

HIS WAY ON EBAY

Faced with a tight budget, a determined homeowner went bargain hunting online to outfit his family's sleek new place.



BY RACHEL LEVITT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREG PREMURU



FOOTLOOSE Homeowner Steve Ratner got great prices on cork flooring for the bedrooms and bamboo flooring for the rest of the house from a Canadian company via the Internet. The Artemide lamps above the bed, worth \$300 each, were bought on eBay for \$125 for the pair. Facing page: A double-height ceiling and upper-level windows and balconies create the illusion of more space in the house.





TURN STYLE
The KWC kitchen faucet did come with minor scratches, but at \$460 below retail, Ratner could overlook the flaws.



ART AND (CON)SOLE
EBay collector's items include a Paul Rand lithograph (\$125) and a console by architect George Nelson (\$420).



HARDWARE SCORE
Ratner bought all the door hardware on eBay. Handle-and-lock sets that retail for \$80 to \$85 cost just \$27.

YOU HAVE TO HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR IF YOU'RE building modern in New England. When Steve Ratner's house in Southborough was almost finished, a woman walking her dog asked the proud owner, "When is the roof going up?" Even the building inspector admonished, "You know you have the only house like this in Southborough. Are you from California or something?"

Ratner is used to questions like these and suspects that some folks may still be waiting for the gable roof to be delivered on a flatbed truck, but he loves his house. Ratner, who is president of the multimedia firm Ivy Creative, and his wife, Amy, dreamed of this: a home suitable for *Dwell* magazine—something open, sunny, flat-roofed, and modern, where they could live a low-maintenance lifestyle with their two young sons. In William Ruhl of Ruhl Walker Architects in Boston, they found a perfect match for budget modern. "We gave Will lots of clippings to show him what we wanted," says Amy. "At our initial meetings he presented his idea, and I kept thinking, I shouldn't like the first thing I see, but I do. Finally Will said, 'It's OK to like it.'"

"The budget was \$150 a square foot," says Ruhl, "which for custom houses around here is very tight, about half the average cost. We did some quick sketches of a small house—2,500 square feet. This was tiny by today's suburban standards."

How do you design a small house that feels big? "Eliminate circulation wherever you can," the architect says. "Everything is usable space. So, instead of separate living and dining rooms, we went with one big space. The double-height area in the plan is actually quite small, but when you connect it to the second floor with windows and balconies, you appreciate the volume. The see-through fireplace makes it feel like they have two fireplaces for the price of one."

The flat roof, which uses less material than a conventional peaked roof and requires no gutters, also satisfied both design and budget goals.

Controlling the architectural price was only half of the story—all the fixtures and finishes in the house would add up, too.

So Steve Ratner did what few of us would dare: He ordered everything—from sinks to lights to faucets to toilets, everything—via the Internet, most of it from eBay. It took him a year to research and obtain all the parts he needed, using the garage at his old house in nearby Framingham as a warehouse. "Kids' parents would come over and marvel at the boxes," says Amy. "I'd say, 'Oh, that's a toilet,' or 'That's an exhaust fan.'"

Steve determined exactly what he wanted and then waited for the right price. The Iris recessed lighting fixtures in the living room, for example, retail for \$200 to \$300 apiece, depending on the trim, but he bought 18 for \$125 total, on eBay. Other lighting fixtures that sell in stores for \$68 each, he bought for \$25—for two. Most communication with the sellers was via e-mail, and in the hundreds of transactions, he says, he never got burned.

This kind of shopping isn't for everyone. It takes a tremendous amount of patience—and flexibility, since sometimes "perfect" is less than so. The KWC kitchen faucet, which retails for \$650 and Ratner found for \$75, came with some minor scratches, but that was enough to persuade the seller to knock off an additional \$25.

And while the bargain hunting was labor-intensive for Steve, it actually made the process easier for the architect and builder. "We were happy, because we didn't have to source all of this stuff," says Ruhl. "Steve could get much nicer things than what you'd typically get for the budget allowances. He got beautiful things at Home Depot prices."

Even after the Ratners could no longer afford his services, Ruhl followed the project, showing up now and again to see how the construction was coming along. "I simply loved the project and enjoyed watching it go up," he says.

Now, sometimes for fun, the Ratners and their boys build a model of the house out of Legos. The flat roof and boxy form are perfect for the modular medium, and best of all, they don't need to order any special Lego pieces from eBay. ■

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LIGHTS UP Amy Ratner reads at the dining set the couple bought years ago at Machine Age. They saved enough on the recessed-lighting fixtures bought on eBay to splurge on a whimsical chandelier from Wolfers. The sofa, which retails for \$7,500, was bought on the Internet from a British exporter for \$4,200.

