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the perfect fit

A Chevy Chase couple tailors a historic home to suit their lifestyle

ON A TREE-LINED STREET IN Upper Northwest D.C., Sarah and Bryan Carey's 1920s-era house sits alongside other cottages and bungalows of the same vintage. The charming exterior looks as it did 80 years ago, but the inside has been updated and customized for modern living.

Sarah, 41, an interior designer, and Bryan, 45, a lawyer, have owned the home since 2008, but they waited until 2016 to embark on a major renovation. "We love our neighborhood and knew we wanted to stay," Sarah says, "but we needed to live here for a while in order to make smart, thoughtful decisions."

The four-level, five-bedroom house, which they share with their 12-year-old cockapoo, Bailey, had plenty of space, but the room arrangements and sizes weren't working for them. "We didn't need more square footage, we just needed to reallocate it," Sarah says.

The couple interviewed several design/build firms before deciding on D.C.-based Four Brothers, a company with experience in reconfiguring the interiors of older homes. They collaborated with team leader Ben Johnson and his architects on the design, with a common goal of respecting the home's architectural character while improving it. "We see ourselves as the caretakers of the house while we live here," Sarah says.

"We wanted to make it our own, while embracing its original beauty and bones." They devised a plan that touched almost every room in the house—from major modifications that included the gutting of two upstairs bathrooms, to simple but impactful changes such as adding built-in storage and new lighting.

As a design professional, Sarah follows a philosophy of helping clients focus on measuring the time and energy spent in a room versus the money spent on it. "Whether your budget is \$25,000 or \$250,000, each decision should align with the value of the space as defined by the homeowner," she says. She used this approach in her own project. Since she loves to cook, it was worth it to her to splurge on a high-end, custom-built French range. But she didn't have strong feelings about the kitchen backsplash, so she saved money by opting for a standard, less expensive tile.

The three-month renovation was finished on time and on budget. "Bryan and I like to be together, even when we're doing different things," Sarah says, "and now the house blends the right combination of open and defined spaces for how we spend time here."



BY CAROLYN WEBER

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL VENTURA



WORK THE ROOM

The layout of the living room didn't change, but an expanded 6½-foot-wide opening connects it to the new kitchen, improving circulation and creating a central hub for relaxing or entertaining. The Careys upgraded the existing gas fireplace to a modern version that operates via remote control. A 60-inch television is mounted above the mantel and is concealed by new custom cabinetry when it's not in use. The room is bright and inviting, thanks to improved lighting and walls painted in Farrow & Ball's Pavilion Gray.

A sofa and three chairs make for a cozy seating area, but the living room is also spacious enough to host a book club. Sarah describes her style as classic with a twist, and it shows in her use of midcentury modern elements such as the Eero Saarinen womb chair and the clean-lined acrylic coffee table.

The couple uses the small room at the front of the house as a library. A wall of windows allows in plenty of natural light, so Sarah had the room painted in a dark, dramatic gray called Down Pipe, also from Farrow & Ball.



OPEN HOUSE

The Careys decided that a den and a living room were redundant spaces, so they incorporated the den's square footage into the kitchen. Contractor Ben Johnson, from Four Brothers, and his team opened up the back section of the house by removing a load-bearing wall and replacing it with a structural beam. The new and open 400-square-foot

kitchen is proportionally large for the house, but it's where the couple spends most of their time together, so it was worth the investment.

There are very few solid walls in the room, so the opportunity for upper cabinets was limited. A 5-by-9-foot center island is the main work surface as well as a central storage piece, with lots of deep drawers on both sides. Two counter stools tuck in at the

end of the island, and a round acrylic and glass table at the rear of the room seats four people comfortably.

The ivory-colored Lacanche range is a real statement piece and was the homeowners' first design decision. White Shaker-style cabinets, marble-look quartz countertops, oak hardwood floors and pale-gray walls combine for a neutral backdrop.

Two oversize antique brass ring chandeliers illuminate the island. "I needed something with a lot of presence because they are visible from the front door," Sarah says. The cabinet hardware is nickel, and the range combines both silver and gold finishes to tie it all together. "I think mixed metals create nice texture in the kitchen," she adds.



MADE FOR TWO

Old houses are not known for their spacious bathrooms, and this one is no exception. Rethinking the master bedroom's tiny en suite bathroom was a challenge for Johnson and the architects, who were tasked with designing a space that was functional for two adults to use every day. By borrowing space from an existing closet, they managed to fit a lot—his-and-hers vanities, a walk-in shower and a private water closet—into just 80 square feet. Sarah relocated her closet to a spare second-floor bedroom, which she converted into a dressing room.



SLEEP RETREAT

In the second-floor master bedroom, Sarah and Bryan wanted a space that was just for sleeping and resting. "We didn't need a sitting area or a place to watch TV," she says. But they did need storage. The solution was a wall of built-in cabinets with a mix of shelves, large drawers and hanging rods. They love the look of the home's front façade and wanted to preserve it, so they had to work around the existing window placements. The asymmetrical design highlights the vintage round window, and they even made room under the other window for a window seat.

On the opposite side of the room, new sconces with individual switches flank the bed and are among Sarah's favorite elements. "You realize over time that the little touches make a big difference day to day," she says.



SHE'S CRAFTY

Formerly a third living room that the couple rarely used, the basement is now one of the most important places in the house. Sarah wanted a dedicated organization space, a place to store large items and out-of-season decorations. "I do everything from wrapping gifts to folding laundry here," she says. The built-in cabinetry maximizes the storage function, and the island serves as a standing worktable.

In contrast to the high-end finishes upstairs, the homeowners kept the basement design simple and cost effective. The walls are lined with wardrobe-size wall cabinets from Ikea's PAX system. "These are fantastic," Johnson says. "They are inexpensive, but can be customized with different interiors and door styles." The island is topped with warm and practical butcher block, and the floors are laminate in a hardwood pattern. ■

A room of floor-to-ceiling storage cabinets allows Sarah (pictured with Bryan) to stay organized. Her holiday decorations, extra china and serving dishes, and even a cache of hostess gifts are easy to access, but stowed neatly behind closed doors.

Carolyn Weber lives in Silver Spring and frequently writes about architecture and home design.