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ELEMENTS Home: A Respectful Renovation

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Rich Soper has long been a fan of “This Old House,” the PBS show where craftsmen restore vintage homes.

Two years ago, he and his wife, Melissa, launched what might be “Their Old House,” where they would breathe new life into a property with some age to it.

“We were looking for an old stone house to do a renovation,” Melissa recalls. “So we started searching on the Internet.”

Restoring a house might be the ultimate reality show in which families balance their wish lists, budgets and coping skills. The prize the Sopers sought was a lovely, livable home that retains the charm and character of the original house while adding space and up-to-date amenities.

The couple, who were then living in Pennsylvania, found several prospective homes in Brandywine Hills, a community of stately residences in Wilmington that is experiencing a wave of revitalization.

“Not one house is the same,” Melissa notes. “They all have differences.”

To carry out a respectful restoration and update of the classic 1936 center hall colonial the Sopers eventually bought, they turned to architect Jeff Pack and builder Gary Munch of Boss Enterprises in Wilmington.

“Although we do all kinds of houses, we are very much traditionalists,” says Munch, a third-generation builder. “When we met the Sopers, we soon realized we were all on the same page.”

Meticulous researchers, the couple prepared for the project by calculating costs and studying resources and materials. Their strategy was to bundle several major projects: gutting and installing a kitchen, tearing down an attached garage and building a family room, adding a large master bath, and replacing a Florida room addition with a covered patio.

The most arduous part of the renovation was tearing down a stone bearing wall that separated the existing kitchen from the garage and creating a new support system. To carry out the entire game plan in a fast and furious six months, Munch brought in a team that included Amish artisans skilled in working on vintage homes.

“You need really good installers in an old house because nothing is plumb or square,” Melissa says.

In order to make a seamless transition to the new kitchen, the Sopers extended the oak flooring found in the rest of the house.

Those warm tones are reflected in honey-stained cherry cabinets with raised panels, enhanced with crown molding, fluted accents and forged bird-cage pulls. Arched trim defines the primary sink, and glass-fronted cabinets provide storage for barware. A granite counter, wine chiller and secondary stainless steel sink form the bar area. The tumbled marble backsplash is accented with a cluster of grapes.

“It’s the details that take a good kitchen to a great kitchen,” Rich says.

A six-burner Wolf gas range is set into a peninsula that delineates the adjoining family room. The stainless steel hood provides a dramatic sculptural element, as well as ventilation. As attractive as it is, the layout is supremely functional.

“I can see the TV and be part of the action while I’m cooking,” Melissa says.

The family room is eight feet longer than the turned garage it replaced, giving the couple more space without sacrificing the lines or proportions of the structure.

“We didn’t want it to look like we just plopped something on the back of the house,” Munch says.

In order to replicate the deep window wells found in the original part of the house, the contractor built a shallow false wall on both sides of the room. The ceiling is vaulted to more than nine feet. Transoms above the windows boost natural light.

“If we kept the ceiling the same height as the kitchen, it would have looked like a tunnel,” Melissa says. “We wanted it to be bright and open.”

One of the biggest decisions the Sopers faced was choosing which elements of their home to update and which to leave just as they were.

The couple embraced such period details as the gracefully curved overhead light covers, still in perfect condition after nearly three-quarters of a century. The center hall opens to a formal living room with a fireplace on the left and a dining

room on the right.

Upstairs, a hall bathroom retains its vintage black-and-white tiles and porcelain sink on chrome legs. The floor is paved in the time-honored windmill pattern.

But the master bath wasn't in keeping with the Sopers' vision of a spa-like space they could share. So they created a new bath, an expansive retreat in a restful palette inspired by white Carrera marble flecked with silvery gray tones.

A deep soaking tub is outfitted with a retro-style hand shower. A large stall shower is framed in glass and marble. His-and-hers vanities with white stone tops, creamy, bow-front cabinets and vintage-style taps were purchased already assembled from Ethan Allen. Oval mirrors above the vanities are flanked by pairs of sconces, a subtle homage to the harmonious balance and symmetry found throughout the house.

The space formerly occupied by the master bath is now a modern walk-in closet for Melissa, with rods, shelving and an old-fashioned amenity that is making a comeback, a built-in ironing board.

Along the way, the Sopers added several minor projects to their wish list, such as updating the first-floor powder room.

"When people are going through a big renovation, it's good to get as many things as you can off the list," Munch says. "Then they can take a little rest before they move on to something else."

A tired, ground-level Florida room was torn off and renovated as a 1930s-style covered patio, with a tongue-in-groove ceiling and classic, colonial pillars. The wood framing was painstakingly hand scribed in order to fit the contours of the home's stone exterior, a detail common in the mid-20th century, but not often seen today.

After a brief breather, the Sopers have already moved on to their next project: installing an oversized, two-car garage, driveway and extensive landscaping.

"We want to do things right," Rich says. "We owe that to our neighborhood."