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# REAL & SIMPLE



A ST. PAUL PREFAB  
ADDS PANACHE TO  
ITS HISTORIC  
NEIGHBORHOOD

BY CHRIS LEE ◊ PHOTOS BY MAKI STRUNC PHOTOGRAPHY ◊ STYLED BY MAUREEN BURNS



## DAVID SCHMIT IS A GUY WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS.

Good thing, too, or his dream house might have remained unattainable, a mirage that danced just out of reach. But Schmit was determined to own a contemporary loft-like home, and once he figured out a way to make it happen, nothing was going to stop him.

His stylish Hive Modular home, now safely ensconced on a narrow lot in St. Paul's historic Capitol Heights neighborhood, is just a mile from the loft that inspired his quest. "I was renting this amazing open and airy loft space in the Tilsner Artists' Coop in Lowertown," says Schmit. "I loved it. I thought I'd live there forever. But then I started thinking about wanting to own a space like that."

The 35-year-old artist knew he couldn't buy the kind of place he wanted immediately, so he plotted a more circuitous route to his goal. In 2001, he purchased a little two-bedroom fixer-upper in St. Louis Park, betting that the then-booming housing market would give him the boost he needed. "I had the idea that I'd fix up the house, build equity, and then sell it and buy a loft," he says. "But I started getting used to the amenities of owning a house—the privacy, a driveway, a yard for Parker [his cocker spaniel]. In a loft, you have to go down four flights to let the dog out."

Even while Schmit upgraded, remodeling his kitchen and installing new windows, he hatched an alternative plan. A photographer by trade, he was drawn to the edgy, modular homes often showcased in design magazines. In the pages of *Dwell*, he discovered Hive Modular, a Minneapolis firm that sells prefabricated homes assembled in a factory and delivered to the homeowner's site. One of several local modular housing designers, Hive offered Schmit the simple, modern form he desired. "As soon as I walked into their office, I knew a Hive house was exactly what I wanted," he says. "It had the feel of a loft, but all the benefits of a house."

Schmit purchased his St. Paul lot in 2005 and sold his St. Louis Park house a year later, when the housing market was already skidding from lukewarm to frigid. His master plan was unfolding with nary a hitch. Anticipating the fast build-out that prefab makes possible, he moved in with friends, planning to stay for a few months. And that's just about the time things started getting complicated.

The first challenge was the site itself. The lot, front to back, narrowed from 30 to 25 feet. Fortunately, Hive modules can be customized (to a degree) without sacrificing the efficiencies of modular construction. "We made significant changes to Dave's house so it would work on this lot," says intern architect and Hive Modular partner Paul Stankey. The design consisted of three "boxes": One would form most of the main-floor living area (living and dining rooms, bathroom, and den); the second would make up the kitchen and front foyer; while the third

PREVIOUS SPREAD David Schmit's open kitchen displays his preference for spare. Flos glass pendants above the island give the Ikea cabinetry an Italian glow. It's a great space for entertaining and food prep—or a combination of the two. "I've had 16 people in here making dinner," he says. OPPOSITE PAGE In the living room, space, light, and art shine, while the neutral furnishings disappear. THIS PAGE The two-story dining area, anchored by the open staircase with vertical steel-pipe railings, delivers graphic punch. Eames wire chairs give an edge to the wood pedestal table and hand-blocked printed pendant lamp, both from Room & Board.





The light-filled second-floor owner's suite also reflects Schmit's exacting photographer's eye. But here, organic touches soften the sharp edges. In the bath, a wood cabinet adds warmth to the textured ceramic and pebble tiles, and the soft-edged Room & Board bed makes modern cozy.

would be the second floor. The narrow site required the two-car garage to be tucked under the kitchen, which added another 230 square feet to the main floor.

The final design created a 2,010-square-foot home with three bedrooms and three baths. The airy, two-story dining area, open to the living room and kitchen, would be anchored by a staircase with a steel-pipe railing. A walkway would seem to float above the dining area and connect the upper-level owner's suite and a second bedroom. The effect would be light, spare, and spacious—very much giving off a loft vibe.

So far, so good. Stankey finalized the specs and the schedule for the contractor who would assemble the modular components on site. Then Schmit discovered he needed approvals from the board that governs his historic neighborhood before he could get building permits. Nothing could proceed without

the blessing of the Capitol Area Architectural Planning Board. Schmit presented his design; board members requested modifications. They didn't like the flat roof; Schmit pointed to another home across the street with a similar roof line. They wanted a suspended canopy over the doorway; Schmit agreed to add it later. And so it went.

As the approval process dragged on, Schmit tried not to panic. His three-month stay with friends stretched into a year. "I would have thrown in the towel if I hadn't already sold my house," he says. "And I had this lot. And the market crashed. And I had put down a pretty good down payment to start this house. I had to hang on and go for the ride."

Eventually, the board okayed the project. Then it was on to the city of St. Paul, which requested additional modifications. Finally, after another four-month delay, all systems were go.

On a cool June morning at 3 a.m., three semi trucks with extra-wide loads wound their way up the narrow city streets to the hilltop lot. A 240-ton crane showed up at 8:30 a.m., and a crew of 20 started work. The wood-framed, fiberglass insulated, Hardieplank modules—already dry-walled, wired for electric, and plumbed—were screwed together, patched, mudded, and... voila! By 1:30 p.m., the house was ready for finish work and Schmit's sweat equity. He painted the interior and installed the kitchen cabinetry, decks, carpeting, and sod.

Then came the fun part. He'd been collecting the spare, modern furniture he loved since his days at Tilsner Coop, finding and purchasing pieces with exactly the contemporary panache he wanted for his loft-like space. A great deal maker with an eye for quality, his favorite shopping destinations are similar to those of most savvy designistas with limited budgets: Craigslist, Blu Dot, and



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Room & Board. “When I moved in, it was like Christmas,” he says. “I had all this stuff in storage that I’d been buying a piece at a time for the last four years.”

He immediately placed every item in the location he’d painstakingly assigned to it during sleepless nights when he despaired of ever getting this place built, keeping faith by mapping out every detail in his head. He knew that the deep espresso stain of the red oak floors would perfectly set off the gallery-style white walls, and that the white walls would perfectly display his paintings, photographs, and collages. And he was right. “Finally, the first time I actually walked in here after the house was done, it was like the clouds parted and I could see the sun shine,” he says. “It was all worth it.” **MH**

CHRIS LEE IS THE EDITOR OF *MIDWEST HOME*.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON FEATURED PRODUCTS AND SUPPLIERS, SEE PAGE 118.



1. After more than a year of delays, delivery at last. The crane carefully lowers the second-floor “box” onto the first-floor den, and living and dining rooms. 2. The kitchen and foyer module is set in place over the tuck-under two-car garage. 3. Schmit’s finished 2,010 square-foot home.