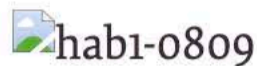


Let It Float

For two Seattle architects, updating a Paul Kirk split-level meant honoring an artist in transition—and keeping the owner happy, too.

By [Brian J. Barr](#) • July 15, 2009 • Published in the [August 2009](#) issue of *Seattle Met*



Between the lines Custom shelving showcases owner Frances Locke's once boxed-up art collection, and lends a linear nod to the home's original design.

Image: [Benjamin Woolsey](#)

UP TILL 1957, Seattle architect Paul Hayden Kirk designed homes in the International Style: flat roofs, rectangular forms, windows all in a line. And yet here is Frances Locke's house in Seward Park, a Kirk split-level built in 1952, with its V-shaped roof hovering above the house. Inside, the rooms follow the L-shape of the split-level's frame; Kirk separated them with brief, zigzagging sets of stairs. From upstairs into living room, living room into kitchen, kitchen into basement, the wide, shallow steps create a seamless feeling of spilling over as you move from one area to the next.

Locke, who at 80 still possesses a keen eye for (not to mention strong opinions about) design, bought the house with her late husband in the 1970s. Back then the couple did not know who Paul Kirk was, let alone that he was a leading architect in his day. They just needed a house. But when Locke charged Bjarko Serra architect Chris Serra and his partner Valerie Wersinger with remodeling the home, *they* knew right away the house was special. Paul Kirk built it at a pivotal time, just a few years before he would reject the International Style and denounce it as “an architecture...imposed on the land by man.” He would soon develop a new aesthetic—native woods, expansive windows that showed off evergreen-and-lake vistas, exposed “bones”—that would profoundly influence our region's architecture. To do the house justice, they'd have to honor Kirk's intentions at the time of its original design as well as the work he would go on to do, the work that would come to define him as one of the Northwest's most influential modern architects.

Plus they had to please Frances Locke.

Serra began poring over Kirk's original design notes and blueprints, and listening to Locke's desires: more display space for her collection of glass and ceramic sculptures, an emphasis on the open floor plan, updates all around. Kirk's free-flowing design was marred by bulky obstructions—a partition dividing the kitchen and dining room, an imposing coat closet at the front door. These had to go. The parquet floors had to go, too.

But a single floating cabinet in the dining room, everyone agreed, could stay. They all loved its clean lines, its simple rectilinear shape, the textured glass of the cabinet doors, and the recessed base—which gave it the appearance of a weightless body shouldering the structural wall above. “If you have cabinets going straight to the floor,” says Serra, “you give off this feeling of a big, impenetrable mass. But by designing them as floating boxes—yeah, there's still the structure there, but the space between the cabinet and the floor implies a free-flowing rhythm down below.”

On the lower level Serra and Wersinger knocked out the partition that divided the kitchen from the dining area. This not only improved the flow, but also turned an existing island into the axis of the room. They spruced up the island by adding modern back-painted glass doors to face the dining area and mirror Kirk's floating cabinet. They also built floating ceiling-height cabinets to replace an awkward wall that separated the kitchen from the hallway leading to a bathroom; this served to augment the sense of weightlessness.

The architects replaced the outdated parquet floor with more contemporary Milestone and a cool inlay of zinc. A large glass sliding door leading to a backyard terrace reflects Kirk's intent to eliminate the barrier between indoors and outdoors, already demonstrated by the sweeping floor-to-ceiling windows that look out on a dazzling view of sparkling Lake Washington from the living room on the main floor.

It never occurred to anyone to mess with those windows. But across the room, Serra and Wersinger removed the coat closet by the front door, opening up a spot for Locke's desired display case—a modern gallery-style shelf that now houses her artworks. The light pouring into Kirk's picture windows bounces off them in the most handsome way.