

HOME & DESIGN

Modern Vision

A bold renovation in Potomac spotlights the homeowners' stellar art collection



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Visionary homeowners inspire a major renovation that celebrates their vast collection of modern paintings and sculpture

WORK



of ART

By TINA COPLAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ANICE HOACHLANDER



In transforming a house to accommodate an extraordinary collection of modern paintings and sculpture, the owners produced an elegantly unified home, as minimal and balanced as the abstract art within. Monumental paintings, iconic sculpture and classic 20th-century furniture stand out, interplaying against a canvas of crisp white walls. Contemporary gardens continue the orderly progression outdoors. A sense of harmony prevails throughout.

This perfect synthesis of art and environment is especially remarkable given earlier conditions on the site. Located at the base of a hill in Potomac, the house had suffered regular flooding as well as major structural and mechanical damage. Dated decorating cluttered the interiors.

None of that fazed the prospective owners. “When we walked in,” the wife recalled, “we said, ‘Wow. This would be great!’ There were wide hallways, large spaces, lots of bare walls, a high entrance hall, good light—perfect for hanging art.”

Her husband also looked past obstacles, observing, “The house hadn’t been touched in 20 years. That was both terrible and nice. We didn’t have to fit ourselves into somebody else’s idea.”

RENOVATION DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION: STEVEN KIRSTEIN, BOWA, McLean, Virginia. INTERIOR DESIGN: GERALD L. SMITH, G. L. Smith Associates, Inc., Washington, DC. LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE: LILA FENDRICK, Lila Fendrick Landscape Architects, Chevy Chase, Maryland.

The couple had decided to sell their primary home on the bay in Annapolis to be closer to urban conveniences as well as to their children and grandchildren. Their goal was to find a residence to showcase their extensive works of art. Adding to the challenges, they set a tight move-in deadline—just six months. Then they found a dream team that made it happen.

At a recent reunion, interior designer Gerald L. Smith and Steven Kirstein, a principal in the design/build firm BOWA, gathered in the impeccable new dining room. “The project was a great collaboration between all of us sitting around this table,” the husband beamed. “They were the pinnacle of efficiency.”

The owners’ idea to unify art and design was the starting point. “That was the hub, defining the interior architecture and space planning, and how the house was finished,” said Smith, emphasizing that such singular vision is rare. “Art collections are more often embellishments. This was a wonderful and refreshing approach.”

The existing plan—a one-story rambler with added wings—remained. Tearing down the house was never an option. “There wasn’t enough time,” Kirstein acknowledged. However, everything inside was eliminated down to the studs. Any vestige of traditional architecture—crown moldings, paneled doors, high baseboards—was stripped away. All windows, doors, skylights and cabinetry were replaced and streamlined.

Paring down the architecture to basics introduced other hurdles. “Simple is always complicated,” said Smith. Removing soffits that interrupted straight lines between walls and ceilings caused



PREVIOUS PAGES: Bold, paired abstract paintings by Tadaaki Kuwayama greet visitors in the foyer (on left) with a view toward a backlit construction by Pamela Gwaltney in the dining room. The entry leads to the gallery, where an Alexander Calder mobile is suspended from the

vaulted ceiling. THESE PAGES: Crisp, white walls and carefully placed lighting in the gallery (opposite) and adjacent living room (this page) dramatically highlight the owners' art. The fireplace was precisely framed in rift-cut white oak and black granite.



Works by Morris Louis (left) and Helen Frankenthaler (right) frame the opening to the gallery and a view of a black-and-white painting by Al Held. The renovation stripped the house down to the studs and replaced all windows, doors, skylights and cabinetry.





Gerald L. Smith designed shelving in the husband's office (right) to accommodate the owners' collection of limited-edition art books; recessed LED lights illuminate the top shelves. The adjacent library (above) houses a collection of biographies. A water sculpture by Archie Held entitled "Lovers" graces the backyard (below).







ripple effects. Mechanical systems housed within the soffits had to be relocated underground. Running miles of new wiring and cabling in trenches dug through and under the home's concrete slab exposed structural flaws. "There were huge voids and cavities in some places. Nothing underpinned some of the bearing walls supporting the house," Kirstein recalled. "It gave us the opportunity to fix a lot of things."

Nothing was left to chance. Before walls were finished, the owners' art curator, Gary Snyder, arrived from New York to position the paintings; then more than 100 ceiling lights were placed to highlight the art. Before shelving was designed, Smith visited the owners' previous home to measure the depth and linear footage of their limited-edition art books, each signed by author and artist.

Recessed LED lights along the top shelves recall a tradition of white Christmas lights that sparkled along the highest bookshelves in the husband's previous offices. All of the lighting is part of an integrated whole-house automation system installed by Bethesda Systems that allows the owners to control lighting, drapes, heating and cooling, audio/video and security remotely using a computer, mobile phone or tablet.

Whether at night or in daylight, the colors and contours of the art are set off against uniform white walls. The "absence of color," as Smith said, "was never questioned: Benjamin Moore's Bright White. It's a very neutral white, very clear, crisp and clean." It serves a purpose familiar to most modern art galleries of not competing with the art.

As the wife pointed out, "Art needs a nondescript background,

to breathe." Views throughout the home are breathtaking. Starting at the soaring entrance, sweeping through the central core of the house and glancing down broad hallways, every perspective is studded with major mid-century works of geometric abstraction and the Washington Color School. Color-saturated paintings by Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler stand like six- and seven-foot-tall sentries beside a large opening to the living room. In the adjacent gallery, an illusionist painting by Al Held, a tile composition by Sol LeWitt, a backlit wood construction by Pamela Gwaltney and an Op-Art screen print by Bridget Riley riff on geometry at different scales. Overhead, an Alexander Calder mobile drifts above Le Corbusier leather armchairs in this luxuriously reductionist, exclusively black-and-white space.

At the back of the house, glass doors frame sunlight glistening from the surface of a bronze water sculpture by Archie Held. Landscape architect Lila Fendrick placed sculptures close to the house to be viewed in all seasons. Wide steps and large bluestone pavers simplify detailing on rear terraces in a serene, unified transition outdoors.

The owners find near-perfection in their completed home. One possible glitch: "We've run out of walls," said the wife, pausing before she reflected with a smile, "But we'll let this sit for a while and enjoy it." ❖

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The rooms on one side of the house were reconfigured to create a new kitchen (opposite) designed in conjunction with Kitchen and Bath Studios. The enlarged dining room (this page) accommodates a 12-foot-long dining table designed by the husband and constructed by José Araujo. The series of prints is by Josef Albers.

“Art collections are more often embellishments. This was a wonderful and refreshing approach.” —GERALD L. SMITH



In the master bedroom, a backlit work by Pamela Gwaltney mimics glass doors opening to the pool. A painting by Vivian Springford hangs above the bed.

