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Bridging a Generation of Design

Award-Winning Georgetown Rowhouse Becomes a Dream Renovation for Interior Designer Robert Pahnke

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Written by [Sherry Moeller](#)

Photography by [Robert Lautman](#)

As an admirer of Hugh Newell Jacobsen's work and in particular a rowhouse on Q Street in Georgetown, Robert Pahnke, principal of Robert Pahnke Interiors Inc., was honored when asked to take on the recent renovations of the residence. "I have great respect for the house," Pahnke says. He had fallen in love with it years ago, even before he saw the interior. "I would park across the street, stare at it, and dream about what it looked like inside."

The rowhouse came on the market at a perfect time – his friends were looking for a new residence and asked Pahnke to go house hunting with them. Pahnke recalls telling his friends that "this is the house you have to have" about the rowhouse on Q Street. The owners agreed, knowing that they wanted to stay in Georgetown where they had raised their family, and asked Pahnke to redesign the interior. Once the two-year renovation project was complete, the owners knew Pahnke was right; they were home.

Recalling Its History

Basically, the house was an 18-foot-wide rowhouse with an adjoining vacant lot, says Hugh Newell Jacobsen, who was hired by Robert E. Lee in the early 1960s to connect the two spaces and create three bedrooms and better function in the living areas.

First, Jacobsen cleaned up the facade by bringing windows to the floor. Then, he built a wing to match the original house and linked the spaces with a glass-roof atrium and a bridge to the owners' suite. Jacobsen made a dining room out of the original living room, a living room out of the vacant lot, and a front entrance from the original side garden.

"In those days, everybody was doing modern architecture," Jacobsen says. "There were no center hall colonials even in Bethesda, let alone Victorians." So for a local architect who was out of Yale for six

Photo Gallery



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The renovations include capping the living room's original brick fireplace, with a curved wall of birch by Taylor Concepts Inc. Paintings from Annie Gawlak of G Fine Art, framed by District Fine Arts, flank the Robert Pahnke-designed fireplace.

years and had only opened his office in 1958, this rowhouse on Q Street put him on the map. This design won him seven awards, including a 1964 award from the New York chapter of The American Institute of Architects (AIA) and later the 25-year AIA award for a design that stands the test of time.

And Now

Keeping the house's past in perspective as well as the realization that no one had touched the interior since the 1960s, Pahnke began to tackle the interior redesign by staying true to the new owners' requests.

The owners were looking for a modern hotel feel inside their house, but with a European minimalist edge, Pahnke says, like the posh hotels they had stayed in during their many trips. Heated towel warmers, heated bathroom floors, and no shower doors were top requests. They also wanted "smart wiring" so they could run the interior and exterior systems, such as sprinklers and alarms, from a computer on a plane. With Pahnke's background as both an architect and an interior designer, the total redesign was a challenge, but one he welcomed.

The project was fascinating, says Scott Taylor of Taylor Concepts Inc., who was the general contractor on the job. "It was a challenge to work on with so many design elements and types of wood. It was not an everyday structure." The engineering involved for the creation of the glass bridge to the owners' suite and the free-floating spiral staircase outside their suite to the rooftop deck is a marvel, Taylor adds.

"We followed Robert's design lead," Taylor says, which started in the living room to the right of the entryway atrium. For the living room's centerpiece, the original brick fireplace was replaced with a curved wall of birch. Pahnke wanted to get rid of the coldness of the brick and the darkness of the house, including the original wood floors that were either lightened or replaced. The fireplace now draws the eye to the coordinating curved wall of built-ins along the adjoining hallway, "an undulating ribbon of wood," Pahnke says. The hallway doors, now at complementing heights, conceal storage space, a wet bar, and the former library that is currently used as a home office.

For furnishings in the front-to-back living room, Pahnke incorporated Fiam Ghost glass chairs from M2L near the doors to the rear gardens and Cassina lounge chairs, also from M2L, on one side of a Tavaloccon Ruote cocktail table on wheels. Rugs in the living room, library, and staircase are by Martin Patrick Evan in New York City.

Next, Pahnke continued the minimalist look of the living room into the rest of the house by steering clear of crown moldings and by painting most of the home in Benjamin Moore's Snow White. Exceptions to the white walls are the dining room's Smoke walls, the guest bedroom's Sea Haze color, and the powder room's Classic Burgundy hue.

Per the owners' request, Pahnke also updated the bridge above the atrium to include glass panels that make guests, family pets, and initially the owners pause before crossing. "Cross if you dare," Pahnke laughs, but with tubular steel and structural glass, the transparent bridge engineered by Neubauer Consulting Engineers is sturdy and secured with a new railing playing off the curvilinear silhouettes in other rooms.

Pahnke redesigned the owners' suite to include a street-facing dressing room featuring Poliform built-ins that allow the owners to pack easily and a rear bedroom that overlooks the gardens. A spiral staircase off the bedroom balcony, also engineered by Neubauer Consulting Engineers, takes the owners to the rooftop deck with views of the pond, patios, and greenery in the large private yard.

Today's Modern

Herringbone-patterned wood floors of the past gave way to modern hardwood flooring in most of the spaces, with the dining room and kitchen featuring slate. The dining room had one-by-one ceiling tiles, Pahnke says, until he got a hold of them and designed a ceiling masterpiece. Recessed lights by Illuminations within the ceiling sculpture, plus a true candelabra by Bruce Eicher Inc. shine on the new table designed and built by Williamsburg Fine Woodworking. Fabric by J. Robert Scott Inc. covers the dining room chairs.

Also in this entertaining area, Pahnke added double windows mimicking the arched windows originally in the house. These windows overlook a planting tub on wheels that when moved reveals the outside stairs to the basement.

Multi-Tasking

"The owners wanted the kitchen as modern as we could make it," Pahnke says, as well as to provide a place for wine storage and high-tech connections. Blue stone granite counters, blackboard slate around the remote-operated gas fireplace, and overhead lighting by John Seward of Illuminations, who installed all the lighting in the renovated spaces, glisten in the Pahnke-designed kitchen. This truly gourmet cooking station includes Sub-Zero, Viking, Miele, Gaggenau, and KitchenAid appliances from Appliance Distributors Unlimited Inc.

The kitchen's expanded spaces, built by Taylor Concepts Inc., also offer a curved island with high-tech hookups and wine storage on one side. The edge of the island points toward the windows and doors

leading to the gardens.

Era to Era

What works in one era can still work in another, with a few updates. Pahnke took the bookcases installed in the original first floor library and gave them a facelift with a rich wood facade and matching shelving along the fireplace. Pilchard Designs Inc. fabricated sheer window treatments using Grey Watkins fabric. The draperies were kept simple and the same throughout the house.

Georgetown Insight

In the 1960s, Jacobsen worked with Lester Collins, a fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects, to create magnificent tiered gardens and ponds for this site, which includes a courtyard just off the atrium. Recently, Pahnke worked with Paul Ward, The Foxhall Gardener, to establish gardens befitting this landmark residence. Plantings include a Natchez Crape Myrtle in the center of the courtyard and Cryptomeria Japonica providing privacy along the side yard.

The design was more contemporary than usual for Pahnke and involved more structural rework. "The owners gave me carte blanche to do what I wanted," the interior designer adds. With great respect, Pahnke kept the bones of the award-winning Hugh Newell Jacobsen house and reestablished it as a still minimalist, but now modern abode for the new residents who love living in Georgetown. It all came together for the owners and the designer. "It was a dream renovation," Pahnke says.

