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OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Breathing new life into a Wyndmoor fixer-upper



OPPOSITE The large, stately trees framing the stone home enraptured the homeowners, who had lived in the city for so many years.

ABOVE With a youngster in the house, the homeowners chose furniture that was elegant but also comfortable and durable.

Anyone familiar with searching for a home knows the process can be daunting. We dream of the most idyllic houses, with perfect-sized rooms, perfect fittings and, of course, perfect price tags. Yet, the For Sale signs along the way seldom conform. A local couple, Mary and David, began this familiar adventure, adding hope to their arsenal of imagination and determination and, eventually, transformed a neighborhood eyesore into their dream.

Previously situated in a 1,500-square-foot home in Center City, the couple were finding their small quarters and the quick pace of urban life a bit tiresome. “We were city weary and wanted to get out of town,” Mary explains.

A trip to quaint Chestnut Hill for an annual arts festival seemed a good distraction and escape, and after enjoying the fair, they took a drive through the area’s old neighborhoods. Intrigued by a weathered, stone-faced property in Wyndmoor, the couple headed home with their then 2-year-old son and did some investigating. “We looked it up and said, ‘It doesn’t make sense; the price is too low,’” she says.

A return trip the following weekend with a realtor quickly revealed the problem. “The previous owner had it for 40 years, and nothing had been done with the house for probably 39 years,” Mary explains.



“It was like we had this new house sitting inside the 1861 structure.”

The fixtures and fittings of the 1861 home were on their last legs. The kitchen had the mid-century stain of a drop ceiling, not to mention trails of yellowed linoleum. “It was the kind of house where there was always one person who said, ‘Let’s do it,’ and the other said, ‘Are you nuts?’” she recalls.

The property was viewed by many would-be buyers, but none were up to the restoration challenge. For Mary and David, it wasn’t so easy to turn away. “We never looked at another house,” Mary says. “It had the bones.” Describing elements that made them feel it was a one-of-a-kind find, she notes: “It’s got moldings in it that are 2 feet. It’s got 15-foot ceilings. It’s made of beautiful stone.”

In addition to the house itself, the couple also loved the home’s yard, which boasted much more green than their downtown dwelling. “We tell people the reason we bought it was because of the trees,” Mary says. “There’s a beautiful tulip poplar in the front, and coming from Center City, it really screamed out at us.”

Connecting with Hanson General Contracting, Inc., the couple began discussing the possibilities. “One of the appeals was that we could have this great old house but with all the finishes that we wanted. It was like we had this new house sitting inside the 1861 structure,” Mary says. They also consulted with the architectural firm of Rasmussen-Su and, in partnership with their general contractor, began efforts to unearth the couple’s dream home.

ABOVE While graceful, muted colors mark most of the home, this guest bath is an exciting surprise with its water blue walls and lime green, retro fittings.

OPPOSITE TOP The majority of the furnishings were bought with the home in mind, but the homeowners’ dining room set from their previous address, once reupholstered, blended in perfectly.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Light, neutral tones keep the kitchen airy; floor-to-ceiling mahogany-colored cabinets ground and define the space.



“It was an unusual project in that it was such a careful renovation,” recalls Kevin Rasmussen. “The homeowners could really see the original house through the layers of changes other owners had made, and they worked very hard to preserve the elements that worked and then enhance them with changes that were compatible.”

Mary collected ideas from magazines, using them as a starting point. “Our goal was not at all to restore it to the period in which it was built, but we wanted to maintain a traditional look to fit the house. We still wanted it very clean looking,” she says.

While the home was eventually nearly gutted, the homeowners strove to keep the same floor plan and feel of the original structure. They removed a purposeless staircase, extended the tight kitchen and created larger room openings to enhance the flow.

“The goal was to be consistent with the spirit of the house — the original house,” Rasmussen explains. “What’s kind of neat is that it’s hard now to discern the difference between what had been there before and what’s new.”



Keeping the original footprint of the home meant creating a modern, functional kitchen in a tight spot, which the designer accomplished by taking advantage of the high ceilings and vertical space.

BELOW Retaining many charming details, like the thick, intricate wainscoting, the new homeowners created a more updated mood with bright, warm pieces like the eye-catching orange and wrought-iron chandelier.

Beyond structural changes, the architects also assisted the homeowners with finish selections, tiles and even paint colors. “A lot of times people come into the house and they think that the bathrooms were already here,” Mary says. “So we met that goal — the finishes fit the house.”

Once renovations were complete and it was time for move-in, the couple turned to designers Karen Sloane and Jen Raul for help. “When it came time to furnish it, we could have put all our furniture in one room,” Mary says. Concentrating on the living room and a goal of making it a casual, comfortable hub, they “mixed up new and old stuff.”

“I like antique pieces, and then there are new couches and loveseats,” Mary explains. The couple also updated many of the pieces from their old space to give them a fresh twist to match their new surroundings, like reupholstering old dining room chairs in soft, black leather and pursuing similar revamps in other rooms.

Despite the home’s massive transformation, however, Mary says their work has just begun. “It will be a number of years before we feel like it’s done,” she says. “I don’t know if you ever feel done.” **SAH**

