

Blueprint

*Design in
all its many
forms*

*A vintage
house brings
two DIY-ers
to Orange*

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Lucky find

Tonda and Mark Morriss had renovated several houses before, and they swore they were done with all that. They also thought they would downsize when they moved from Texas five years ago to be near their daughter and her family—they dreamed of a one-level house with less property to care for. “We did the opposite,” says Tonda. “We have more house, more property and two stories.”

The reason for the switch? After they’d looked for property in several counties without success, the circa 1920 stucco home they found in the town of Orange was just too good to pass up. Situated on a big lot on a quiet street, it has a gracious front yard, great views out the back and a generous entry hall. Its detailing would also make a perfect backdrop for the furniture and objects that Tonda loves to collect from antique stores and Craigslist.

“We thought we could do a lot with it,” says Tonda. “It was the challenge [that drew us].”

Like all renovations, it’s been a journey. Though the house was structurally sound, it needed a lot of cosmetic work after having been owned by one family since 1962. The kitchen was very small, with laundry appliances wedged in among the cookspaces, and bathrooms needed to be refurbished.

The Morrisses tackled all the work themselves except plumbing, electrical and HVAC updates. Mark became skilled at repairing plaster, and they took on painting, carpentry, tilework and refinishing floors. They’d moved in as soon as they bought the house, so they were living in the midst of the renovation, doing without a kitchen for a few months at a time and sealing off work areas with plastic to avoid getting their living spaces dusty.

“We’ve regretted it lots of times,” says Tonda, laughing. “But now that we’re closer, we love it.”

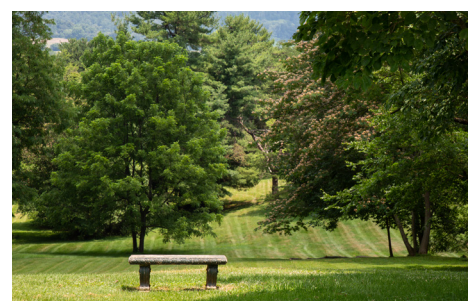
The first priority was the kitchen, located at the back of the house, and this was where the couple would make the only significant structural change. “We wanted openness between the kitchen and the family room,” says Mark. They took down a wall and replaced it with a salvaged beam and posts, letting their two main living spaces flow together.

On a hunch, they pulled away part of a wall surface and exposed a brick chimney, lending texture to the room, and they improved the kitchen layout with a larger island and a corner banquette. (Laundry moved upstairs.) Marble countertops, white cabinets and subway tile are the contemporary details that balance quirkier touches, like the large antique pantry cabinet they’d brought with them from Texas. Ceramic taxidermy, patterned china and pickled-finish wood are repeating elements that pull together the eclectic design.

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A sunroom at the back of the house provides a view across the property’s sloping lawn, as well as natural light through the front hall (previous page). In the kitchen, modern finishes give a contemporary counterpoint to the homeowners’ quirkier décor, like the large antique pantry cabinet they brought with them from Texas. The dining room features a table that was handmade from an antique metal base and wooden planks salvaged from a barn.





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The adjacent family room—formerly used as a dining room—centers on a simple brick fireplace painted white, its slim wooden mantle topped with an oval mirror and antique glass vases. A pair of salvaged doors stand like sculptures in opposite corners, and ethnic-print pillows contrast with the neutral furniture.

The Morrisses made a front room, featuring arched built-in shelves, into their dining room, and built their own table from an antique metal base and wooden planks salvaged from a barn. The entry hall, with a large round rug and a collection of family photos and artwork lining the stairway, is well-lit thanks to natural light entering via a sunroom on the back of the house. There, the Morrisses closed in one side wall for privacy while retaining the view of their long, sloping lawn—where, says Tonda, all the neighborhood kids go sledding in winter.

The formal sitting room contains one of the best discoveries of the Morrisses' renovation, as well as a glimpse into the lives of two former owners. From 1942 to 1962, the house was owned by Graham Hawes Kemper and Aubrey Cowan Kemper, who had previously lived in

Rome and Japan while he served as a U.S. diplomat. The Morrisses were curious about the painted tiles around the fireplace in this room.

"One evening, we decided to scrape off a little paint just to see what color the tiles were," says Tonda. When she scraped a small area, she found the face of a bald eagle staring back at her—and as she and Mark kept scraping, they uncovered a couple of dozen different hand-painted birds, done in a Japanese style and signed "ACK," likely meaning Aubrey Cowan Kemper.



A nearby formal sitting room provided the couple with the biggest discovery—fireplace tiles that had been hand-painted by the home's former owner.

An addition made in the 1990s provided the house with a first-floor master suite, which features contemporary touches like a cathedral ceiling and a bay window to the backyard. Its high ceiling allowed the Morrisses to fit in a 10-foot-high mirror they'd scored for \$100 from a former Masonic Lodge—it probably wouldn't have squeezed into any other spot in the house.

The couple even found a way to fashion the little side porch off the kitchen more to their liking. They added a concrete side wall, making this diminutive seating area feel like an enclosed oasis suffused with the sound of a small fountain on the nearby patio. Butter-yellow stucco and brightly patterned flowerpots (plus a longhorn skull displayed above the door) make the porch feel like a nod to the Morrisses' Texas past. And a pair of salvaged doors with ironwork in their windows, installed in the wall near the parking area, tie the design back to the look of the interior.

The couple are enjoying the house more and more as they cross projects off the list—and especially now that their daughter's family has moved to the house right across the street. "We call it the villa," says Mark. "It's a nice refuge, something to take a lot of pride in."

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TONDA MORRIS