

HOME & DESIGN

Row House Redux

Developer Brook Rose strips a District townhouse down to its architectural essence

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On the front façade of the Columbia Heights row house, Rose replaced the windows and front door, and painted the brick walls and bay in a monochromatic gray.

Most real estate developers would have walked away from the neglected row house in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of the District. The roof of the 1890s structure was leaking. Floors, full of holes, were caving in. Garbage was piled in the basement. But Brook Rose, who has remodeled 15 homes in various areas of the city, saw the fire-damaged brick Victorian as an opportunity to create a no-holds-barred, contemporary interior without the burden of history. “I basically wanted a shell so I could do something modern,” explains Rose, who bought the house at an estate sale. “This area has a young energy and I felt that type of design would appeal to the buyers. There was a niche in the market for cutting-edge design that needed to be filled.”

The developer-builder began the renovation by stripping the original finishes and replacing the floor joists with sturdier ones. New building systems—plumbing, electrical and air-conditioning, plus windows and wallboard—were installed so the interiors now resemble brand-new construction. “All the architectural detail had been eliminated before I stepped through the door,” Rose recalls. “So there wasn’t much to save. It was important that the walls be straight and the floors be level. If something’s askew in a modern space, it becomes noticeable.”

With the help of architect Jennifer Fowler, Rose divided the townhouse into a pair of two-level condominiums, each connected by an internal staircase along one side. The lower duplex occupies the ground floor and the basement, which was dug out to create nine-foot-tall ceilings. Upstairs, the other two-bedroom condo is divided between the second and third floors. At the rear of the row house, wooden decks extend from each living level, while a third one projects from the upper unit’s master bedroom.

Rose created the feeling of a loft in each of the apartments by opening the entire living level from front to back. Floors are covered in five-inch-wide planks of walnut and ceilings are fitted with halogen spots. “Once I had gutted the interiors, I saw how expansive the space was,” he says. “I wanted to retain that openness.”

The developer took his inspiration for the minimalist design from Philippe Starck’s interiors in the Delano Hotel in Miami Beach and the Italian designs he had admired at kitchen and bath shows. “I wanted to bring some of the things I had seen in Miami, New York and Los Angeles into this project,” he says. “DC doesn’t have many examples of really great modern design.”

At the center of each condo’s open level, he made sure the kitchen components looked like built-in furniture since they remain in plain sight of the living spaces. Wood-laminated cabinets from Porcelanosa are combined with synthetic stone countertops. Backsplashes and 10-foot-long islands are covered in an Italian white marble called Calcutta gold. Hanging over the island, which can double as a dining table, is a Starck-like touch: a pair of lamps from West Elm with large white shades.

The contemporary look also extends to the bathrooms. Vanities were made from walnut-veneered dining room sideboards from BoConcept, the Danish furniture-maker with a Georgetown store in Cady’s Alley. Fitted with raised sinks and sleek, chrome faucets, they echo the fixture-as-furniture look of the kitchen. “That was out of the box for us,” admits store manager Tim Briscoe.

He and Rose then collaborated to stage the apartments with a selection of BoConcept furnishings to make the case for modern to potential buyers. “The open layout he did was urban-minded and that’s our whole design philosophy,” notes Briscoe. “It was a perfect match.”

Based on a sample of the walnut flooring in the units, Briscoe chose walnut-veneered dining tables and contrasting upholstered chairs with brushed-steel legs. At the kitchen islands, he grouped “Sling” bar stools with clear Lucite seats. Modular sofas upholstered in charcoal gray chenille and transparent acrylic coffee tables transform the rear spaces of each living level into comfortable sitting areas. A leather chaise in front of the marble-framed gas fireplace shows how the space next to the front bay window could be used as a cozy reading nook.

On the deck off the back of the upper condo, a streamlined hammock and chairs create an oasis with a view of the Flemish gables of a nearby charter school. A spiral staircase connects this outdoor space to the parking pad behind the townhouse. Throughout both apartments, the neutral-colored furniture enhances the pared-down style of the townhouse while demonstrating the potential use of its unencumbered spaces. “I

knew this furniture would be appropriate to highlight the modern design,” says Rose.

So appropriate that when Erick Hein, who works for the DC Preservation League, and his partner Matt Rogers, a meteorologist, bought the lower unit, they also purchased the kitchen stools and dining chairs from BoConcept. Their duplex differs from the top two-bedroom unit with the addition of a corner den on the lower level. Another distinguishing feature is the retro-style, patterned mural painted on the wall of the staircase connecting the two floors.

This row house renovation marks a change for Rose, who is best known for his restoration of a 1916 mansion in the Kalorama neighborhood of Washington, DC, that was once home to President Warren G. Harding. That project entailed duplicating the historic home’s Neo-Georgian moldings and details, and upgrading the kitchen and bathrooms to respect the original integrity of the architecture.

As for the stripped-down, modern look of the more recently completed row house, Rose says he had never tried it before this project. As Tim Briscoe notes, “It’s really contemporary for him. It marks a new beginning in his work.”

Photographer Lydia Cutter is based in Arlington, Virginia.

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The open living level is staged with a walnut-topped dining table and Mariposa chairs from BoConcept. A leather chaise and lamp, also from the Danish company, create a reading nook in the bay window. The painting is by Sarah Stockstill. A sculpture by Rebecca Kamen hangs over the marble-framed fireplace. Art work through Weber Fine Art.



A contemporary hammock and chairs furnish the upper condo’s deck, which overlooks the brick charter school behind the townhouse.



In the lower unit, Rose painted a geometric mural on the wall of the staircase leading from the kitchen to the basement bedroom level.



Rose added a free standing soaking tub to the top-story master bathroom; a walnut-veneered cabinet from BoConcept was converted into a vanity.