

## Home Design

# Rosedale redux

Inspired ideas transform historic District home

by John Byrd

Home Fronts News Service

It pays to be a good listener. Just ask BOWA Builders, the residential construction firm that is about to complete the renovation of Rosedale farmhouse, Cleveland Park's founding residence.

When Jonathan Abram, Rosedale's new owner, interviewed the high-end remodeling outfit nearly two years ago, he was most interested in what the builders didn't say.

"I wanted a dialogue that would help me think it through," Abrams recalls. "I was keenly aware of Rosedale's uniqueness, yet not sure what needed to be done. I wanted the home's age and historical identity in view, but also needed a plan that would work for my family."

"From the outset, BOWA allowed me to come to terms with critical considerations at my own pace ... proposing a whole series of solutions as needed."

Adds Rich Cassagnol, the head of BOWA's District operations:

"We just let Jon describe his passion for Rosedale, and looked for ways to make a contribution."

The D.C. farmhouse, rustic home of Revolutionary War hero Gen. Uriah Forrest, would be transformed into an urban estate with four bedrooms, four baths, a library, an office, a study and a re-configured kitchen. Just outside the kitchen, a brick walk and patio would lead to a 14-foot-by-60-foot swimming pool with adjacent pavilion.

Three acres of 18th-century terraced landscaping on the property's south side — the "falling gardens" — would, in turn, be deeded to the Rosedale Conservancy, a nonprofit neighborhood organization.

"Our instructions from the owner were to make the 'new' seem 'old,'" says Cassagnol.

### Just the latest phase

Still, there's nothing architecturally exact about Rosedale — even Gen. Forrest would tell you that. The dwelling he purchased in 1793 was a two-room, dirt-floor cottage (now the home's rear section), built around 1740 — which makes it the oldest structure in the District of Columbia.

Forrest — mayor of Georgetown, member of Congress and a founder of the new "Federal City" — added three rooms to the original cottage. But neither the width nor height of the general's addition matched the cottage.

It took a couple of centuries, but the "step-up" from the cottage was finally eliminated when BOWA laid a concrete mat and subfloor over the dirt — ultimately installing white oak flooring planks that lend the room both period ambiance and warmth.

The largest part of the residence — a two-level farm house built as a separate structure in the late 18th century — is linked to the Forrest house by an elongated "hyphen," a connecting structure which housed the utility room at one end and a storage pantry at the other.

With the total living space of the house exceeding 6,000 square feet, the property seemed perfect for a girls boarding school — which it became in 1959, when the National Cathedral purchased the property. In 2002, the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital's bid for the Rosedale prop-



The new owner of Rosedale wanted a renovation plan that kept the historic significance of the home in view and would work as a family residence.

Photo provided by Home Fronts News Service

erty was blocked by neighbors concerned with an increase in traffic.

"Rosedale has an impressive history," says Cassagnol. "Washington and L'Enfant were visitors. A dinner party was held there for John Adams when he was president. There's even a legend that Lincoln slept on the dirt floor. To say we were working on a national treasure is no exaggeration."

### Relocating old walls

But sometimes the good old days are here and now. The post and beam construction techniques of the 18th century mandated small rooms and numerous load-bearing walls.

One of BOWA's first steps, in fact, was to modify many of these walls — especially in the rear of the old farmhouse, which included a dated kitchen, an open laundry area and full bath all within a generally dysfunctional floor plan.

To make sense of new uses, BOWA eliminated several walls in the kitchen and hyphen, installing overhead steel beams for structural supports where needed — an option unavailable to colonial builders. Similar substitutions were used throughout the house to smooth out traffic patterns.

Once re-configured, the kitchen — now sporting a food preparation island, 20 feet of running countertop space, an apron-style farm sink, a LaCanche range and multi-function refrigerator/freezer — became the home's center of gravity, with the new pool and pavilion just outside the door.

A newly de-cluttered section of the hyphen — re-named the "back hall" — not only facilitates traffic between the front and back sections of the home, but also provides easy access to parking. With fewer walls and greater openness,

the hall also works as an interim zone between the kitchen and a casual dining "banquette" created from the former pantry.

To consolidate and unify all of the home's disparate sections, BOWA installed wood flooring almost everywhere — including the kitchen and back hall.

Rosedale's eastside parking lot is still accessed through a door leading from the back hall — but BOWA thoughtfully added a small porch to the entrance, offering shelter from the elements. The new porch complements both the large front porch on the northside and a smaller portico on the cottage.

This kind of "strategic renovation" characterizes most of BOWA's work at Rosedale: nothing radical or even obvious — just tasteful, discreet alterations and improvements that seem so natural they appear to have been there for centuries.

Still, creating a "seamless" outcome can be painstaking. Adding more natural light, for instance, entailed considerable research since the District's Historic Preservation Review Board requires that any new or replacement windows be perfect architectural replicas of the originals.

The resulting five wood-framed true divided-light windows are both undetectably symmetrical aspects of redesigned elevations and indistinguishable from the windows that were already in the home.

Inside, one finds similar evidence of a light but agile touch. The operation leaves few traces.

"Only an historian would recognize many of the alterations," says Cassagnol. "Yet it's a modern house with new wiring and the latest appliances and lighting. So, yeah, it's the best of the old and new — which is what we were asked to accomplish."

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