



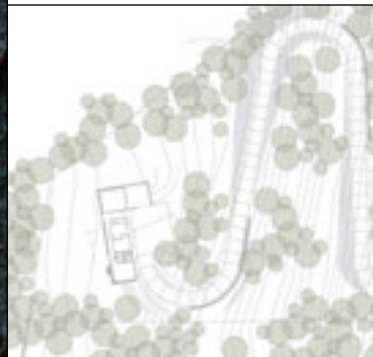
SUBURBAN INVERSION

What happens when a city architect designs a home on a wooded suburban plot? The typical floor plan gets turned on its head.

BY **CHRIS GRIMLEY**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ROBERT KNIGHT

Architect Michael LeBlanc flipped a traditional layout when designing his South Shore home, placing the bedrooms on the ground floor and the living space above. Right, the property's site plan shows the long driveway.





Clockwise from above, a view of the house's top floor from the woods; the outdoor deck is made of Cambria, a new chemical-free alternative to pressure-treated wood; the upper- and lower-level floor plans show LeBlanc's clever, lean design.



LIKE SO MANY URBANITES BEFORE HIM, Michael LeBlanc was determined to avoid Pleasantville's clutches. The architect and his wife, Sharon, spent 11 years in Dorchester and the South End, firmly believing commuter towns were for *other* people. But three years ago, faced with a lack of affordable housing options for their young family—including Max, 7, and Livi, 4—the LeBlancs decided it was finally time to surrender to the suburbs.

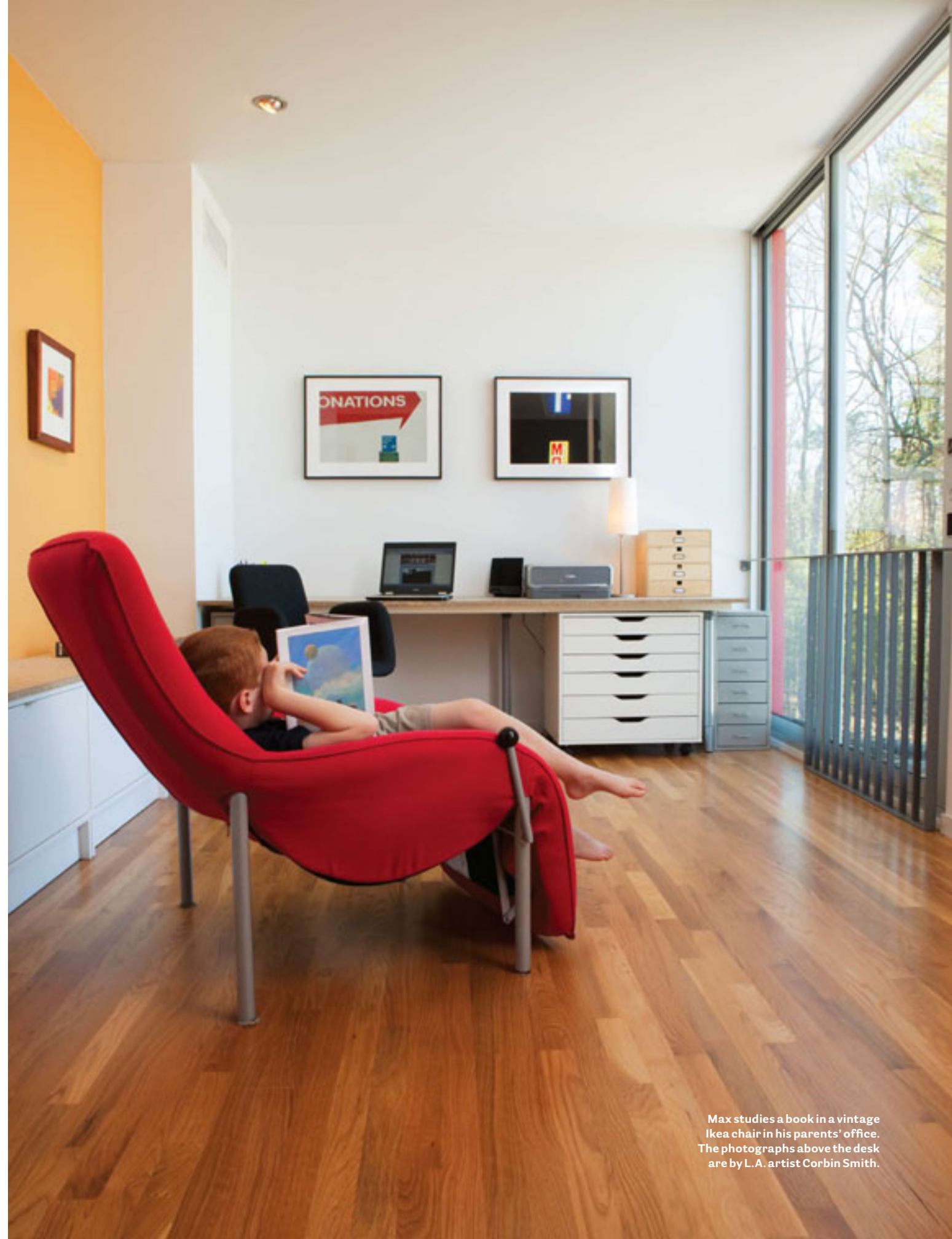
After months of hunting, they found a 1.4-acre site bordering a South Shore wildlife sanctuary. “We were commenting on how beautiful this stretch was,” Sharon, a psychotherapist, says. “Before we could finish the thought, there was a ‘Lot for Sale’ sign staring at us from the side of the road.”

The dramatically sloped piece of land, adjacent to 2,000 acres of red maples and cedars, certainly wasn't a typical suburban lot—and the couple resolved to build an equally atypical home. A principal at Boston's Utile Architecture + Planning and an instructor at Northeastern University's School of Architecture, Michael wanted to create “something clean and modern, a breath of fresh air from the traditional historicism of New England homes.” Sharon, meanwhile, pictured a large, open space conducive to entertaining, and a “socially interconnected” kitchen radically different from the one in their cramped city pad.

After studying the site, Michael decided to build into—instead of on top of—the hill in order to keep the driveway short. Embedding the house



Above, Livi creates a chalkboard masterpiece while Max assembles a construction paper installation in the playroom.
Below, Livi's room features removable daisy wall decals by Blik.



Max studies a book in a vintage Ikea chair in his parents' office. The photographs above the desk are by L.A. artist Corbin Smith.

Michael, Sharon,
and Livi relax in the
master bedroom.



The kitchen carpeting is made from Flor Fedora carpet squares, and Michael rescued the Bertoa dining chairs from the trash.



To save money, Michael topped an Ikea kitchen with a CaesarStone countertop. The living room features three prints of Rome by photographer Stephen Lee, a Boston native.

required a very deep foundation, which, in turn, allowed Michael to design something other than the standard concrete basement. He thought, Why not place all three bedrooms downstairs to avoid the cost and hassle of building a second floor?

By flipping the typical suburban home plan, he made sure the most oft-occupied quarters—including the living room, office, kitchen, and play area—received ample sunlight and sweeping views. Now, Sharon says, the upper level feels like a tree house with oversized windows overlooking the sanctuary. “We all hang out here together until someone decides they need some space, at which point they can go downstairs,” she explains.

The home’s exterior showcases this same creative practicality. The LeBlancs selected vibrant siding to mirror and reflect the surrounding natural splendor. “Red was the best four-season color for this particular site,” Michael explains. “It works in the fall with the red maples, in winter in contrast to the snow, in spring against

the lime-green leaf buds, and in summer by picking up the sunsets.”

Likewise, a 20-foot-wide Cambia wood deck that juts out from the main level was purposely placed close to the forest. In good weather, it serves as a playground where, much to the children’s delight, deer and wild turkeys occasionally wander. “The kids were already nature-lovers,” Sharon says. “Since moving here, I’ve developed such an appreciation for living in the woods, too.”

The couple also committed to a significant environmental agenda, using tricks of the trade to conserve materials and energy. Michael designed on a 2-foot grid, which matches most commercial lumber dimensions and eliminates the waste of custom floors and windows. He used cellulose insulation instead of fiberglass because it requires 10 times less energy to produce, and insisted on a geothermal pump to provide the home with eco-friendly central heat and air. A white roof membrane reflects the sun’s rays and provides the ideal base for

one of Michael’s upcoming projects, a succulent-lined “green roof.”

On a tight budget, Michael called in favors from subcontractors he’d worked with in the past, and strapped on a tool belt when necessary. Sharon took on the role of project manager. For the most part, construction ran smoothly. “We ran into typical problems like shipping delays and absentee subcontractors,” says Michael, “but to us, doing the actual heavy lifting for the first time in addition to having full-time jobs, those snags seemed more serious than they really were.”

In the end, though, even an idyllic setting and a painstakingly crafted home may not be enough to keep this dyed-in-the-wool city couple in the ‘burbs. “The minute Livi gets her college acceptance letter,” Michael jokes, “the ‘For Sale’ sign goes up. I miss the city. But I can definitely think of worse places to spend 15 years.” ■

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