

A manse on a human SCALE

Imposing Georgian in Potomac becomes a more livable home

BY NANCY MCKEON

Like many of us, Tom Baltimore knows a good piece of real estate when he sees it. Unlike many, though, he and his wife, Hillary, are well positioned to jump at an opportunity.

Back in 2007, the couple fell for a piece of property they spotted in Potomac, a few miles from where they lived. As for the house on the 2½-acre lot, well, Baltimore says, "I'm in real estate and sometimes I can see a diamond in the rough."

"Rough" was the right way to describe the sprawling Georgian-style house, all 10,546 square feet of it. Built in 1988, the place had been on and off the market for several years, and it came complete with four inches of standing water in the lower level; the long, low pool house out back was mold- and odor-ridden, a possible tear-down. Other potential buyers had looked, then walked away.

Less problematic but nonetheless off-putting were the interior details — an overblown white two-story foyer and great room with soaring 22-foot ceilings that made all of the architectural elements look dinky. Other details were simply jarring and dated — shiny marble foyer floors leading to arched doorways topped by triangular pediments smack up against what looked like a builder-grade staircase with Colonial-style balusters. A slightly fussy kitchen. A master bedroom that resembled nothing so much as a coffin.

But updating the eye candy couldn't come first. First, the Baltimores wanted to know whether the house could be reclaimed from its somewhat compromised condition, and at what cost. Baltimore, co-founder and president of the Bethesda lodging firm RLJ Hotels, may be familiar with commercial construc-

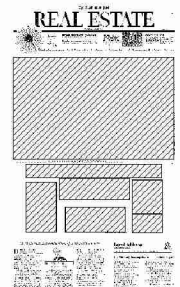
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tion, but he turned to **BOWA Builders** of McLean, which specializes in whole-house renovation, to help him and his wife assess the possibilities.

Armed with a home inspector's report, BOWA put a dollar figure to the problems, which enabled the Baltimores to purchase the property — at a "discounted" price of \$4.2 million — and then embark on a seven-figure remodel and upgrade.

BOWA principal Steve Kirstein, who headed the contracting team, notes that the Baltimores got the longest possible settlement date from the sellers. "We used those months," he explains, "to assemble our team" — architect, civil engineer, landscape designer, interior designer — "and get all our permits." The day the Baltimores settled, "there was a dumpster at the door."

The Baltimores settled on the house in June 2007 and moved in May 2008. "It took less than a year" to renovate, says Kirstein. "To build it would have taken two years."

The fun part of the year surely wasn't the time spent on drainage and gutter problems or underpinning or deciding where to



add another garage. While Tom Baltimore was telling them to “watch the money,” Hillary Baltimore went to work with interior designer Gerald Smith of Georgetown-based GL Smith Associates.

Away went the fancy pediments over the doors leading from the foyer (to the wood-paneled office on the left and the dining room on the right), replaced by simpler arched doorways with flat pediments above. To bring the size of the entry down to human scale, Smith divided the foyer walls horizontally, warming the lower 10 feet with paneling of rift-cut white oak with a limed finish. Capping that is a border constructed of fluted ebonized mahogany (“a touch of Art Deco,” Smith says); above, the walls are finished with a faux limestone-block veneer, echoing the real French limestone blocks now underfoot. All of it light in color, he points out, but warm.

Replacing the earlier handrail is an iron railing custom-made by Patrick Cardine of Cardine Studios. “It’s inspired by Art Moderne,” says Smith, who adds, “That railing will look as smart 10 years from now as it does now.”

Colors throughout are pale, creams and sage. That dusty color, Smith says, is neither too feminine nor masculine.

The great room, directly behind the foyer, had the same high-ceiling challenge. But here Smith pulled the room together by clustering seating at the center, anchored by an area rug that allows several feet of the new rich walnut flooring to show around the edges. “The proportion of area rug to seating area is what gives a human scale,” Smith notes. “If a rug covers the entire room, it might as well be a Marriott somewhere.” The fireplace surround got a new, taller treatment, and the monumental-scale chimney-breast was given a cladding of white oak, in a contemporary grid pattern, to echo the millwork marking the doorways and built-in cabinetry in the

room.

In its earlier incarnation, the master bedroom upstairs was dark, its windows swagged and swaddled in yards of fabric. Upholstered love seats were trimmed with heavy bullion fringe. A large circular recess in the ceiling was covered in tiers of shirred fabric. “I felt I was in a coffin,” Smith says.

Today, natural light pours through the large bedroom windows. Fabrics covering the bed and comfortable modern seating are warm beiges and creams. No ’80s-style swags or jabots, just simple curtain panels stacked to the side of each window. And in the circular recess at the center of the room now hangs a four-foot-diameter “Floatation” lamp, a simple stack of white Japanese paper shades, by German lighting designer Ingo Maurer.

This being a Potomac trophy house, there is of course a real living room (also known as the piano room), to the left of the great room, and a kitchen sitting area to the right. Both have human-scale ceiling height and feature French doors to the rear terrace and pool area.

If there are quite a few places to sit, there are also myriad places to eat: the formal dining room table, the kitchen counter, the round table in the kitchen sitting area, the black granite bar on the lower level, the kitchen counter in the restored pool house. And chances are they all get used.

“This is a family-friendly house,” Tom Baltimore says. “We tried to make something livable and comfortable.” He and Hillary have two school-age children. Also, “I’m the oldest of five, and Hillary is the youngest of five.” Hillary is from Chicago, but Tom grew up in the Silver Spring area and has siblings nearby. In fact, the first “event” in the renovated house was a big family dinner.

Baltimore adds, “It’s not uncommon to have a dozen kids running around on any given day.” And that’s where the restored pool house comes in. “When we have large groups —

lots of birthday parties — we have them in the pool house,” he says. “It takes pressure and wear-and-tear off the main living areas.”

Goodness knows, there are places in the huge house to hide from all the tumult. Over the course of a weekend, Tom will retreat to the office off the foyer, or the downstairs gym or cigar room (“I guess you can call it a ‘man cave’”). Hillary may find herself watching a movie with the kids in the lower-level theater or in the sitting area of the sumptuous master bedroom.

Architect Sarah Susanka, author of “The Not So Big House,” could have predicted this: “We don’t spend a lot of time in the great room and living room,” Baltimore acknowledges.

But the great room and living room play their public roles well. Several Friday nights ago, the Baltimores invited some 45 people over for a private performance by jazz-rock pianist Eric Lewis (a.k.a. ELEW), who played at the White House in May. “We turned the piano around, and people sat in both rooms,” Baltimore recalls. “It worked well.”

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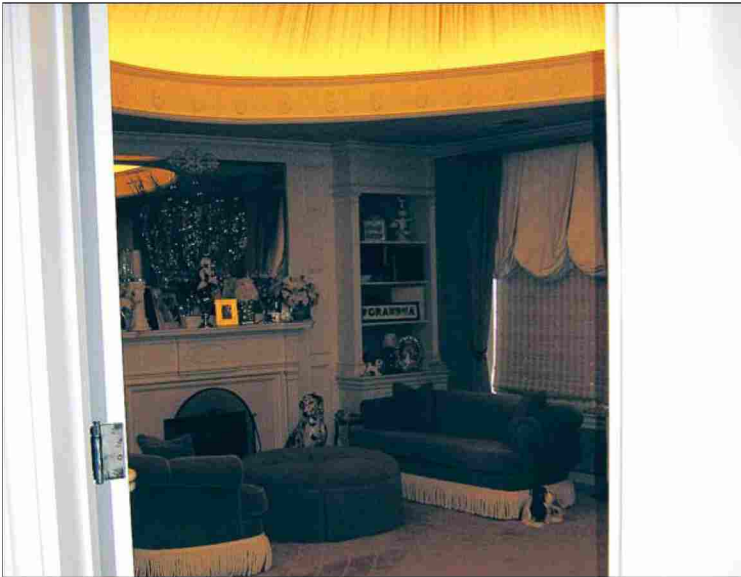


Before the Baltimores began remodeling their grand home, they disliked the daunting white two-story foyer, left, and great room with 22-foot ceilings that made architectural elements look small. In the new version, above, designer Gerald Smith divided the foyer walls horizontally, warming the lower 10 feet with paneling of rift-cut white oak with a limed finish.

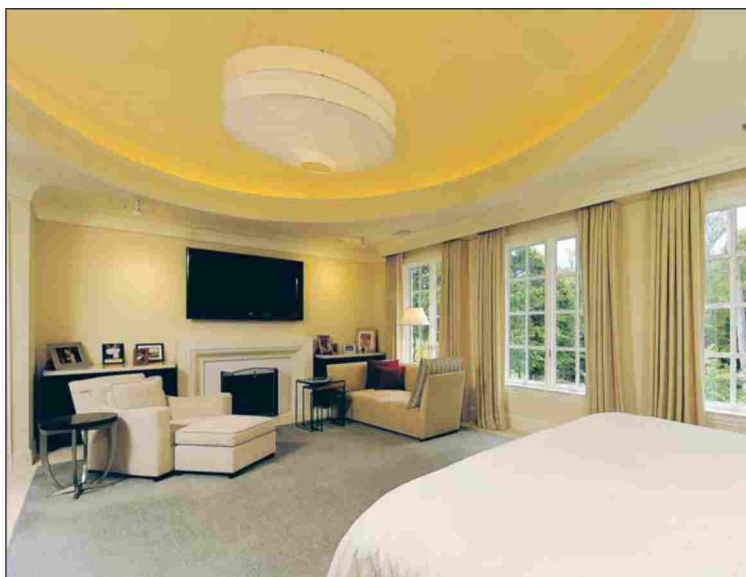


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Warmth was brought to living areas, as shown above. And the master bedroom that had resembled a "coffin," bottom left, now has life.



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