

Treehouse Retreat

RUKI Modern Design + Build

Story by **Tracy Nicholson**

Photography by
Dan Francis Photography,
Additional photos courtesy of
Chris Hemmah

From left,
Brent Behm of Ruki Modern Design + Build
and homeowner, Chris Hemmah



Part One

FROM THE PLAINS TO PALM SPRINGS

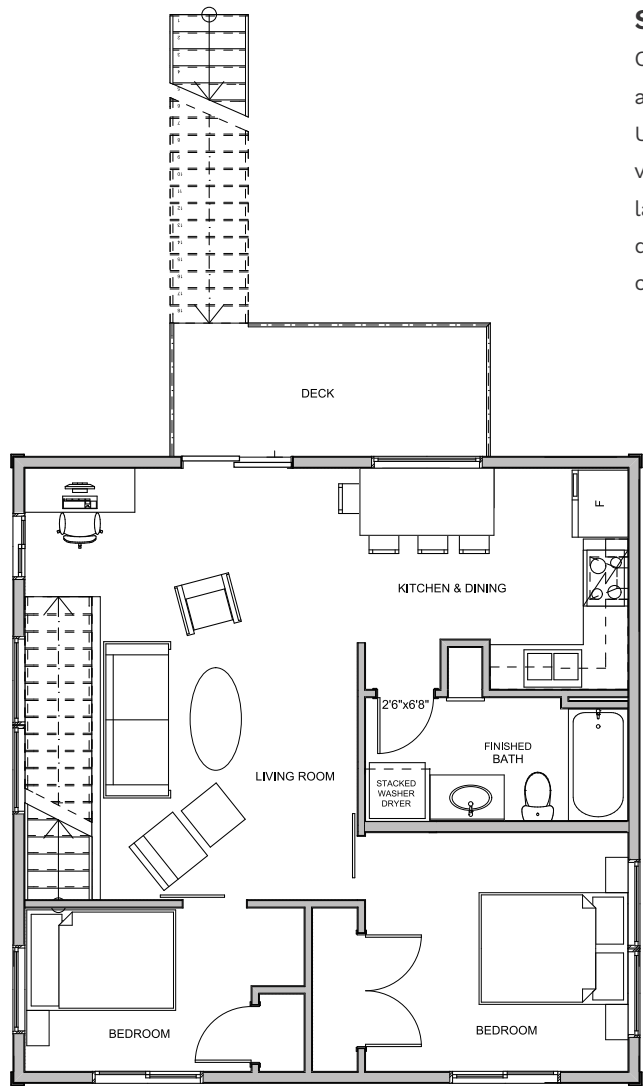
Perched high in the branches of a well-established neighborhood near Downtown Fargo, Chris Hemmah's treehouse-inspired retreat is efficient design, at its finest. Unlike the trees, Hemmah doesn't plant his roots too deep. In the back alley of his home resides his second home, a 98-square-foot travel trailer that he parks near Palm Springs in the winter months. When he's not headed South, Hemmah required an efficient and self-maintaining home base that he could manage from afar. To complete his unique vision with 1,000-square feet of living space, he general contracted the home himself, then recruited the drafting and design expertise of Brent Behm at RUKI Modern Design + Build. Together, the two put their perfectionism to work with Hemmah's passion for Mid-century Modern design and Behm's ability to balance space and harvest light.

Located in a modest, older neighborhood, Hemmah's home of three years is a natural stand-out with its modern lines and tree-grazing stature. With 800-square-feet of living space on the upper level and 200-square-feet, plus double garage on the lower, the design equates to cleverly-orchestrated, minimalist living. While some may have a fear of small spaces, Hemmah embraces the smaller footprint that allows him to live a fuller life; less tied to "things" and more connected to experiences. These days, he divides his time between Fargo, Palm Springs and the lake. For Hemmah, life is an ongoing adventure that's worth the mileage.



SCOUTING A SITE

Hemmah first found his lot on Craigslist, which was advertised by his neighbor, Jon Evenson. A few hours later, they struck a deal and Jon would quickly take an interest in Hemmah's modern infill project. "Jon was a great resource, having years of construction and remodeling experience," said Hemmah. "On a project like this, you need all the help you can get, and I have to say I'd have been lost more than a few times without Jon's help."



2ND FLOOR LIVING SPACE - 28' X 28' - 784 SQ. FT.

SHARING A VISION

Once Hemmah had designed the floor plan, he recruited Richard Holmes with Custom Building and Remodeling for his framing contractor, but still needed someone to draft buildable plans. Upon meeting Brent Behm of RUKI Modern Design + Build, the two immediately struck a common vision and Behm worked closely with him to draft the final plans and offer his expertise on the layout. Behm's role would be to make sure every detail of the home was perfectly plotted and designed for function, with little or no waste. Together, they would discuss everything from ceiling heights to what type of view he wanted to capture from each window.

CAPTURING THE VIEW

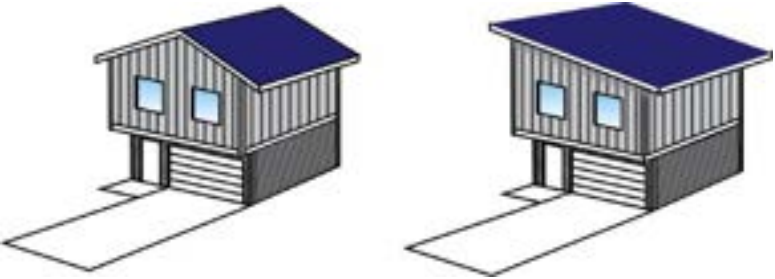
Since the property had an existing row of large, old-growth trees, Hemmah knew it was a no-brainer to build the house so that the main living level was perched in the treeline. Although older neighborhoods lead to views of power lines, utilities and alleyways, his home was designed to keep an eye on the sky and not on his neighbor's rooftop. Behm would help him to position the windows to provide maximum natural light and nature views.

BIG IDEAS - SMALL FOOTPRINT

Although Hemmah had big ideas for his small footprint, he was careful to not overbuild. Instead, he chose to invest in high-end finishes and durability. "The house design came together quickly, breaking ground two weeks after I purchased the lot, then moving in four months later. A lucky streak of good weather and a fantastic team of sub-contractors made this possible," said Hemmah. "I used many ideas that I'd gathered over the years, along with contributions made by friends on Facebook."

The unique roofline was decided by consensus of his Facebook friends and an architect friend suggested he include a scarcely-seen, cantilevered, three-foot overhang to provide entrance protection from the elements.

"In many ways, it's the house that Facebook built," laughed Hemmah. "Also, my training as a graphic designer helped a lot - the tools that I used to create my drawings, while not the same as what architects use, worked well enough to get my ideas across."





UPPER-LEVEL LIVING

Inside, Hemmah has an eye for local art and Mid-century modern design, with a nostalgic twist. "Combining Mid-century style with industrial modern was a little bit of a challenge, but with reclaimed wood from Dakota Timber Company, some creative design work, and the skill of my finish carpenter, David Langenberger - he made everything work together," said Hemmah. "David added many fantastic ideas to the design, especially the custom sliding barn doors."



LIVING LARGE IN SMALL SPACES

In Hemmah's eclectic living room, his mod-industrial style and local art collection pairs perfectly with Scandinavian furnishings and a set of unique accent tables designed for the outdoors. The coffee table and side tables are a find from Loll Design in Duluth and constructed using recycled milk cartons. Many of the furnishings hail from Scan Design, with a handful of pieces found online at Joybird and Etsy.



Lending character and function to the shared space, Hemmah incorporated sliding barn doors built by his finish carpenter, David Langenberger. To prevent warping, the doors have a plywood core with glued-down, rustic barn wood from Dakota Timber Company.



RETRO IN THE KITCHEN

Embracing the open-concept, Hemmah's kitchen design flows seamlessly from the living space with nostalgic elements of another era. "I'm a fan of Mid-century modern design, so I love that the cabinets and laminate countertops evoke that Wilsonart 'Betty' 50s & 60s style, especially with the slab maple doors and old-school hardware and stainless steel trim," said Hemmah.



Ignoring the current countertop trends, Hemmah relied on his finish carpenter, David Langenberger for the craftsmanship of his laminate, 50s patterned tops with a hardwood edge. Since they had to screw the table's backsplash to the stud, Hemmah cleverly hid the screws with automotive hardware from a 1939 Pontiac. Carrying this mod design to the cabinetry, he chose star motifs just like the ones his grandmother had in her home. "I think most people really get steered away from laminate because they see chipped corners, but the way this is constructed is practically bullet-proof," said Behm.

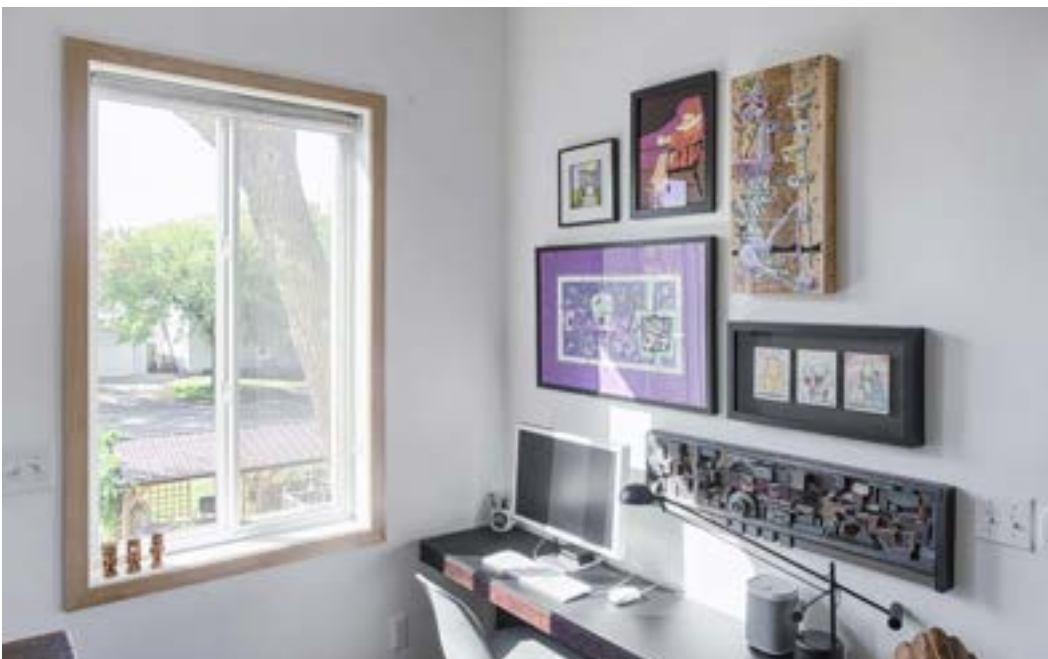


Over his retro table, Hemmah displays a Mid-century modern, stitched fiberglass light from an online company that specializes in custom, mod shades. He worked with Menards on the cabinetry, then had Langenberger install and design the upper trim. Hemmah found space-saving appliances like the smaller, 18-inch dishwasher, but opted to keep the larger gas range with integrated grill. To make sure every piece would fit like a puzzle, Hemmah's initial design took into account door swings, appliance size and walking paths.



SUPPORTING LOCAL ART

Throughout Hemmah's home, we found a vast collection of local and regional pieces from artists like Mike Marth, David Witt, Don Dahlquist, Darcy Simonson, Jon Offutt, and many pieces from Punchgut (Matt Mastrud). He also incorporated a well-known retro artist based in Palm Springs, Josh Agle - also known as "Shag".



Just off of the living room, Hemmah has created a comfortable den and guest room inspired by his travels, music and art. Attending a gallery opening for Punchgut (Matt Mastrud), this painting, done entirely by spray can, reminded Hemmah of his frequent view from the pool in Palm Springs. "If you look up, all you see is blue sky, contrail and jet. It really stirred a memory," said Hemmah.

On a solo road trip in his motorhome, Hemmah found himself perched near a mountain, contemplating life and ultimately, finding clarity. Within the moment, he grabbed his iPhone and snapped this panoramic landscape shot that would later be printed on aluminum at Shortprinter, then mounted on his bedroom wall.



MULTI-PURPOSED SPACES

One of their biggest challenges was securing space on the upper level for laundry. Behm helped him find the space in the main bathroom using a smaller 24" wide washer and dryer from GE. "Putting the laundry in the bathroom works wonderfully," said Hemmah. "There is a peninsula in the kitchen, just outside the door; it acts as a multi-purpose catch-all, so it's perfect for folding laundry."





Finding ways to share the entire living space, Hemmah avoided hallways. "I guess it's Architecture 101 that says, 'hallways are the devil.' Here the hallway to the bedrooms is the space necessary between the sofa and TV," said Hemmah. "Everything in here is well thought out, including the size of the TV and viewing distance to the couch; I found a chart online that helped me figure out the living room and bedroom distances with the appropriate size TV."



UPPER DECK

From Hemmah's upper deck, he entertains guests, takes in the treetop view and embraces the neighborhood's character. "Even though the sun sets over the old apartment building and there's a concrete block sitting on the hood of the car back there, I've captured some great sunsets in this eclectic neighborhood," said Hemmah.

UPGRADED ENTRY

On the lower level, encompassing 200-square feet is the entry with hidden mechanical, half bath and the home's only hallway. "When we were trying to figure out where to put a closet, it was a real struggle," said Hemmah. "Brent suggested we use the hallway as a closet - so, that's worked out really well. I had planned to put in pull-out drawers underneath the stairs, but I haven't really needed the extra storage." Adding finite details around every corner, his finish carpenter built the 22-foot-long, square handrail with a perfectly-constructed joint in the middle that is nearly impossible to see.



SAVVY SITELINES

In a smaller space, with the cantilevered roofline, Behm knew that window placement was going to be a key factor. "In smaller homes, it can easily become very dark – but this home is nice and bright," said Behm. "It doesn't have an overabundance of windows, they're just correctly placed." To harvest more light and enhance the views, Behm suggested larger, 5x5' windows, pulled down with a lower window ledge.



EXTRAORDINARY EXTERIOR

Hemmah wanted a 100-year foundation, so to achieve this feat and comply with the new FEMA code, his foundation goes down seven feet. "Everything that was done with this house, was done top-shelf," said Hemmah. "There were no shortcuts and that ended up costing more by the time we were done, but, I think it's worth it."

To ensure a durable exterior that could withstand the elements and sun, Hemmah included the three-foot overhangs and worked with Western Products to have heavy-duty roofing and siding installed with a 50-year warranty. "Because of the way the trusses are designed and the three-quarter-inch decking, if this was a flat roof, it's so strong, you could park cars on it," said Hemmah.

TRUSTING THE EXPERTS

Along the way, Hemmah listened closely to what the pros suggested. The framing carpenter (Custom Building and Remodeling, LLC) figured out a way to widen the stairway without negatively impacting the main-floor usability. Red River Plumbing, Red River Mechanical and Nice Electric handled the majority of the infrastructure work; offering valuable advice on how to make the house comfortable and efficient. Most of the materials, including the windows, came from Simonson Lumber.

Working with Cullen Insulation, a combination of foam and insulation made sure the home was sealed and the air controlled for maximum efficiency. The highest heating bill Hemmah's seen in the winter is \$55; keeping the main living space at 73 degrees, and the garage at 60 degrees. Because of the way the joists are built - in a long, clear span, they were able to make the home a clear-standing structure with no downstairs walls needed to support it.

For less maintenance, Hemmah also included cold-air returns throughout the whole house with hard ducting; not the harder to maintain flex ducting. "We worked with all of the vendors to get everything from the on-demand water heater to the furnace, which is a multi-stage, slow start, DC motor fan; everything is designed for comfort and quality," said Hemmah.

EYES FROM AFAR

To suit Hemmah's mobile lifestyle, the home was designed to be monitored from anywhere in the world. Nearly all major functions can be managed from afar; including the security system, garage door, sprinkler system and thermostats.

RETHINKING AN URBAN IN-FILL

When it came to the placement of his house on the lot, Hemmah threw traditional ideas out the window and started from scratch. "With the way people normally position their house, the front yard becomes like a formal living room; unused. I wanted one continuous yard space which gives me more options for future use or expansion," said Hemmah. "I knew the city had a minimum



setback - the distance from the sidewalk to the house - but no maximum. To me, the front of my house is the back of my house, and I just have one yard - the front yard." For Hemmah, using the alleyway meant easy access to the garage and outlets for plugging in his travel trailer, ensuring it would be ready for spontaneous road trips.

Hemmah's original plan was to set the house back and then eventually, build the exact same house on the front - if the city would allow it. Since he's not in Fargo as often, another option he considered was to build a smaller, 400-square-foot structure towards the front of the lot for him to reside and rent out the larger home in the back.

UNCOMMON SENSE

In a real estate market where big is often deemed better, Hemmah's ideas of value go against the grain. "This is 180 degrees opposite of what most people would do, and one of the more satisfying projects I've worked on," said Behm. "As an ethical proposition, this is the way I prefer to build; high quality in a smaller space, but enough space.

"I can see why people would go the traditional direction; if you look at the MLS, for the same price point you can get four bedrooms, two baths and a two car garage," said Hemmah. "The downside is that you get a postage stamp lot, lower quality finishes and likely \$40,000 in specials."

INVESTING IN QUALITY

"This house could have been built for less, but it would have shown and you would have felt it everywhere," said Hemmah. "I like to think that we weren't wasteful, but we were judicious with materials. In a small space, you can do higher quality things like use the wide maple trim and invest in good furniture pieces - because you're not dealing with that much of it. You can also hire really great people; my finish carpenter, David Langenberger, is a true artist."

LOOKING BACK

"We had ten days to break ground," said Behm. "That only happens when you have someone like Chris - he had already taken the first steps in the design process and he knew what he wanted - his plans were very specific with measurements and even furniture placement. A lot of clients I've worked with have good taste, but Chris is probably the most design-savvy client I've had for sure. He brings to the table a greater sense of reality of how buildings go together."

"This space has been perfect for me - in fact, this has been the only house that I wouldn't change a thing after having lived here for a couple of years," said Hemmah. "When you're a perfectionist, that's a big deal. As an architecture junky, to get a place that you wouldn't change is unheard of."

"Instead of having to drag Brent into this thought-pattern, he was already there," said Hemmah. "He understood small spaces and never pushed me to build bigger; he just made it happen, and that was really the fun part in working with him. I had the general idea and floorplan of what I wanted, but we tweaked it a lot to make it all work; Brent pushed me off the edge in some cases and pulled me back on in other cases. He had excellent insight and made many suggestions to improve the livability of my initial rough design - without really changing anything major."

ON THE MARKET

Three years ago, Hemmah intended to stay here, but with recent changes in his lifestyle, he has since decided to list the home. "I spend half the year in California, then much of the summer at my girlfriend's lake home, so I'm not here very often anymore," said Hemmah. "It's not a problem, as my house somewhat takes care of itself, as far as maintenance, but after three years, I think I may be ready to take on another project." Hemmah's home is currently listed by owner at \$228,000 and is available for tours.

Need more livable square footage? Not to worry, Hemmah already laid the groundwork for an easy addition. "Downstairs, the exterior wall has a pre-framed pass-through if someone wanted to put an addition on the West side of the house; it would make for a simple matter considering they wouldn't have to redo the structure," said Hemmah. "What's now part of the bathroom would then become a hallway."

Find the Finishes:

Home design - Chris Hemmah with Brent Behm, RUKI Modern Design + Build

Finish carpenter - David Langenberger

Reclaimed wood - Dakota Timber Company

Bedroom bubble light fixtures - Menards

Bedroom aluminum photography - Chris Hemmah, Shortprinter

Living room sofa - Scan Design

Grey side chair - Soto Chair, Joybird

Industrial steampunk lamp - Tesla Lamps, Etsy

Artwork - Darcy Simonson, Mike Marth, Punchgut (Matt Mastrud), Don Dahlquist, Jon Offutt, Len Peralta, Roy Jacobsen, David Witt, Shag (Josh Agle), Derek Yaniger, David Mjolsness, Maynard Hemmah

Custom, spun-fiberglass light shades - moonshinesthades.com

Cabinetry - Menards

Roofing & siding - Western Products

Insulation - Cullen Insulation

Trusses - Fargo Truss Systems

Maple doors - D&M Industries

Materials & windows - Simonson Lumber

Framing contractor - Custom Building and Remodeling, LLC

Electrical & plumbing - Red River Plumbing, Red River Mechanical, Nice Electric

Foundation - Asplin Excavating & Quality Concrete

Part Two

FROM THE PLAINS TO PALM SPRINGS



PALM SPRINGS BOUND

As Hemmah has found peace with less, his decision to put his Fargo home on the market was bittersweet. Between his winters in California and summers at the lake, he no longer spends enough time in the city to justify keeping it. He's also envisioned continuing renovations to his lot in Palm Springs. Last fall, he purchased the lot, sight-unseen in an RV resort in Cathedral City, Calif., for \$22,000. It's located in the Coachella Valley right next door to Palm Springs. He immediately began remodeling and removing everything, including the existing tin shed. He's since rebuilt a new shed and stunning new deck with an outdoor kitchen workspace.

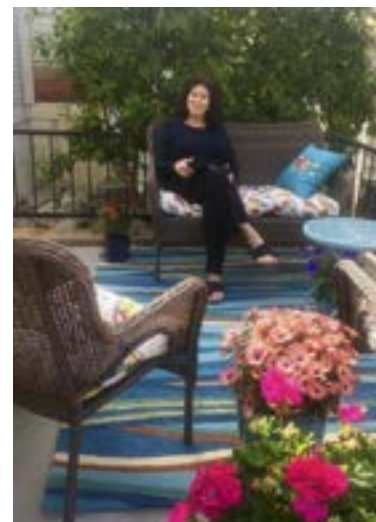
"I spend the winter in 98 square-foot travel trailer, but I have a really great lot and outdoor space with access to a pool on the property, so we're outside most of the time. Doing this has shown me that I value experiences more than material things."

Chris Hemmah



Hemmah's future plans include designing and building a modern tiny home for his Palm Springs lot; another project him and Behm can work on together. "I am probably looking at \$65,000 to \$70,000 for that build, but it would be foam-insulated due to the 120 degree summers. So, this place will be designed for 'old' me," laughed Hemmah. "I look at this type of living to be the future for many of us; it's low cost and it's in Palm Springs."

Initially, against the idea of vacationing in a trailer park, Hemmah's girlfriend and local artist, Darcy Simonson, spent about a month there before deciding to buy her own space, a larger, park model trailer where she can easily host family visits and retreat to her on-site art studio. With damages from a broken water line, prior to her ownership, she also took on an extensive renovation with a local carpenter, Wayne Smith. The renovation included upgraded cabinetry, flooring, quartz countertops and new lighting for a modern-glam getaway.



Darcy Simonson's mother, Myra Hogness, enjoying the trailer's small backyard garden during a visit to her Palm Springs retreat.

For more information, contact:

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