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## STYLE HOME: Something Old, New Again

by Eileen Smith Dallabrida

The conventional wisdom among professionals who build and restore houses is to not take a project too personally. The idea is to keep things neutral in order to appeal to the greatest number of potential buyers.

Gary Munch readily admits he hasn't taken that advice to heart.

"There's a little bit of me in every project I do," he says. "I'm not trying to please everyone, just that part of the market that likes the things I do."

So when Munch revitalized a tired Victorian with the goal of selling it, he included such unexpected amenities as high-end oil-rubbed knobs and hardware, walk-in closets and a custom staircase—all features that suited him perfectly when he decided to move into the house himself.

"I had always envisioned this as a family home, and that's just what it is," he says.

The president of Boss Enterprises Inc. in Wilmington, Munch is a third-generation builder and a carpenter by trade. His savvy and skills would become key points in turning around a property poised on the brink of no return. The structure was in such a state of disrepair even the floors had to be replaced.

"This house had been on the market forever," he recalls. "Nobody wanted to take it on."

But Munch was attracted to the location in the Highlands, a fashionable neighborhood in Wilmington. He grew up in a stately Victorian home in central New Jersey, where he developed an affinity for old homes.

"Living in that house gave me an appreciation for the charm and craftsmanship you don't see enough of these days," he says.

To spark inspiration for the house in the Highlands, Munch took photographs of various architectural styles in neighborhoods in Philadelphia. He considered transforming the property into a pair of brownstones or a large, shingle-style single-family home.

But in the end, he decided to uphold and enhance the original architecture, ultimately buying the other side of the semidetached house and restoring that, as well.

"There are very few Carpenter-style Gothics left in Wilmington," he says. "We realized that it was worth preserving."

When the home was built at the turn of the 20th century, the style was to separate rooms and designate a function for each. He opened the floor plan in the informal living areas, where the kitchen flows into a large, light-filled family room and dining area.

It's a strategy that suits Munch, his wife, Lara, and their three young children, Luke, Sam and Greta.

"As parents, we like to keep our eye on the kids," he says.

In the bright and cheerful kitchen, the counters are topped in limestone, a material typically found in Europe, much less frequently in the United States. Munch says the material is in good supply on this side of the Atlantic—the limestone in the kitchen hails from Indiana—and is slowly gaining traction in higher-end construction.

Still, limestone is porous, so maintaining its beauty requires sealant or a willingness to embrace the patina the stone acquires through time. In making the choice, Munch decided the creamy matte surface was worth the upkeep.

"It's a little bit of maintenance, but you can't get that warmth from granite," he says. "I think people develop tremendous feeling for their homes, and I think about those feelings when I'm deciding which materials to use."

Overhead, the ceiling is sheathed in stamped tin, a feature favored by the Victorians. A pendant lamp and bin pulls on white painted cabinets enhance the vintage feel.

In decorating the house, the Munches opted for a modern interpretation, an inviting, unfussy and eclectic look that combines furniture they've collected over the years with new pieces. The Munches furnished their family room with a contemporary, clean-lined sofa and chaise. The massive carved armoire in the living room was crafted in India.

"We're not stuck in traditional," he says. "We buy things we like, furniture we think will work well for a young family's lifestyle."

Throughout the house, Munch put down 4-inch planks of character-grade oak, which retains the wood's natural wormholes, knots and a variety of grains.

"I like the randomness, the personality of it," he says. "It looks like a combination of species because there's so much going on with the wood."

The large entrance to the space currently used as a formal dining room is in keeping with that strategy. But with the swing of a pair of French doors, the room can be transformed into the setting for an intimate dinner party.

"Or we could turn it into a study or a library with big leather chairs, a place where I can put up my feet and think," Munch says.

As a developer and custom builder, Munch sweats the small stuff, scouring architectural salvage for antique lighting fixtures. He delights in such details as wicker vanity pulls.

"I love things that are handmade and one of a kind," he says.

A copper sink is an unexpected treat in the powder room.

"Sometimes the powder room is an afterthought," Munch says. "But that's one room the people who visit you will see, so I think there should be something cool and different in there."

In restoring the house, he added more than 1,000 square feet for a total of more than 2,500. As the project progressed, he came up with creative ways to repurpose pieces of the past. A small arched window gained a new sense of drama when it was moved from the front of the house to the peak of master bedroom.

The space is a soothing retreat for the couple, with a bed with a painted white cottage-style headboard, simple Roman shades at the windows and lots of family photos. Brass reproduction lamps are mounted above the bed, ideal for night-time reading. French doors

lead to an intimate balcony with a view of the pool, garden and park beyond.

The master bath is large, sumptuous and spa like, with such niceties as inset cabinetry, a generous, freestanding shower and Italian marble. Illuminated by vintage pendant lights, the deep claw-foot tub is a nod to the home's Victorian roots. Its cast-iron surface offers an added benefit. It retains the heat in the water.

"I'm a tub guy," Munch says. "I like a hot bath, especially in the winter time."

A second-floor laundry room and ample, well-outfitted closets are another 21st century improvement.

"That's imperative, because people in the city always complain about a lack of storage," he says. "Here we have all the features people love in old houses, and plenty of room to store our things."

## GET THE LOOK

Use a variety of natural materials. The Munch home includes the matte creaminess of limestone, the texture of character-grade oak and the luxuriant smoothness of marble.

Raise the height quotient with high-end hardware. Egg-shaped knobs in an oil-rubbed bronze finish provide a subtle touch of class.

Create a flexible floor plan. For example, a first-floor room paneled in stately wainscoting can be used as either a formal dining room or a clubby study.

Embrace the unexpected, such elements as a tin ceiling in the kitchen, a copper sink in the powder room and a vintage window installed below the peak in a bedroom ceiling.

Keep the old, but bring in the new. Old houses are charming but benefit from such modern amenities as gourmet kitchens, state-of-the-art baths and copious closet space.