



Residential Landscape Design / Outdoor Living · \$100,000–\$250,000

Sauna Sanctuary

A compact city backyard reimaged into a year-round outdoor retreat.



PROJECT STATEMENT

From an underused city lot to a four-season retreat

The homeowners wanted to transform an underutilized backyard into a functional outdoor living environment that could be enjoyed throughout the year. While the existing city lot included a small deck and lawn, there was very little usable space for gathering or recreation. Their primary goals were to create an inviting entertaining area, expand the amount of functional outdoor living space, rebuild the deck, and incorporate a modern sauna as a central feature of the design.

Because of the region's long winters, convenient access to the sauna from the house was especially important. The design needed to position the sauna so it could be reached quickly and comfortably while maintaining the existing walkway connection to the detached garage.



THE CHALLENGE

A sloped, compact lot with no room to spare

The existing backyard consisted of a small deck and lawn that did not support entertaining or everyday outdoor living. Several site constraints influenced the design: the side property line sloped downward, and the overall footprint of the yard left little flexibility for accommodating every requested feature, while a convenient circulation path between the home and detached garage needed to be preserved.

These challenges were addressed through careful space planning. The existing deck was replaced with a lower-maintenance landing, a new patio expanded the outdoor living area, and a small boulder retaining wall created the level space needed to install the sauna in its ideal location. The front slope was replanted with lower-maintenance landscaping to simplify upkeep while complementing the overall design.

BEFORE & AFTER

Front Slope

BEFORE



The aging stacked-stone retaining wall along the sidewalk no longer held the grade cleanly, leaving an uneven edge and an eroding slope above it.

AFTER



A boulder retaining wall stabilizes the hillside and eliminates erosion; natural boulder outcroppings, groundcovers, and perennials complete the finished look.

BEFORE & AFTER

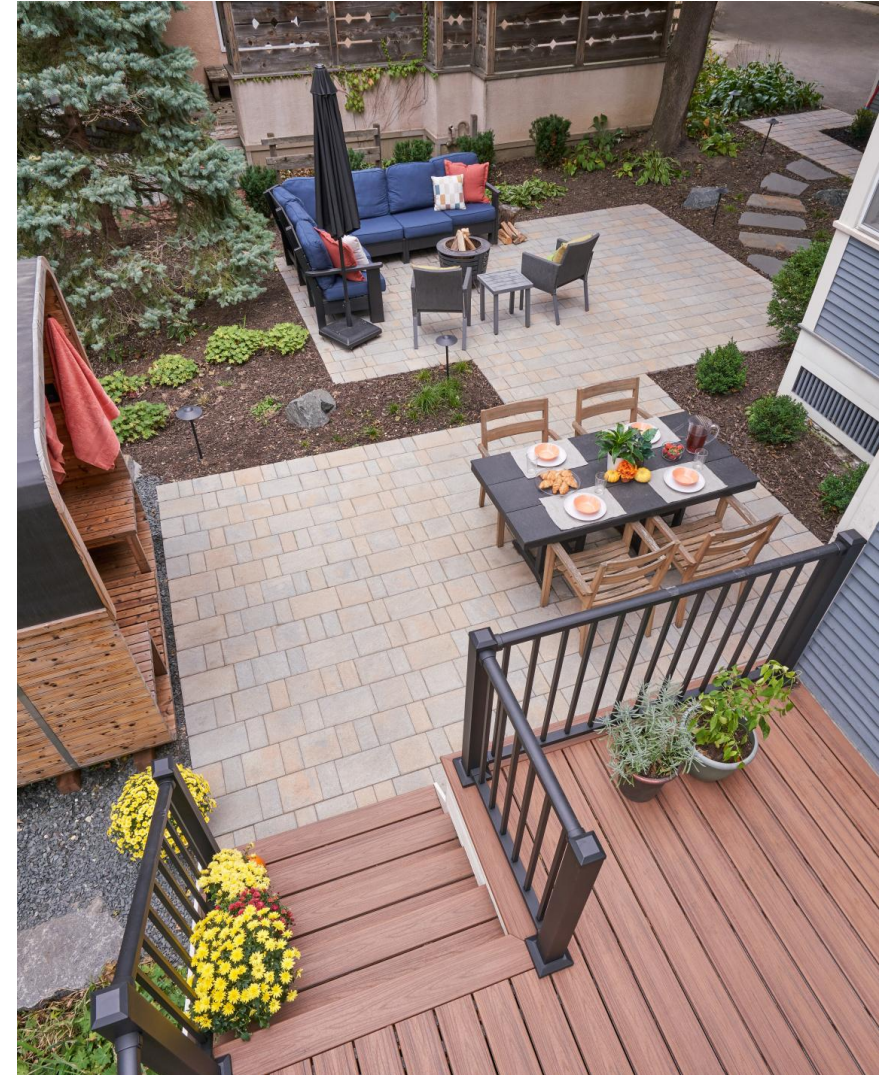
Rear Deck

BEFORE



The original wood deck's lattice skirting and small footprint lacked functionality and efficient circulation.

AFTER



A new composite deck improves durability and usability; relocated stairs create a nook adjacent to the sliding doors and improve circulation.

BEFORE & AFTER

Walkway & Patio

BEFORE



Aging concrete, mismatched pavers, and mature boxwoods restricted movement, leaving only an informal path of least resistance.

AFTER



Natural stone steppers establish a defined walkway with low-voltage lighting, relocated to let existing boxwoods mature without future maintenance issues.

BEFORE & AFTER

Backyard Transformation

BEFORE



Disconnected concrete and gravel walkways created a closed-in feel with no defined outdoor living space.

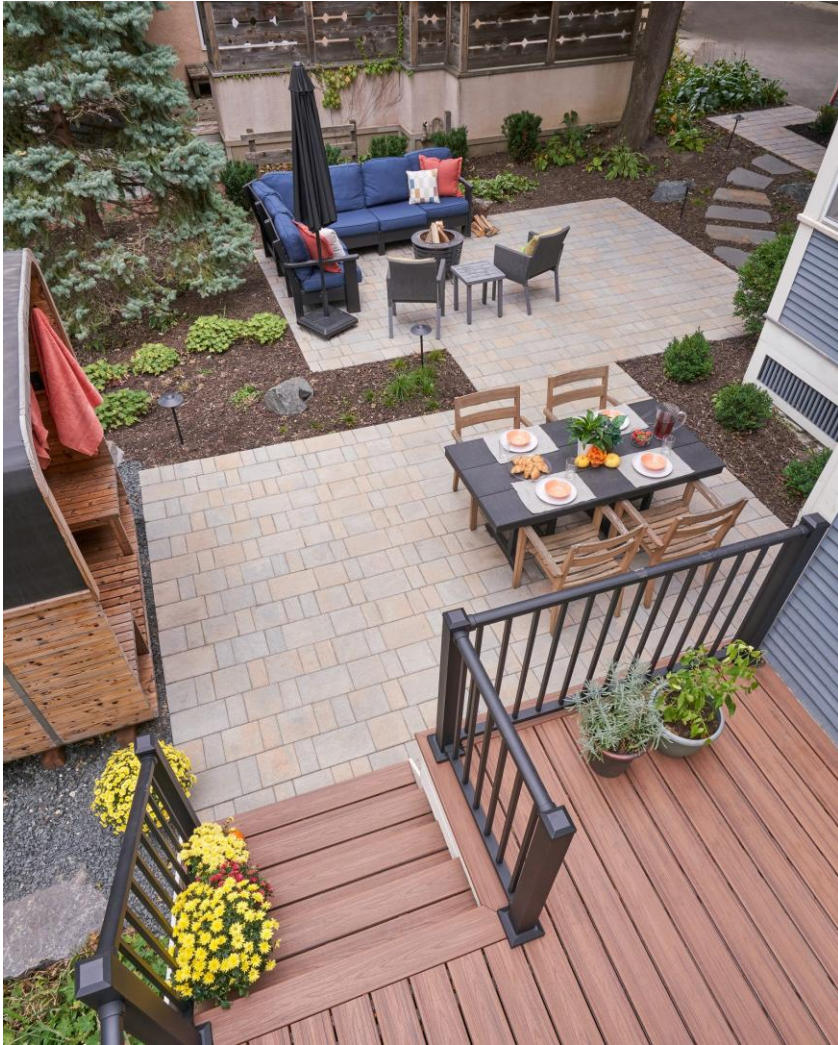
AFTER



Distinct dining and lounge spaces are connected by intentional hardscape and pathways leading to the sauna, with existing mature trees preserved throughout.

SITE OVERVIEW

The Full Layout, From Above



Viewed from above, the finished layout reads as a sequence of connected outdoor rooms: a dining area, a lounge and fire-pit seating group, and the sauna, all linked by a single paver patio. Reworking the circulation this way — rather than treating each feature as a separate destination — is what let the design fit so much program into a compact, sloped city lot.

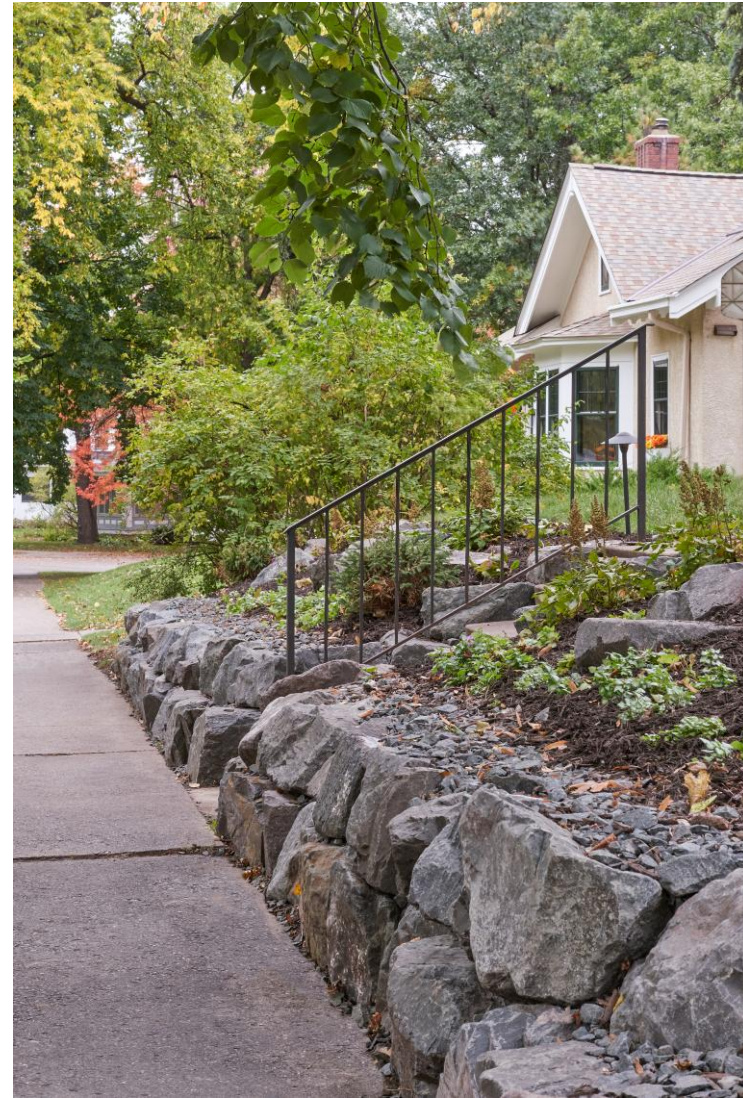
Retaining Wall — Under Construction



Final stages of the boulder retaining wall installation; final grading was carefully cut into the slope to prevent future erosion.

CONSTRUCTION DETAIL

Retaining Wall — Completed Detail



A closer view of the completed boulder retaining wall, highlighting naturalized outcroppings, edging, mulch, and shade-tolerant groundcovers that provide long-term slope stabilization.

THE SAUNA

A Modern Sauna as the Design's Centerpiece



The cedar barrel-style electric sauna's glass front, integrated bench seating, and towel hooks provide comfort and function.



A seamless transition from the home's interior to the outdoor dining area and sauna encourages year-round use.

Site & Design Layout



Scope of Work & Outcome

SCOPE OF WORK

Self-performed: boulder retaining wall construction, patio installation, landscape lighting, planting installation, and associated landscape improvements. Subcontracted: composite decking, electrical work, and sauna assembly/installation, coordinated throughout by the project team.

OUTCOME

The completed project approximately tripled the family's usable outdoor living area, with dedicated spaces for entertaining, relaxation, and everyday use. Positioned for convenient, app-controlled access from the house, the sauna became an integral part of the homeowners' daily routine — and the organizing feature of a compact yard reimagined for every season.