

Classic Collections, *Classic* Home

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When Reid and Michelle Willis Adams bought their home in 1995 in what's endearingly known by the locals as "azalea alley" near Rugby Road, they were a busy young couple with a one-year-old baby. Reid, a surgeon, had just finished his medical residency/fellowship and Michelle worked for the University of Virginia Alumni Association. They were excited to be new homeowners and went right to work completing lots of do-it-yourself projects to make their new home their own.

Michelle recalls, "Every time the baby napped, I'd go paint something."

Her first painting project still greets visitors at the front door: a black geometric pattern she stenciled on the hardwood floors in the foyer, which gives the illusion of an area rug and runner.

Other early painting projects include the boldly colored walls in the formal living room (a rich, warm red) and the dining room (a deep cobalt blue). Michelle explains that the living room's red walls are a classic Chinese red, which she and Reid hand-lacquered with an umber glaze to give the walls an antiqued look. She says that you have to apply the glaze with a brush and work very slowly so air bubbles won't form. In the

dining room, Michelle and Reid worked together on the hand-finished painting technique called *strié*, in which a brush is dragged vertically along the wall from ceiling to floor before the paint dries. This gives the walls the subtle texture of a linen weave.

Twenty years later, these projects still look terrific—one of the many benefits of making classic choices with your home décor.

The home, like many in the neighborhood, was built in the early 1930s and only had one other owner in its history—a rarity for a home of this age. The Adams lived in the home as-is, save for a few little updates here and there, for many years.

Six years ago, they completed their first major home renovation: the kitchen and family room addition, built by contractor Goodman B. Duke and designed by Michelle's father, Stewart Willis, in conjunction with Charlottesville Architectural firm, Angel Applications. Kitchen Designer Karen Turner provided the design for the new kitchen and butler's pantry. And last year, they completed a second major project: adding a two-car garage with a guest suite above it—connected to the house by a deck and walkway, designed by Charlottesville architect Russell Skinner, and built by custom builder Baird Snyder, Incorporated.

When touring the Adams home, one of its most apparent qualities is a sense of connectedness from room to room. Michelle attributes this to the home's consistent interior color palette.

Michelle says that she "inherited" her colors of "Chinese red, cobalt blue and camel tan" from her mother, interior designer Evelyn Tyler Willis, who lives in Sperryville, Virginia.



Michelle and her mother (and grandmother before them) are collectors of Chinese porcelains and art, and these classic shades appear often in such objects. So when the young couple first began outfitting their new home, Michelle's mother teased that she would happily share furniture and decorative items with them, but they would also need to adopt her paint colors so that everything could settle into the new home in Charlottesville with ease.

Michelle says that her favorite thing about having a limited color palette is that she can pick up an item in one room and carry it to another, and it'll never feel out of place. By using these same three tones in varying shades and repeating them in different ways throughout the house, Michelle says she actually has more options and versatility. She's able to move things from room to room, or add new elements with ease because she doesn't have to worry about coordinating with a complex set of colors. She says, "Each room maintains its own personality, but also makes so much sense when looked at as a whole. The thread that connects everything is the color palette."

In 1997, Michelle began studying interior design and helping her mother with clients' projects; before long, she followed in her mother's footsteps and became an interior designer herself. Michelle now owns an independent interior design business and primarily focuses on private residences, though she has also done work at UVA, including the Offices of Admission and several historic pavilions on the Lawn.

Michelle and Reid share an interest in what she calls "treasure hunting"—searching for antiques and interesting collectibles, especially if they have an Asian theme. She says, "We're always going to auctions and estate sales, or we pick up things during travel or from family. It's something we enjoy doing together."

One of the most interesting things they collect are antique grates—decorative metal or wooden frames and screens. Each radiator in their home has a unique custom-made box fitted with a different antique grate. Michelle says the collection has evolved and different carpenters have contributed their woodworking skills to this group of one-of-a-kind decorative radiator covers.

Michelle says that she and Reid think that collections have the greatest effect when like-items are displayed together, but that they aren't purists about it. She says, "I love designing tablescapes, so I'm constantly moving things around from spot to spot." For the most part, the Imari porcelain collection, with its red and gold overglaze, is showcased in the living room against the backdrop of the Chinese red walls. The blue and white Canton ware is found in the elegant blue dining room, and a collection of English Flow Blue china is displayed in the bookcases in the open kitchen/family room.

With that first major renovation, the Adams greatly increased the size of their kitchen and family room. The old kitchen is now a butler's pantry; their old family room now serves as a home office; and the new kitchen and family room is one large open space—



divided into three zones: the kitchen work area, a casual dining area and a cozy sitting area with a fireplace.

In this large space, Michelle flipped the application of her signature color palette from what's seen in the home's more-formal front rooms. In the front rooms, bold red and blue take center stage and camel tones are merely a supporting player. But here, camel is the dominant color and is accented with lower-key variants of reds and blues.

Michelle notes that there are at least eight different fabrics, featuring a mix of patterns and textures layered into the décor in the new kitchen and family room: three different damasks, a herringbone, a stripe, an ikat, a diamond, a floral on the drapery, tapestry patterns and chenille. Even the granite countertops in the kitchen get in on the game. Michelle says the trick for working with a neutral color like camel is in the layering.

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To accessorize the room, Michelle uses an eclectic mix of warm metals like brass, antique brass and iron. The overhead light fixtures by Visual Comfort are contemporary interpretations of traditional, historic fixtures. She says she is particularly drawn to contemporary accessories these days and has plans to add a few more contemporary touches to her décor. She has already included a modern brass and glass-topped coffee table.

On the family room ceiling is a barely-there pale blue paint called Window Pane by Sherwin Williams. Michelle says she tested several shades of pale blue until she achieved the look she wanted and she always advises clients to do the same. She says that paint may be the easiest product to apply, but it can often be the trickiest to work with. “With fabric, what you see is what you get, but paint changes everywhere you put it—sometimes even within the same room, depending on the light. So it’s important to paint large swaths of a paint sample—at least two coats—and live with it for a few days before you paint the entire room.”

Michelle’s savvy for recycling good ideas and “that, which is tried and true” is especially evident in the Adams’ new guest suite, completed last January. A longtime supporter of the Shelter for Help in Emergency (SHE), Michelle has participated in five of the six SHE Design House tours. Of her involvement, she says, “It’s fun for me to participate because it’s a chance to try new things and work in a way that’s out-of-the-ordinary for me. There’s no real client, so I do things to suit the property, rather than focusing on suiting a particular personality.”

The designers involved with Design House contribute their own investment of time, materials, custom sewing and furnishings. Two years ago, because she knew she would soon be outfitting a guest suite at her own home, she





requested to decorate “a bedroom” and was serendipitously granted the master bedroom suite at the Design House by the design committee. She confides, “Everything I did at the home in Farmington two years ago is now in our new guest suite.”

(This year, Michelle’s SHE Design House project is the kitchen and family room—a space that connects with a breakfast room designed by Ellen Beard of Patina Antiques.)

From the family room in the Adams’ main house, guests have only to step out and across the backyard’s elevated open deck to enter the new freestanding guest suite. This one-level entrance is just one of several “aging in place” features that the Adams incorporated into the design of the guest suite. Doorways are also scaled to be at least 3 feet wide and the walk-in shower features a curbless stall. Inside, the guest suite has a kitchenette, a dining set, a generous king-sized bed and a sitting area.

Michelle’s classic color palette is used in the guest suite—seen in the bedding, drapery fabrics, paint colors and the bathroom’s stunning cobalt wallpaper.



Outside, the new garage and guest suite is clad in Hardiplank cement siding and painted in Benjamin Moore’s Monroe Bisque, mixed at three-quarters strength, to coordinate with the exterior of the main house. The stark white trim around the windows and the Chippendale details on the deck railings “pop” against the camel paint on the siding.

The furniture on the outdoor deck provides places for casual dining and lounging. The outdoor fabrics Michelle selected for the cushions are stylish and fun, chosen with the same design philosophy she employs inside her home: layering a damask, classic solids and stripes and even adding an animal print in neutral camel-based tones for a touch of whimsy.

Another example of Michelle’s practical sense for repurposing can be found upstairs in her daughter’s bedroom and study lounge in the main house. Michelle says that for their upstairs bedrooms, she relaxed her stance on her trademark red/blue/camel color palette, as she brought in two new colors that “complement, without competing.” The new colors she introduced are brown (just a darker version of a camel, really) and a plummy purple (which is, after all, made by mixing red with blue).

These new colors were pulled from the patterns in the room’s fabrics, which were first seen at her second Design House experience—when she decorated a handsome library/sitting room at a home in Crozet.

All this fortuitously came at a time when her daughter was ready to embrace a more mature look for her bedroom and upgrade her teenaged tie-dye decor.

With a little ingenuity for resizing/rescaling the fabrics she had used in the Design House library project, Michelle was able







to reuse everything. The chocolate and ruby ikat-patterned London blinds were pared down and the excess fabric was used to make skirts for the twin-sized bed. Other fabric treatments used in the Design House were resized for use as a dressing table skirt, a new cushion for the window seat and extra throw pillows.

Michelle and Reid are glad they made the additions to their home when they did, while their daughter was still living at home and able to enjoy the benefits of them, too. Now, she's a third-year student at UVA and frequently brings her college friends over for home-cooked meals and club meetings. Michelle and Reid wouldn't have it any other way.

The Adams' home is a classic example of the benefits of choosing a timeless look for your home. When you start with that classic foundation, it's easy to make little updates to freshen up your look, through au courant motifs and accessories. Michelle says timeless choices are a commitment, but something you'll love to live with for years to come. **H**