

Feels Like Home

After finding a house in the perfect neighborhood, a couple renovates to reflect their love of art and passion for the environment.

BY CHRISTINE MACDONALD

Véronique Marier and her husband, Bilal Rahill, first stepped inside what is now their Chevy Chase home on a dreary day last February. “It was one of those days when the damp seeps into your bones,” Marier says. “We had been freezing in our old colonial in Bethesda, but here it was much cozier and quieter.”

Two-story windows in the back of the house flooded the space with natural light, and looked out on a bucolic tangle of tree trunks and bare branches. Marier and Rahill say the view reminded them of their childhoods in the Canadian province of Quebec, where they both spent a lot of time outdoors.



They decided that day to buy the home, and soon hired David Benton of Bethesda-based Rill Architects to conduct an overhaul with one goal in mind: They wanted to showcase their large art collection, but not at the expense of their career-long interest in environmental sustainability. Marier is the executive director of Bethesda Green, the local sustainability organization, and Rahill works for the World Bank, overseeing lending on environmental projects around the world. “He’s Mr. Global. I’m Mrs. Local,” Marier says of their different focuses but shared passion for protecting the environment.

The couple had been living in Bethesda’s Bradley Hills neighborhood—just far enough from downtown Bethesda and bus lines to make driving a necessity. They liked that the new home, in the Somerset neighborhood of Chevy Chase, is near bicycle paths and within walking distance of the Metro and downtown Bethesda. Marier now bikes to work often. “We were ready to get into a more urban area without losing that feeling of being close to nature,” Rahill says. “Besides, we were looking for a project. We are both engineers.”

The couple asked Benton to update the house, which measures 3,500 square feet on three levels, without changing the home's footprint. "We didn't really add any square feet," Benton says. "We just moved things around."



Benton started by tearing down the interior wall that enclosed the stairway on the main floor of the house, which opened up the space and improved sight lines to the woody backyard. He also moved the master suite from the main floor to a 620-square-foot room that had once been a storage space above a two-car garage. The suite, which includes a full bath and walk-in closet, has a new gabled roof punctuated with rectangular windows, a design flourish that matches similar windows elsewhere on the house.

On the main floor, the family room—which was once the master bedroom—is filled with art and other artifacts from the family's international travels. A custom built-in holds stone sculptures from India, a Buddha head and antique hookah pipes. The brightly colored rug and multicolored throw pillows are covered in Indian textiles. Figurines and art books sit on coffee

and side tables, while a stone sculpture made in India stands at one end of the room. Connecting the family room to the rest of the house is a set of custom-built barn doors designed by Benton.

An open staircase with a custom-built black metal railing and mahogany treads leads to the lofted second story, where there's a bedroom for one of the couple's daughters, Amina Rahill-Marier, a senior at the National Cathedral School in Washington, D.C., as well as a home office for Marier. Benton replaced the wooden railing that once surrounded the loft area with a low wall, which Marier and Rahill use to display handmade masks from Africa.

Originally, the house had a second two-car garage on the lower level. That space is now a home gym with a set of sliding glass doors opening onto the shaded backyard. The lower level also has a TV room, storage space and a bedroom for the couple's other daughter, Bianca Rahill-Marier, when she visits from Manhattan.

Throughout the home, the walls are painted in neutral colors to offset the couple's art. With the exception of paintings by Indian artist Tapan Dash, the collection is heavy on artisanal and tribal art. "Maybe it's the engineer in me; I'm looking for functionality—not just aesthetics," says Rahill, who developed an interest in tribal art while traveling with his work to nearly 100 countries. Rahill's large collection of tribal masks from Papua New Guinea in his main floor study are spiritual instruments first and objects of art second, while the couple's many hand-loomed rugs were designed to keep a home warm and comfortable.

Throughout the renovation process, Marier and Rahill also took care to preserve and update the home's many green features. The former owner, Howard Byron, was a tech entrepreneur who acted as his own general contractor when the modular house was built in 1994. He hired Dan Foley, who now owns Foley Mechanical in Lorton, Va., to help him install a radiant heating system and energy recovery ventilator. Foley says Byron's goal was to create an energy efficient home that would cost no more than \$100 a month in utility bills.

"At the time, that was unusual, and it was challenging," Foley says. "We all learned a lot on that job."

Foley continued servicing Byron's home for the next two decades and was called back in by Marier and Rahill to update the system and bring the house up to today's "green" building standards. Benton installed new oak and tile flooring, but the house still uses the original radiant heating system, which circulates warm water through pipes beneath the floor.



A new Viessmann boiler wastes less than 5 percent of the natural gas it burns during the heating process, a performance level unheard of at the time the house was built. Energy recovery ventilators, on the other hand, haven't changed much. The devices keep heating and cooling costs low by transferring most of the heat (or "heat energy") from the stale outgoing air onto the fresh incoming air. The original ERV that Foley installed just needed a good cleaning and a new motor to keep it functioning properly.

Despite increases in gas and electricity rates over the years, the house costs Marier and Rahill about \$165 a month in utility bills. Thanks to the super-efficient boiler and radiant heating system, the gas bill has averaged about \$110 a month, while the electricity bill has averaged \$55 a month since the solar panels went up in November 2013, further reducing the structure's carbon footprint, Marier says. In fact, the solar panels generated more electricity than the house used during the months of April and May, she says. "It's pretty incredible that a house this big can run on the utilities of a small apartment," Foley says.

Now that the renovations are done and they've been living in the house for almost a year, Marier and Rahill say they love how their new home lets them feel more urban, but still connected to nature. One of their favorite spaces is the screened back porch, where they eat breakfast in the morning and listen to the crickets at night.

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All About the Art

Architect David Benton offers tips on how to design a home that shows off artwork

By Christine MacDonald

Consider built-ins

If your art collection is heavy on sculptures, carvings or other pieces that can't be hung on a wall, consider adding a custom built-in, such as the family room display in the home of Véronique Marier and her husband, Bilal Rahill. And don't assume a built-in has to take over an entire wall—Benton has designed smaller displays featuring floating shelves, open cabinets and cubbies around fireplaces.

Maximize wall space

Be mindful of the placement of windows and doors. "A lot of times," he says, "we like to put the doors toward the corners of the room, windows in the center," which creates clean stretches of blank walls for hanging art.

Lighting matters

Benton likes to "wash" walls in light, which means using several evenly spaced lights to bathe the whole wall. Then he uses spotlights to draw attention to particular pieces. He also recommends adding dimmers to light switches for more control. And he says today's LED lights have improved a lot and can provide the same soft white glow of the old-school, energy-hogging variety.

Be mindful of scale

To balance the high ceiling in the family room of the Rahill-Marier home, Benton added a large light fixture that hangs down into the room. He says keeping most of the art at eye level makes a room feel cozier.

Go neutral

Choose mostly neutral, earthy paint colors that don't compete for attention with the artwork. In the Marier-Rahill home, Benton chose a palette of off-white, taupe and warm gray. He says one of his favorite colors is Benjamin Moore's "elmira white" for its warm, creamy tone.

A little can go a long way

Brighter colors can work well when used sparingly. To the right of the front door at the Rahill-Marier home, Benton added a deep orange accent wall that complements a color in the Oriental rug just inside the entranceway. Placing the accent wall by the front door made a strong statement and set the tone for the rest of the house.

Build in breathing room

When you design a room around artwork, consider where people are going to stand to look at it. "Find places where you can step back and appreciate the art," Benton says. "Even a small piece could be a focal point at the end of a long hallway or sight line."