

FEATURE

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Renee Smeal enjoys the urban lifestyle of her downtown condominium within walking distance of shops, attractions, and restaurants, but her “modern beachy” lake house is her hub for hospitality and entertainment.

Designed and built with three generations of family visitors in mind, it made its large-group debut over the 2018 Christmas holiday. It has proven to be a welcoming home away from home for this year’s summer guests, and Smeal has a great next-door neighbor, too: her sister.

A different house was originally on the lot in Willow Point, which surrounds a lake adjacent to the Platte River in Ashland. That home was nearly 50 years old and too small for her needs. It was also below the current flood plain, and Smeal could see it needed other major upgrades. But she could also see the property’s potential.

“I thought this would be perfect for families—our children and our grandchildren and extended family—and I wouldn’t be isolated,” Smeal says. “I’d have my buddy right next door.”

While visiting her sister’s neighboring lake home, Smeal was cutting flowers and “watching the waves lap up on the beach with the water glistening from the sun” when she was “struck by the idea that this would be a wonderful gift for my family.” The owner of the property had passed away. Realizing the property might go up for sale, Smeal contacted the executor of the property and an agreement was struck before they hung up the phone.

“I couldn’t believe it!” she says. “I was thrilled.” >



From left: Sisters Ellen Gross-Rhode and Renee Smeal, with Renee’s family.

A LAKESIDE HUB
 & Wish Come True at Willow Point

◀ The house was demolished and the necessary changes were made to the lot as plans for a new house commenced. Smeal deliberately chose a builder with lakeside construction experience, G. Lee Homes.

“They were very creative when I talked about what I was looking for in a house. I didn’t want a house that looked like it sat in the city. I wanted a house that looked like it belonged on a beach and I wanted it to be unique,” she says. “I couldn’t wait to design my own place. I wanted a home that fit the shape of [the] property and [I] also wanted to create a compound of sorts.”

Smeal says some of the design elements she found appealing were impractical for a lakefront location or Nebraska weather, such as a flat

roof. She also had to consider restrictions imposed by local building code, such as deck railing that would obscure views.

...Smeal discovered imported backsplash tile with an aged look not only evocative of similar styles she loved in Italy but also the exact shade of the ocean as she remembers it...

“But the alternatives the builder offered were excellent,” she says. A simple roof design eliminated the need for an overhang and complemented the contemporary exterior with clean lines. A retaining wall made it possible to keep an east-facing walkout area overlooking the lake both elevated and in compliance with code. “I have this dramatic boulder retaining wall. It’s stunning, and it’s organic,” Smeal says.

An early concept called for an activity area on the south side of the house but at the builder’s recommendation, Smeal moved it to the north side to create a patio she and her sister could share for combined family events. ▶



FEATURE



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◀ “This works perfectly because on the north side we have shade and we have the sun on the east side,” she says.

The home boasts many practical elements, such as an enclosed outdoor shower, cork flooring, open flow with wide hallways, and an expansive quartz kitchen island that serves as a gathering spot. Even the landscaping, in its final touches this summer by Green Inc., is low-maintenance. Above all, Smeal wanted to be a host—not a housekeeper.

“The first thing was ease of upkeep; I didn’t want to spend all of my time taking care of things. Everything had to be easy to care for, easy to maintain,” she explains. “I am retired and I have another place to take care of. I didn’t want to work so much that I’m not having any fun.”

The house is as beautiful as it is functional.

“I started with a black-and-white theme with beachy blue and aqua as accent colors; (design consultant Angie Hall) encouraged me to incorporate some gray so it wouldn’t be so harsh, for transition,” Smeal says. The cork flooring is a perfect accent. “It’s soft, warm, beautiful, and easy to take care of. I love it.” ▶



◀ During a happenstance visit to a tile store, Smeal discovered imported backsplash tile with an aged look not only evocative of similar styles she loved in Italy but also the exact shade of the ocean as she remembers it from a trip there. “I get a lot of compliments on it.” She chose metal shelves instead of cabinets for her kitchen, an “industrial look” that pays homage to her family’s business, Smeal Fire Apparatus Co.—a fire truck manufacturer in Snyder, Nebraska—and her father’s welding shop.

Smeal says windows were strategically placed to showcase the outdoors through all four seasons.

“It’s an open plan and the view is beautiful everywhere,” she says. “It’s a happy place.”

And Smeal says she’s happy with how everything turned out. But the very process of bringing the house to fruition also brought much happiness.

“I had my files and tore out pages of magazines,” she says. “The designing component was fun for me because I love that type of thing.”

Being surrounded by family and nature, Smeal says, is everything she dreamed it would be.

“How many times do you get to say, ‘I got exactly what I wanted’?” she says. “I love being out here.” [OmahaHome](#)



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