

Mid-Century Modern in Tennessee

By Dan Gregory



*Updating 1960s Modernism: built from a Signature design
by architect Robert Nebolon, Architect AIA*

Architect Robert Nebolon is a big fan of the mid-century modern tract houses in Northern and Southern California known as Eichlers. They are named for the developer Joseph Eichler, who hired various modern architects in the 1950s and 1960s -- including the firms of Anshen & Allen, Jones & Emmons, Oakland & Imada -- to design the homes for his many developments. Above is an original Eichler plan by Oakland & Imada, which is our [Plan 470-8](#). It's an early modern version of a one story ranch house. Eichler developed many variations. Below, and at the top of this post, is Robert Nebolon's [Plan 438-1](#), which was inspired by an Eichler that he used to own. The plan has been built by a young couple, Ann and Scott Wilkerson, near Knoxville, Tennessee. See Robert's photos of the family room, kitchen, and master bath shown here. The Wilkersons are fans of Mid-century Modernism and furnished the house accordingly, much to the delight of Nebolon, who only met them when he came to Knoxville to receive a design award in an award program sponsored by HGTV.

The story of building the house has been delightfully told on Curbed.com by crack real estate journalist Mary Jo Bowling who is Curbed SF Editor. Here's part of what she says:

"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."

Great story, Mary Jo! Read her full account, which includes information on all the finishes and furnishings, [here](#).

Nebolon's key changes to his original plan were to reorient the garage to the side and add a basement as a way to fit the house into the sloping lot. The changes point up an important lesson: every ready-made plan needs to be adapted to the site where it will be built. In this case, the original architect was able to make the adjustments himself.

Recalling the original Eichler he used to own, Nebolon waxes poetic and says living in it was like "driving a convertible '65 Mustang on a beautiful weekend afternoon...I love the simplicity of the design; I like the large windows that allow me to see the garden... In a convertible Mustang with the top down, I can see the entire road, I see the sky, and I feel the breeze. I enjoy the world around me. Probably the best part is that in both the Eichler Home and a convertible Mustang, I can enjoy the Unencumbered Life. Both the house and car are contemporaries, having been designed and constructed in simpler times and I like that. Both have a sporty personalities and I like that, too. Both sit lightly on the land which is nice. Slow and heavy with history is not what an Eichler and a Mustang are all about. What they ARE all about is Optimism and Simplicity with Style, and I like that."

Bravo Robert Nebolon and Wilkersons! It turns out that the open road leads from California to Tennessee!

To read excerpts from Scott Wilkerson's delightful blog about the construction process, [click here](#).

Continue to see additional images.



The rear the home is a window wall that looks into the garden—all from the family room and the kitchen island.



(left): The Eames rocker occupies a glass corner; (right): the MCM table under a skylight



The kitchen and the view of the vaulted hallway to the front door.



A model of the house.



The front door is deep inside the home and thru the dark vertical cleft in the center of the home...and not instantly revealed from the street.



A skylight reveals the front door which, upon opening, immediately reveals the high glass window wall at the rear of the home....an architectural enfilade...



The front door set within a glass wall with a roof opening for daylighting into the hallway.



The trellis at front bedroom windows allow filtered light into the room. The cleft to the right leads to the front door.



The first snowfall...