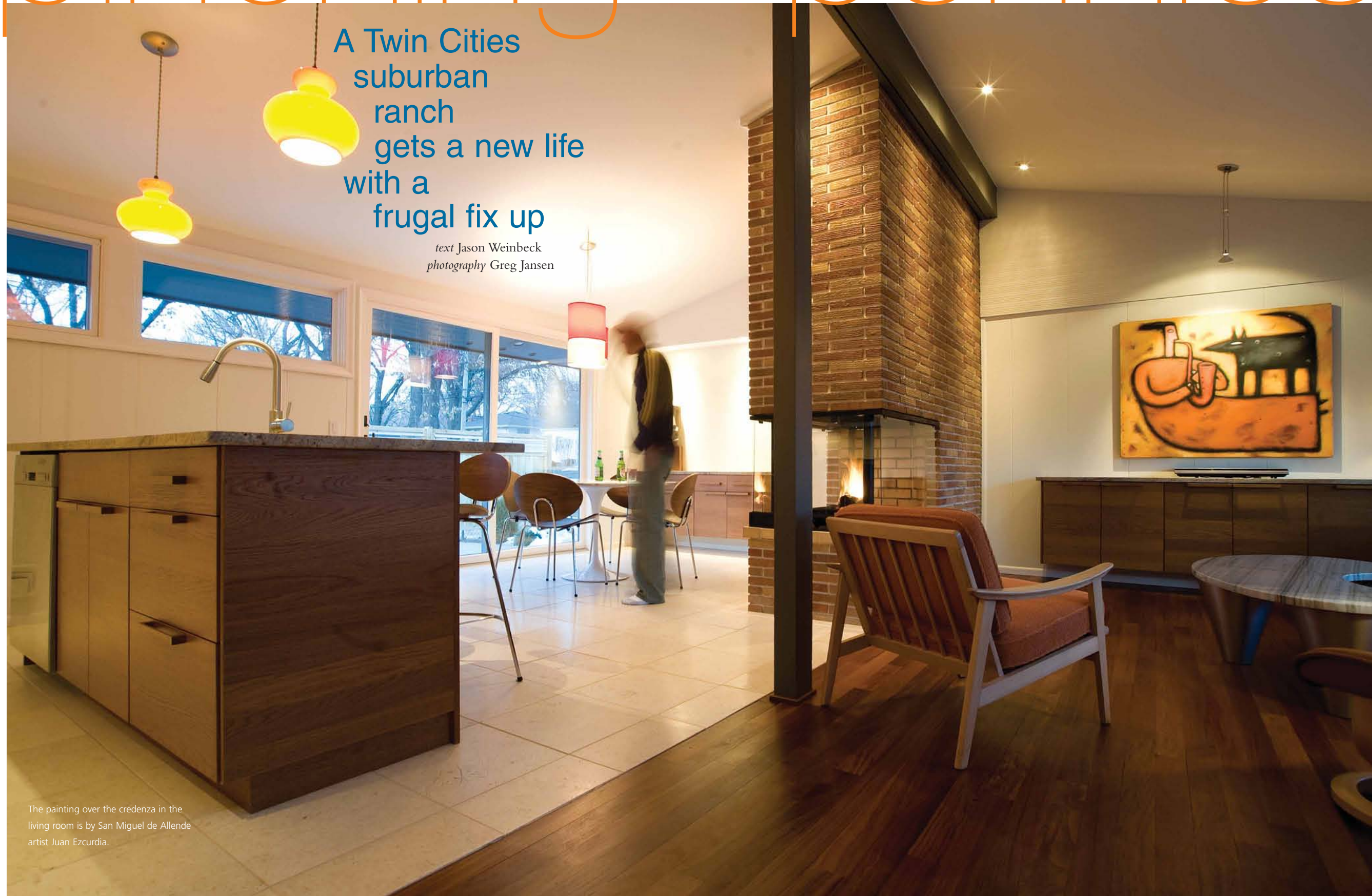


pinching pennies

A Twin Cities
suburban
ranch
gets a new life
with a
frugal fix up

text Jason Weinbeck
photography Greg Jansen



The painting over the credenza in the living room is by San Miguel de Allende artist Juan Ezcurdia.

When I was in the market for a new home in early 2007, I knew one thing for sure: it had to be a ranch. While magazines like this one are bringing new and creative perspectives to the ranch home, the style is also gaining attention around the country due to its interior flexibility and its affordability—not to mention the fact that they're everywhere.

I'm not rich but I can transform houses, so I was looking for something inexpensive with a lot of potential. I knew from experience that ranch homes were easier to work on than pre-war Craftsmen, Tudors and Colonials. A ranch lends itself to an open floor plan, efficient lighting and a balance of both vintage and contemporary fixtures and furniture. It didn't take me long to find the perfect California-style ranch in Richfield, Minn.; it was definitely a fixer-upper, a pure 1958 classic.

I immediately fell in love with the house. I was struck by the simple beauty of the peninsula fireplace, which was in pristine condition, and also loved the vaulted ceilings, open floor plan and exposed ridge beam. On the negative side, the kitchen wasn't in working condition and the laundry/furnace area was open to the rest of the house with nothing but a shutter screen to insulate the noise. There were also a couple of awkward partition walls in the main living area, and the floodlights that ran across the acoustical tile ceiling seemed to be in arbitrary locations. Nonetheless, I wanted the house and knew I could give it a new life.

The first thing I did before moving in was tear up the carpet that extended even into the kitchen and bathroom. I didn't have a plan or a timeline for my home renovation yet, but I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep until the carpet was out of there. Underneath, I discovered that the cork tiles hadn't weathered the years very well and the subfloor was sagging between the joists.

In 1958, when sheet materials were fairly new, the subfloor in my house was installed in the wrong direction, parallel instead of perpendicular to the joists. It was at this point that I decided to take time off from my design business and work on renovating my home fulltime. I took out a second mortgage and never looked back. Working alone, I usually put in 12-hour days.

Taking advantage of unseasonably warm weather, I started on the outside with a fresh coat of paint and a new roof. I replaced the old window glazing with thermopane glass and refreshed the landscaping by planting smaller scale arborvitae bushes along the sides of the house and adding a new crab-apple tree to the front yard. I also ordered custom house numbers. Since my home sits on a corner lot, I ordered a set for the

The cabinetry is from IKEA and all of the kitchen appliances were purchased locally on Craigslist. "It's time consuming and sometimes frustrating because the items may not be in as 'shiny-new' condition as advertised, but in the end the money saved is well worth the footwork," Jason Weinbeck advises. His best find was unfinished 3/4" teak flooring for the living room and hallway left over from an installer's job that he bought for \$3.50 a square foot—delivered.



Jason Weinbeck





front as well as the side that's visible to drive-by traffic. And I installed small spotlights that automatically illuminate the house numbers when it gets dark.

The inside of the house was next. I drew a floor plan, kitchen plan and lighting plan. With a post and beam structure, I knew exactly what was feasible. I tore down existing walls and ceilings, and spent more than a week installing a new subfloor. Then, I opened up the back of the house for an 8' patio door. After removing the old 32" hinged rear door and framing it in, I found out that, of course, the siding I needed was no longer available. So I improvised and made matching beveled siding with a table saw and router.

The 1,300-square-foot house has three bedrooms and one bathroom. I use one of the bedrooms for an office and the other for my media room. The original floor plan had the laundry/furnace area open to the rest of the living room and kitchen; whenever the furnace cycled on it sounded like a jet engine. In my new plan, there is a full-height, soundproof wall and a solid core door between the kitchen and the utility room.

To save money I sourced as many items as I could locally and on the Internet. I found my patio door and all appliances on Craigslist. The kitchen cupboards as well as the dining and living room credenzas are modified IKEA cabinets. I loved the style and color of the Nexus line; the yellow-brown tone with its horizontal grain and clean lines was a perfect fit for my midcentury house. The counters

are a honed granite called Golden Oak, and the walnut Radius stools that pull up to the breakfast bar are from Room & Board.

My ambition is to someday design and build furniture, so I also incorporated several handmade pieces that fit the look and feel of the house. I built a boomerang bench for the front entry, bevel-edged walnut nightstands for the bedroom and a kidney-shaped granite coffee table fitted with stainless steel legs from a small dairy equipment manufacturer in my hometown. A Danish modern chair was salvaged from my parents' basement and refinished.

I also designed the chandelier that hangs over the dining room table and had it fabricated by a local lampshade maker from wire frames I ordered online. Two orange pendants over the kitchen island are from a vintage lamp dealer in the Netherlands, and were surprisingly inexpensive.

The great thing about the original builders of this classic home is that they used quality materials. The base trim and the doors were reinstalled after the construction portion was complete and then enameled a creamy white. Some of the grooved redwood stock from the upper portions of the demoed walls was reused as a patterned accent above the cabinets in the kitchen. Original wood posts and beams were still sound, and by painting them the same exterior gray color, I emphasized the structure of the home.

The brickwork and mortar on the fireplace that attracted



"The bathroom had wood paneled walls that were scratched and discolored. I decided to enamel over the existing wood with Benjamin Moore Satin Impervo," Weinbeck says. "I love this paint because, after it dries, it has a beautiful sheen. It also levels nicely and hides imperfections. The best part is that you can still see the wood grain beneath the paint surface." The cabinetry is Nexus from IKEA.

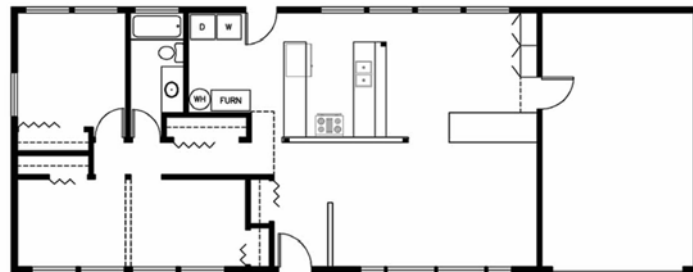
Radius chairs and a Saarinen dining table are from Room & Board. Credenzas in the dining and living areas are IKEA Nexus upper wall cabinets hung low. Weinbeck installed the cabinets six inches from the floor using the IKEA rail system. The now-useable fireplace is the focal point of the house. Opposite: In the living room, less is more: a reupholstered vintage couch and chair team with the homeowner-made coffee table and bench, and an Eames aluminum lounge chair.



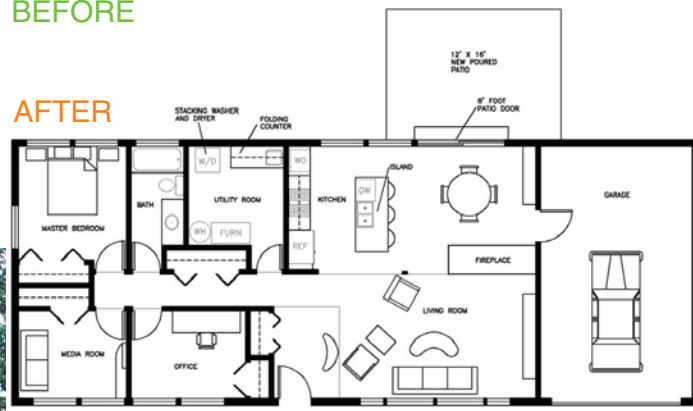


Jason Weinbeck

BEFORE



BEFORE



AFTER

me to the house was flawless. It seemed like it had never been touched and I soon found out why. The first celebratory fire was a disaster: It filled the house with smoke and I ended up carrying one of the still-smoldering logs out to the front yard and throwing it in a snow bank. As it turned out, the chain mail screening that covered the three open sides of the fireplace was too much open area for the fire to properly draw. I did a lot of research on fireplace design and worked with a friend to build a new metal framework and sliding draft door, and installed fire-ex glass doors to fix the problem. It works perfectly now.

What I appreciate the most is the simplicity of my house and its character. Interestingly enough, a lot of the positive comments I have received from friends are about the original elements—the peninsula fireplace, the grooved redwood, the exposed post and beam structure. These elements had gotten lost either from age and discoloration or were hidden behind partial walls. All I needed to do was highlight what was already there. 🔥

Jason Weinbeck put himself through architecture school by working construction jobs; he can be contacted at jasonweinbeckdesign.com. Wedding photographer Greg Jansen's work can be seen at gregjansenphotography.com. Like modest homes? Check out "Working Class Heroes" in Fall and Winter 2008 before they sell out; atomic-ranch.com.

Improvements: What & Why

Interior

- High-efficiency central air with cold air return system and improved fresh air intake
- Increased insulation throughout
- Sub-floor strengthened
- New copper plumbing (easier to use and improves water pressure)
- Floor plan improved to take advantage of floor-to-ceiling fireplace sight lines
- New lighting plan with contemporary fixtures
- Andersen patio door off the dining area
- Walnut kitchen cabinets and matching island
- Granite countertops in kitchen and bath
- New 3/4" teak flooring in living room and hallway
- 16" French limestone tiles in dining room, kitchen, front entry and bathroom
- New shower with limestone surround, built-in shelving and sliding glass door

- TOTO (bath) and Schön (kitchen pull-out) faucets
- Sink, storage cabinets and high-efficiency washer/dryer in laundry room
- Valli & Valli stainless cabinet knobs
- Stainless steel kitchen appliances
- Integrated Klipsch sound system in living room, kitchen and dining area
- Lutron Diva dimmer switches
- Velux skylights in front entry and bathroom

Exterior

- 12' x 16' backyard patio & cedar privacy fence
- Low maintenance landscaping & restored lawn
- 35-year architectural roof shingles
- Exterior lighting improvements
- All new thermopane windows
- Garage shelving system

