TRAVEL LANDSCAPE GOURMET INSPIRATIONS DESIGN

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International Elegance

BY CHRISTIANNA MCCAUSLAND
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM TETRO

Like many well-meaning home renovations, the one undertaken by homeowners in McLean, Virginia was intended to change a few things–and ended up changing everything.

The home sits on a wooded, scenic hillside with enviable views of the Potomac River peeping through verdant leaf cover. From the front, the home's façade was an unassuming one-story rambler with a small second story portion; at the back, the house tumbles down the hillside another two levels. Its wooded location on a pitched elevation would ultimately create several hair-raising scenarios as the renovation progressed. But in the beginning, it was, "a very normal, suburban home with nothing too special about it but the views," explains Patricia Tetro, principal of BOWA, the McLean-based contractor that executed the renovation.

In contrast, she describes the homeowners as, "worldly, well-educated, and well-traveled." The house required a private area to accommodate the young, growing family as well as public spaces for entertaining on the large and extremely formal scale required by the owner's business. What many homeowners might have considered a drawback to the property worked in favor of this couple: the house is organized on split levels. This disjointed organization was the

Opposite: A dramatic light fixture with a cascade of clear glass bubbles adds a fun, youthful feel to the barrel ceiling in the main foyer.

Light fixtures throughout the house were chosen for their sculptural quality and work like a piece of jewelry in each room.

perfect footprint for clients that wanted to keep their private life sequestered away from their public parties.

The client hired David Cooper, principal of ACG Architects (also in McLean) to revitalize the home's mundane interior spaces. Cooper added architectural interest wherever possible, coffering ceilings to create height, for example. As with many homes built into hillsides, the main challenge was to bring as much natural light to the interior as possible. "Working with the program, we demolished a lot of interior walls to create open spaces, which brought more light in," says Cooper.

In the private kitchen, for example, a wall was almost entirely removed to open the space to a media room, and small window openings were enlarged to accommodate glass sliding doors to the outdoors. In the lower level, a small exercise room and kitchenette were expanded into a pool cabana with a soaring ceiling and a cloistered wine tasting and storage room.

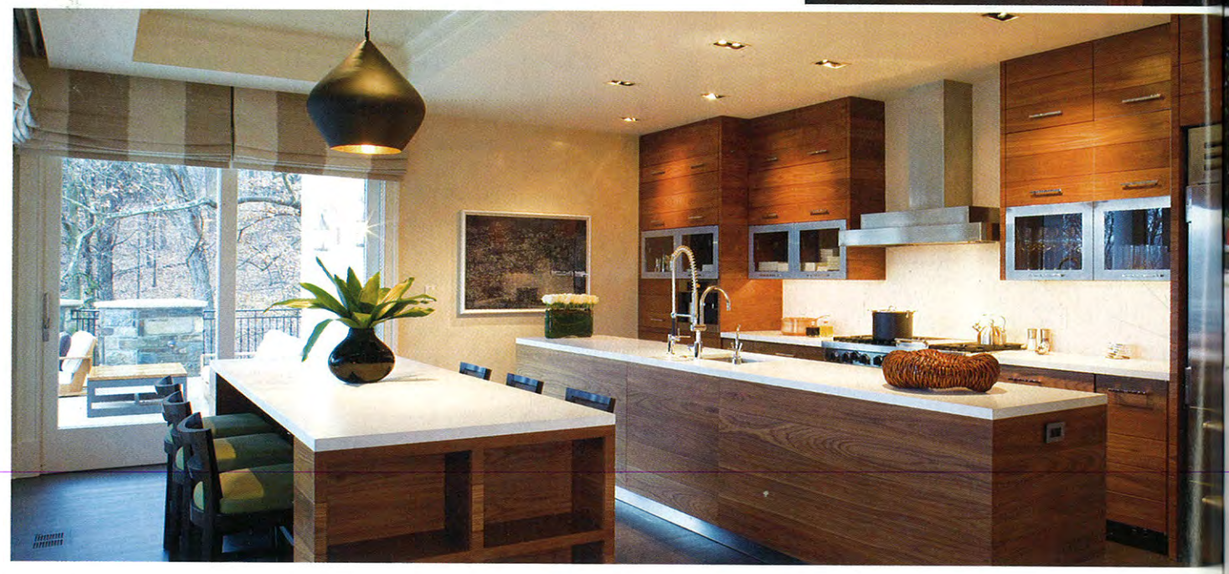
"In every case available to us, we did floor-to-ceiling windows as well as lift and slide doors," Cooper continues.

The lift and slide doors, made by Kolbe & Kolbe, give the appearance of a glass wall with the versatility to slide and stack the doors to one side. The most striking example of this product's use is in the gym, which is enclosed in glass on two sides and can be completely opened to the outdoors. In another bid to bring in light, open the spaces to the beautiful view, and present a more contemporary appearance, Cooper removed heavy stone piers and wrought iron railings on the home's many balconies and patios and replaced them with a glass railing system imported from Scandinavia that uses stainless steel stanchions to anchor panels of tempered glass. The result is a modern appearance and an unimpeded view of the surrounding nature.

The use of the glass railing system lends a feeling of airy spaciousness to the new pool deck. A standard pool was replaced by a wet-edge version made more dramatic by the addition of eight laminars that shoot decorative streams of water across the pool's surface.

Both Cooper and Tetro note that one of the most significant challenges to the project's fulfillment was the abundance of professionals involved, which included two interior designers, craftspeople from all over Europe and the United States, art consultants, lighting consultants, civil and electrical engineers ... the list goes on. "We sat in the middle of everyone, speaking the language of the client, the designers, the architects, and the subcontractors," says Tetro, "taking all their concepts and bringing them to reality."

One of the more unique contributors to the design was House of Fins, which provided an aquarium for the owner's billiard room that also features a pool table custom



Top: A formal kitchen designed for catered meals embodies a contemporary aesthetic with clean lines and modern finishes.

Bottom left: The informal private kitchen adjacent to the media room is designed for casual meals and hanging out with friends.

Bottom Right: A glass railing system lends a feeling of airy spaciousness to the new pool deck, where a wet-edge pool is made even more dramatic by eight laminar jets that arc decorative streams of water across the pool's surface.

built in Spain. The fish tank can handle a two-ton load (it is supported by a structural steel beam) and mirrors the habitat of a saltwater reef. Special lights simulate sunrise, daylight, and sundown. To place the aquarium in the design, a crane needed to hoist the glass box over the house and lower it in through the side of the house that pitches downhill to the river, a white-knuckle moment for all involved. Once in place, Cooper worked with Pennsylvania-based Premier Custom Built Inc. to craft sleek, lacquered millwork surrounds. The same cabinetry is echoed in the adjacent media room to ground a 108-inch television into the room.

The house was largely an interior transformation that encompassed the contributions of two interior design firms. Joan Behnke of the eponymous Los Angeles firm, worked on the majority of the home's interior with senior designer Lisa Hwang. "I was introduced to the owner through a president of MGM who was a personal friend of the [client], and thought that I would bring a certain level of understated elegance to the project," Behnke explains, via email from her California office. "The owner gave us a great deal of artistic license, but liked a neutral palette and wanted the home to be comfortable for both formal and informal occasions."

The mix of elegance, internationalism, and comfort are apparent in the main foyer, where guests enter under a barrel ceiling with a custom finish and a dramatic, yet youthful light fixture cascades bubbles of clear glass down into the space. Behnke notes that the light fixtures throughout the house were chosen for their sculptural quality and work like a piece of jewelry in each room, adding "spiciness" to the design.

The design draws heavily on a neutral palette of golds, coppers, creams, and browns, complemented by a dark, cerused oak finish on the floor with a slight gray wash. "The owner is young and sophisti-

Left: Sleek, lacquered millwork surrounds a 108-inch television in the media room.

Bottom Left: : A custom fish tank designed to handle a two-ton load is supported by a structural steel beam and mirrors the habitat of a saltwater reef. Special lights simulate sunrise, daylight, and sundown.

Bottom Right: The lower level was expanded to include a cloistered wine tasting and storage room.

cated and worldly so we wanted the home to represent him in a sophisticated way with a collection of objects and art that represented a man of the world and yet, because of his age, was not stuffy," says Behnke. "The furnishings were slightly on the contemporary side with clean lines, and at the same time, comfortable."

Every piece of furniture in the home was custom-created to meet the homeowner's taste and needs. "Custom design is the only thing we know to do," says Behnke. "It is a lot of work, but always worth it in the end."

The public entertaining spaces each have their own character but flow together seamlessly. The dining room is warm with Peruvian Alpaca walls and a one-of-a-kind mirror made by a silversmith in Florence. The cabinets feature a washi paper handmade in Japan.

The house has two kitchens, one public and one that is private and located at the first sub-level next to the media room. Although they serve different needs–one for hanging out with close friends, the other for formal, catered meals–both embody a contemporary aesthetic with clean lines and modern finishes.

Cooper likens the home's design to that of a Swiss watch, where every detail was executed to the finest level of precision, even down to the air conditioning system where linear slot diffusers were used so the walls and ceilings weren't marred by traditional louvered vents.

Nowhere is exacting quality more apparent than in the master bathroom, which was designed by Tony Chi & Associates at the owner's special request. An Italian glass mosaic floor pulls one into this extraordinary space. The walls of limestone and the minimalist French oak cabinetry create a comfortable cocoon that opens onto his and hers vanities imported from France and covered in shagreen. A glass foyer

Top Left: A serene master bedroom balances the drama of the adjacent luxury bathroom.

Top Right: The master bathroom features a glass foyer that leads to a sculptural limestone tub.

Bottom: The interior design draws heavily on a neutral palette of golds, coppers, creams, and browns.

floats in the center and leads to a sculptural limestone tub. An open shower room connects to a traditional Hinoki wood Asian sauna.

At the apex of this design creation, sitting like a bird's nest in this forested setting, is the homeowner's office. As the only space on the top level, it is truly the design's crowning gem, with a barrel ceiling and floor-to-ceiling glass doors encompassing a dramatic view and walls lined with walnut built-ins polished to a furniture-grade finish.

Remarkably, this home's transformation was executed in less than a year to meet the homeowner's stringent move-in schedule. According to BOWA's Tetro, "We worked six days a week with two full-time project managers to meet the time crunch." She continues, that projects like this are where they prove their mettle. "People hire us to be their advocate, to build a team and keep things moving."

The home is evidence of what a team of professionals at the very top of their fields can achieve. The project brought together an unprecedented level of craftsmanship, creative collaboration, and engineering know-how to create a house that has international cachet and is also a comfortable home.

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Left: The interior décor, like the home's owner, is youthful yet sophisticated and worldly and features a collection of objects and art from around the world. Furnishings are slightly on the contemporary side with clean lines, and at the same time, classic and comfortable.

Top: The home office occupies the entire top level of the residence and features a barrel ceiling, walnut built-ins polished to a furniture-grade finish, and floor-to-ceiling glass doors that frame a dramatic view of the Potomac.