relationship was transitory, the aesthetic endured). Anne, who hails from nearby Oak Ridge, had neighbors who lived in an Atomic Era home. "I grew up in a very traditional house," she

says. "But the people up the street lived in a midcentury modern home that I visited several times. I thought it was very stylish, and I wanted one of my own."

The soulmate part of their marriage was easy. Finding a home that reflected their personal aesthetic was quite a bit harder. There are a few modern homes in eastern Tennessee that were built by corporate executives and people who relocated there to work at the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Manhattan Project (Oak Ridge was the site of plutonium and uranium enrichment plants vital to the development of the first nuclear weapons). "At any given time, modern homes probably make up no more than two percent of the homes on the market," Scott says. "And when they do pop up, they are snapped up."



This architectural model shows the nature of the sloping site, and why a basement was necessary.

Frustrated by the lack of selection, the couple purchased an empty lot and decided to build a house matching their personal aesthetics. They flirted with the idea of a brutalist home, but rejected the notion of raw modernism as being too out of place for the neighborhood. "Plus, I didn't think I could get a bank to lend me the money to build it," says Scott.

Anne introduced her husband to the idea of [Eichler homes](#), the modernist tract dwellings that for many embody the clean lines of midcentury style. She's the Director of Brand Marketing Operations for Scripps Networks Interactive (Scripps Network is the parent company of HGTV), and as such, sees a lot of home-related programs. "HGTV has a show called *Curb Appeal*," says Anne. "They featured an Eichler home, and when I saw it, it really captured my attention. I thought the style was refreshing." Scott, a Senior Systems Engineer for Scripps Networks Interactive, immediately fell for the style. They both considered it a warmer and more approachable look that would be at home in the environs of East Tennessee.

They viewed thousands of Eichler-like homes on [Houseplans.com](https://www.houseplans.com) (a company that sells building plans from architects and designers) before finding the one by [Robert Nebolon](#) that, in Scott's words, ticked all of their design boxes.

On the site, the plan is known as [#438-1](#), but the Berkeley, California-based Nebolon calls it "Palomino." He says the moniker derives from the building's roots in the work of [Cliff May](#), the midcentury architect known for the Golden State's original rustic and rangy ranch houses. Nebolon says that the home is inspired by May, Joseph Eichler homes, and his personal experience living in (and adapting) an Eichler in Northern California's Marin County.



The kitchen cabinets are by [Ikea](#). The Wilkersons gave them a unique look with a [HanStone](#) quartz countertop and a one-of-a-kind backsplash assembled with [Somerville](#) tiles. They had the glassy mosaic tile in sheets of black, sheets of tan, and sheets of white. Anne Wilkerson cut them apart and pieced together the pattern you see here. The [James bar stools](#) are from Home Decorators Collection and the front door is from [ETO Doors](#)

"I love Eichlers; they are elegantly put together," Nebolon says. "But after living in one, there were a few things I wanted to change. For one thing, I added a laundry room as opposed to a laundry nook in the hallway that meant you were always stepping over clothes. I put in larger bathrooms, as the original Eichlers had very minimal baths. I also combined the kitchen and family room to make one big space."

According to the architect, an original Eichler plan for a house like this would have the living room at the back of the house with a wall of glass and a fireplace. "In all my residential work, I feel that the most used rooms—the kitchen and family room—should be placed in the best part of the lot—with daylight, views, and access to the garden," says Nebolon. "In this particular design, I felt the

family room and kitchen should be in the back of the house for great access to the backyard. I also added an extended cross-gable roof with a cantilevered trellis that made the new living room stretch into the garden and provided a window wall into the side yard."

The Wilkersons loved the plan, but it needed a bit of tailoring for the neighborhood and their site. For one thing, the house was designed for a flat lot, and theirs was sloping. Also, their neighborhood required that the garage not face the street, and in true Eichler form, this design featured the car park at the front. They decided to reach out to Nebolon via Facebook, and they were thrilled when he responded.

"I was a little bit surprised to hear from them," says Nebolon, "but when we started talking, I enjoyed their enthusiasm. I liked the fact they were committed to the design, and I committed to help them, even though they were nearly 2,500 miles away." (It's worth noting that Nebolon had never been to Tennessee.)



Architect Robert Nebolon notes that one of the reasons there are no Eichlers in Tennessee is that the building technology that would allow them didn't exist. Today, double paned, high efficiency windows make walls of glass possible, even in cold regions like this where snow isn't rare. Operable windows and sliding glass doors are [Weather Shield Premium Series](#) in dark bronze. All other windows are field installed units set within minimal wood framework.

After siting the house, the architect shifted the garage to the side of the dwelling and added the basement the sloping site demanded. Now, that lower level affords the couple a music room for Scott and a art studio for Anne.

Joseph Eichler used a particular style of siding for the exterior of his California homes. In Tennessee, the Wilkersons didn't want to deal with the maintenance of the material (in addition to weathering, wood siding is also vulnerable to gouge-happy woodpeckers). While the couple used

the Eichler-style siding inside, for the exterior they chose a James Hardie fiber cement siding. "We knew we would be here for a long time, so we chose low-maintenance products that would last," says Scott. Nebolon helped select the exterior colors after examining digital photos of the earth, trees, and foliage that surround the site.

Inside, the couple sourced the Eichler paneling for many interior walls. "I hate sheetrock; it's too generic for me," says Scott. "I really prefer the character and detail of paneling." They applied that reasoning to the ceiling, which is a whitewashed knotty pine. "We had to convince Robert of that decision," says Scott. "It isn't what would have been used on an Eichler." In the end, they went it. "It adds so much texture, and it was more affordable," says Anne.

The soft brown cork floor is a more traditional take on a classic Eichler style. "We had seen a modern house with a slate floor, and it looked incredible," says Scott. "But when we tested a sample out at home, it was clear it would be hard, cold, and uncomfortable to stand on. We found a sample of this cork flooring at Home Depot, and we loved the way it looks and feels."



Left: When asked what he enjoys the most about the new house, Scott says: "The walls of glass. The natural light is so great, you never need to turn on a lightbulb during the day." An [Eames molded-plastic rocker](#) is placed by the view. Right: Architect Robert Nebolon says he considers the dining room an "introverted" and an "evening space." He likes to place it in an interior spot, but with skylights (as he did here). Dining room table and chairs are by [Nouveau Classics](#), the [Saucer lamp](#) is from YLighting.

Other decisions were harder to make, and the couple reached out to their virtual network for help. Scott wrote about every aspect of the building process on his blog, [Knoxville Modern](#). When it came time to choose interior sconces, the couple turned to their followers for help, posting images of a mass-market light fixture and a similar, handcrafted piece from a seller on Etsy. Readers preferred the product from Etsy, hands down.



As fate would have it, Nebolon did get to see his sole Volunteer State project in person. He was selected by HGTV as the overall winner in their [Faces of Design Contest](#), which entailed a trip to Knoxville. He had told no one involved about this project, and when he revealed the win to his clients and the fact he had a just-finished project in HGTV's backyard to show producers, he says "everyone nearly fell off their chairs." HGTV taped a short segment about the architect in the house, and he got to speak to Scott Wilkerson face-to-face (the entire project had been conducted by email) and see his project with his own eyes for the first time.

"It was such a thrill to walk through it," Nebolon says. "Some of the crew referred to it as a 'retro' style, and I told them that wasn't quite correct. Retro implies a style that is extinct. This is very much a timeless style that works today; and I'd like to think it reflects some of the idealism of midcentury."