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# This Old House

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DESIGN IDEAS / BEFORE + AFTERS / LANDSCAPING / DIY

PROJECTS / TOOL TIPS



## Do-It-Right Renovation Guide

Get your dream remodel with advice from TOH's team of experts

We've got  
a new look!  
Check out  
our redesign  
inside

Left to right: Richard Trethewey, Plumbing & Heating Expert; Jenn Nawada, Landscape Contractor; Kevin O'Connor, Host; Tom Silva, General Contractor



**THESE PAGES:** Elongated glass tile in a shimmery gray-blue climbs ceiling high, and reinforces the contemporary feel of the relocated kitchen.

**FAR RIGHT:** A period-perfect front porch and the "toothed" front walk reflect the old-meets-new aesthetic of the renovated 1925 bungalow.





## House Tour

# Finding their sweet spot

After hopscotching from house to house while raising a family, a couple of empty nesters settle down in a snug little 1925 bungalow, rebuilding it just how they want it

BY DEBORAH BALDWIN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STACY ZARIN GOLDBERG



**W**hat if you love old things but prefer to live with new ones—can you have it both ways?

Of course, say Andy and Cathy Liverman, owners of a renewed 94-year-old bungalow with authentic period proportions and trim on the outside and the latest in style and comfort on the inside. The only hint of this dual aesthetic from the curb? The “toothed” front walkway, created by landscape designer Scott Brinitzer to satisfy Andy’s request for something that would look “less like a runway.” It’s a telling detail that reflects both the couple’s laser focus on the little stuff and what the project’s architectural designer, Jennifer Hall, describes as the renovation’s overall goal: “to keep some of the charm and tradition of the house but make it more up-to-date and true to the homeowners’ style.”



House and landscaping did not gel overnight. When the couple first sized up the house, it was a sagging artifact, some of its 2,102 square feet tucked under dormers. The siding held asbestos, the interiors lead paint, and the yard—don't ask.

But the house was well situated, on a coveted corner lot in a close-in suburb, and the couple had been looking for a while, mainly on foot. "We wanted to be in an area where we could walk," says Andy, "including walking into D.C." They could also grab the Metro—this area of Arlington, Virginia, called Ashton Heights, has more than one stop.

Then Andy, a former naval officer on submarines who co-founded a company specializing in naval sonar and radar systems, took a tour of the unfinished basement, concluding that "the house was not... structurally up to code."

Michael Winn, whose design-build firm was brought in to assess the mess, elaborates: "Someone had taken out a load-bearing wall without redistributing the load." There were also signs of tinkering in

**ABOVE:** The living room's gas-burning fireplace has a new mantel and surround. In a space-saving move, the built-in bookshelves are recessed into a new studless wall that's reinforced with plywood.

**RIGHT:** The living room's pocket-size reading nook, built like a large box bay, may be original to the house.



STYLED BY MOIRA MEDIA MOELLER





**LEFT:** To open up the first floor and give the relocated kitchen more breathing space, the homeowners removed doors and closets and streamlined the staircase's balustrade. Engineered flooring—4-inch antique vertical-grain heart pine—replaced the original heart pine on the first floor of the house.

## FLOOR PLANS

The now three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath house came with its two-story rear addition. It kept its 2,102-square-foot footprint while gaining a new layout downstairs and minor changes on the second floor. The kitchen moved into the original dining room, borrowing space for a pantry from a full bath turned powder room. The existing galley kitchen became a laundry room and mini mudroom. The first floor was opened up by sacrificing a closet near the stairs and another in the family room. The couple's bedroom lost two small closets, and their bath lost a window while annexing space from bedroom closets. The front porch and rear deck were rebuilt.

first floor



second floor



scale  
5'



structural beams by a long-ago plumber. The framing wasn't just compromised, he says; "the floor was moving in all directions."

But where other buyers might have been thinking teardown, "we really wanted to restore," Cathy recalls. For them, this would be a first: During and after Andy's years with the U.S. Navy, they'd lived in 17 places, yet never tackled a whole-house renovation. Their three kids were grown; Andy had just sold his tech company, and Cathy, a health-care policy expert, was about to retire. They knew what they liked, didn't care about trends, and weren't concerned with resale.

The house came with its own quiet cheerleader: a 76-page neighborhood historic-house style guide. Along with rehab dos and don'ts, the guide explains that Ashton Heights had been developed in 1919 as a streetcar suburb and gradually filled with foursquares and bungalows. Buyers today are drawn by the trees and transit, but they mostly want bigger houses. Many originals have been rebuilt beyond recognition.

The couple's house already had a two-story rear addition—a main suite over a family room—and "we're pretty minimalist," Cathy says. Besides, they were also renovating a Delaware beach house. They saw no need for more than about 2,000 square feet.

Still, restoring this house would ultimately require repairing or replacing almost every element in it, or as Winn says half-seriously, would be "like

**ABOVE:** Rather than turn it into a spacious kitchen, the homeowners opted to keep the existing family room, which now houses the TV and a table for two overlooking the deck and garden. *Paint: Benjamin Moore's Gray Cloud (walls). Sliding French door: Marvin*

building a new house with a house in the way."

The couple could stay in their old place, about 40 minutes farther out, for the duration. That allowed time to bring in a structural engineer to shore up the house before demolition began. In the basement, a subcontractor broke up the concrete floor to sink footers for nine posts to hold steel beams. Basement insulation, a dehumidifier, and a new sump pump also went in, while upstairs the design-build team braced an original wood beam with two engineered beams. "All this really solidified the structure and brought it up to code," Andy sums up with satisfaction.

This necessary prep allowed time to bring in Brinitzer, who worked from the outside in while Winn's firm worked from the inside out. Their goal: to meet in the middle, melding indoor and outdoor spaces while addressing setback and lot-coverage rules. This meant not only arranging sight lines from the house to the rebuilt ipe deck to lush plantings but also having the garage double as a garden retaining wall, the edging serve as a water trap, and the gutters channel runoff to the aquifer. "This property," says Brinitzer, "holds on to water so the plants can use it."

The whole project took 15 months.

The couple massaged the layout, aiming for a more contemporary open flow that capitalizes on the interior's abundant natural light. Hall suggested the kitchen move to the back of the house, colonizing





**ABOVE:** To maximize space, the design team carved out a spot for a mini mudroom alongside a laundry sink top and open shelves facing built-in storage. Washer and dryer: Electrolux. Cabinets: Wellborn. Pulls: Top Knobs. Faucet: Pfister. Sink: Kraus. Window: Marvin

the sunny family room. The couple balked. "They really wanted the back room as a gathering space," Hall says, "especially with its doors to the deck and great view of the backyard." The kitchen moved instead into the original dining room, freeing up the former galley kitchen to become a laundry room and mini mudroom. Then they divvied up the full bath downstairs into a powder room and a pantry.

So no, there's no dining room. "It's just the two of us most of the time," says Cathy, who likes to pull a stool up to the kitchen island for most meals. "And when friends come over we have the porch—it's not like there's nowhere to eat."

The second floor remained largely as it was, though both bathrooms were gutted and rebuilt, and



## Renovation recap

**THE HOMEOWNERS:** Cathy and Andy Liverman, retirees eager for a compact house in a walkable community.

**THE HOUSE:** A 2,102-square-foot bungalow built in 1925 in Arlington, VA, with lots of light and charm, along with a mishmash of small spaces, a narrow galley kitchen, and zero flow. Oh, and missing a load-bearing wall.

**WHY THEY CHOSE IT:** It came with a great location and a quarter-acre lot, so they could add a garage. The house was tagged as a possible teardown, which reinforced the couple's mission to save and restore it without changing its footprint.

**WHAT THEY DID:** Moved the kitchen and removed walls to open up the first floor. Turned the old kitchen into a laundry/mudroom, and a full bath into a powder room. Gutted all three baths. Stripped and rebuilt the exterior while bumping up the curb appeal and yard. All this after shoring up shaky infrastructure.

**THEIR INSPIRATION:** The Ashton Heights Style Guide, a historic-preservation how-to. Available online, it would be a useful resource for any owner of a 1920s or 1930s Craftsman, Colonial Revival, or Tudor Revival house.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** The couple realized they'd rather have a family room with a table for two than a dining room. The new kitchen island has also proved ideal for meals tête-à-tête. This is the couple's 18th home, yet "we'd never had an island before," Cathy says. "We just love it."



**ABOVE LEFT:** A sliding barn door in the couple's bedroom saves floor space and closes off the walk-in closet. *Paint: Benjamin Moore's Gray Cloud (walls)*



**TOP RIGHT:** The custom maple vanity in the couple's bath holds ample drawer storage and a single shared sink in the leathered black-granite countertop. *Vanity: Wellborn. Sconces: Thomas O'Brien. Bath tile: Mosaic Tile Company. Paint: Benjamin Moore's Etiquette (walls)*



**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Gutted and rejiggered, the bath gained a shower enclosure with reflective glass wall tile and a flat-pebble tile floor roomy enough for a built-in bench. *Shower fixtures and fittings: Rohl. Shower door: Alumax. Toilet: Bradenton*

under-the-eaves closets and a window fell by the way-side. The reno kept intact a kid-size getaway under the roof peak, about the width of the staircase, entered through two private, knee-wall-height doors in each front bedroom, like an invitation to Narnia.

The chief carpenter and builder, Diego Cabrera, recalls gutting enough of the house to fill five or six 30-yard dumpsters. He unearthed Depression-era scrip and an army's worth of toy soldiers—which he gifted to an elderly passerby who said he'd spent time in the house growing up and requested a tour. Iron radiators were junked in favor of gas-fed hot-and-cold





**LEFT:** A new deck, back stairs, and lattice skirt brighten the back of the house. Siding: James Hardie. Landscape design: Scott Brinitzer Design Associates

**BELOW:** The new garage, a mix of cottage and contemporary styles, holds an electric charging station, plus storage and work space; it also doubles as a garden retaining wall. Permeable paving absorbs rainwater runoff and unites the garage with the garden and the pathway leading to the rear deck. Garage door: Clopay

forced air. A couple of windows were filled in and a few were replaced; the plumbing, wiring, and ductwork are all new. The first floor's heart-pine flooring came out, replaced with engineered heart-pine planks, wider than the heart pine upstairs, which was patched with the salvaged boards and refinished. Cabrera added built-ins and painstakingly replicated moldings and three- and four-piece casings.

Crews meanwhile peeled off the asbestos siding and blew insulation into the walls, working from the outside. They sheathed the house and finished it with a new roof and fiber-cement siding in a marine blue. Then, with the Ashley Heights Style Guide in hand, the design-build team knocked down the worn front porch and composed a new one with more detailed railings, tapered columns, and brackets to add texture and dimension.

The couple added their personal touches, from the yellow front door and matching porch swing to the pale interior palette and multitasking kitchen island to the fire-pit patio in back. Not to mention the new garage—a peak-roofed outbuilding accented with board-and-batten siding and an aluminum-and-glass door. Along with storage, the garage holds a charging station for Andy's Tesla Model Y. Its cottage-meets-contemporary design serves as an emblem of a restoration project that is true both to history and to a modern couple who know exactly what they like. ■

