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Designing Their Own Dream

By **Cheryl Kenny**

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When Michael McManus was a boy, he spent hours making floor plans of houses out of modeling clay. Sometimes he'd take his creations a step further, adding miniature clay furniture.

It is not surprising, then, that McManus chose to forgo the services of an architect when renovating his Fairfax County home. Instead, working with a Northern Virginia builder, McManus and his housemate designed a 2,300-square-foot contemporary house that has prompted even strangers to ask for his floor plans. Such an undertaking might leave many overwhelmed, but for them, it was a way to get their dream house, and to have a good time doing it.

McManus, 43, a project manager for Navigant International Inc., began his adventure in design in the spring of 2001, when he and Michael Fischetti, 45, bought a 1,050-square-foot house in Fairfax's Pine Spring neighborhood. The 1950s contemporary needed repairs, including a new roof.

McManus and Fischetti contemplated replacing the roof before they moved in, and sought advice from a friend, Mike Dolgas, owner and managing member of Premier Development LLC, a Fairfax-based construction company. Dolgas suggested that because they were considering a major replacement, they should make a wish list of what else they would like to change.

Making the list proved easy. The house needed a front door -- entry was through a side door under the carport. The carport could be enclosed. The tiny outdated kitchen, which housed a washer and dryer, cried out for remodeling. McManus considered adding a second story.

The project quickly expanded into a nearly \$250,000 renovation that brought the house down to the slab, leaving only an original wall of floor-to-ceiling windows.

Before putting a design on paper, McManus and Fischetti agreed on an overall vision. "It's important to know what you want out of the house, to plan on what you want the house to be for," McManus said.

Fischetti added, "We wanted an open plan . . . to entertain and be part of the festivities even while in the kitchen. We wanted an industrial look, but warm, comfortable."

Dolgas, who works without an architect in about 70 percent of his projects, initiated the design process by creating a computer-generated image of the original house. He then began meeting with McManus and Fischetti to create a virtual vision of their ideal home.

McManus bought two computer programs -- Punch! Professional Home Design, and the more entertaining Original SIMS -- that allowed him to work on designing at home, between sessions with Dolgas.

"I recommend doing that because then you can visualize it," McManus said.

Many meetings later, the basic design took shape -- a one-story, three-bedroom house with cathedral ceilings, an open floor plan and myriad large windows.

One of the biggest decisions came when McManus wanted to squeeze every square foot of building space from the western boundary of his pie-shaped lot. Dolgas warned this would require scrapping the initial plan for a more traditionally square house, to create an unusual roof line and odd angles in the walls of a bedroom and the kitchen. McManus was game. "Taking risks and overextending your bounds" is part of the self-design process, McManus said. "If you're going to do all that work, make it noticeably different."

McManus said Dolgas kept him and Fischetti "directed," forcing them to consider resale value when choosing the design. When McManus suggested having two bedrooms instead of three, so that the master bedroom could be larger, Dolgas advised against it. McManus conceded.

Dolgas also persuaded McManus to include a bathtub in one of the two bathrooms, although neither McManus nor Fischetti wanted one. "He said we needed it for resale, especially for people who might have children," McManus said.

As construction proceeded, changes in the house's design continued. Some were simple. Dolgas planned on crown molding, but Fischetti preferred the cleaner line of no molding. Fischetti also rejected double doors for the two-car garage, choosing the more contemporary look of a single, larger door.

Other changes were less easily accomplished. After an entry closet was framed in, McManus had it torn out, along with part of the house's front wall, to add another window. Dolgas "wanted us to have an entry closet near the front door," McManus explained. "But we really wanted a fountain area there." They got their window and fountain, and Dolgas found another place for the closet.

Similarly, after two windows were framed in atop an 18-foot-high kitchen wall, Fischetti had the framing removed to add a third window.

Such changes are not uncommon, Dolgas said. He urges homeowners who agonize over such details as door placements to put off those decisions until the walls are framed. (Dolgas adds a "slight charge" for changes in nonstructural framing.) "On paper you just can't see what you can in person," he said.

Such was the case when McManus and Fischetti debated the position of their fireplace. The space that encompasses their foyer, living room, dining room and kitchen is open except for the free-standing fireplace, which they wanted to be visible from most of the open areas. They also wanted the fireplace to partially block the view of their living room from the street.

To aid in the decision, Dolgas had an 8-by-8-foot section of the fireplace box framed out but not attached, so that McManus could physically move the box around the room. After McManus found the right spot, he realized that adding another eight feet to the box to attach it to the cathedral ceiling, as was planned, would block the view of the trapezoidal window above the front door. When McManus lamented that loss, Dolgas suggested moving the chimney from the center of the box to the right side of it. This allowed the top eight feet of the left side to remain open to the ceiling, keeping the window visible.

McManus and Fischetti then designed the fireplace face from the same limestone tiles they were using on the kitchen floor. They could not agree on a final pattern until Dolgas gave them an ultimatum that required completing the design by telephone. "I was on a train to New York," said Fischetti, laughing. "I was on the cell phone telling Michael to move a tile six inches up, 12 inches over."

McManus said his biggest challenge was deciding where to spend limited funds, and what projects could be put off to a later date. Dolgas helped in those decisions.

A major cost saver was to use the original window wall, Dolgas said. He also created structural support around that wall, to facilitate future expansion. Other choices that created the look McManus and Fischetti wanted, while also cutting costs, included using the original closet doors for a floor-to-ceiling storage area, and reusing the original house's interior glass-paneled doors. (They did frost the glass for more privacy.)

Dolgas said that while he has no formal design training, his 27 years in construction helps simplify the design process because he can immediately alert a homeowner when design choices will create additional construction costs. In contrast, he said, if an architect creates a design that is far off budget, that may not become apparent until the design has been approved, and construction bids received.

In some situations, however, Dolgas recommends using an architect.

Homeowners should "ask themselves if they have enough trust in any builder. . . . Some people just don't trust one person's decisions." If that is the case, Dolgas said, an architect can act as the middle man, keeping things cordial. "I tell them, 'If you're got that Type A personality, maybe you need a third party just so you can sleep at night.' "

Tricia Chamberlain, a spokeswoman for the American Institute of Architects, said involving an architect early in the building process is "vital."

"When architects are involved at the earliest planning stage," she said, "they gain more opportunities to understand you, your project, develop creative solutions, and propose ways to reduce costs."

Chamberlain added: "Architects are the only professionals who have the education, training, experience and vision to maximize your construction dollar and ease the entire design and construction process. By helping you define the project, architects can provide meaningful guidance for design. They can conduct site studies, help secure planning and zoning approvals, and perform a variety of other pre-design tasks."

Dolgas, McManus and Fischetti agree that in choosing a builder, trust and "chemistry" are essential. "A homeowner should be able to ask a simple question such as whether asphalt shingles are roof coverings" without feeling the builder is annoyed, Dolgas said. Builders also must be willing to explain things repeatedly, especially to inexperienced homeowners.

While inexperienced in whole-house design, McManus and Fischetti felt more confident choosing interior finishes. The two once owned a gift store, and Fischetti is now a buyer for Marriott Corp. "We know how to shop, and that came in handy," Fischetti said.

They bought design magazines and created files with pictures and articles on different rooms. They found ways to cut costs, such as buying remnants of commercial carpeting (Fischetti figured no one else would have the same carpet in their house) and excess parquet flooring from a department store remodeling.

McManus chose most of the bathroom appointments, including a sound system and steam spa in the oversized shower. Fischetti planned much of the kitchen, which has stainless steel appliances, black granite counters and a glass stove hood. Upgraded appliances and other luxury appointments in the kitchen and bath took them about \$14,000 above budget, Fischetti said.

After Fischetti and McManus moved into their renovated house in February 2002, design challenges continued. Fischetti found glass and chrome cylinder table lamps that he thought would look great as hanging lights above the kitchen counter. He contacted the lighting designer, who agreed to create a hanging version of the lamps. The fixtures were installed the day before a party.

"We had big crystal containers full of fruit under one light, and crystal candlesticks under another, so the lights would shine down on the black granite like a spotlight," Fischetti said. "Michael's sister came in and said, 'Oh my God, that is so beautiful,' and just as she said it, the lights went 'pfizzt,' smoke came out, and one of the lights crashed onto the candlesticks." The defective lights were returned and successfully redesigned.

While it might have been easier, McManus and Fischetti think that using an architect would have made the house less personal.

"Your heart is really in it," Fischetti said. "It's not someone else's design, no one else is going to have it."

That is not to say others have not requested it. Several people have asked for a copy of their plans, or the name of their architect.

"People always stop to ask to look inside the house," Fischetti said.

"We had a guy stop just the other night and ask us who the architect was. It was so nice to say it was us."

The window wall, all that remains of the original house, can be seen behind amateur designers Michael McManus, left, and Michael Fischetti in their living room. The front of the quarter-million-dollar renovation. A "before" photo of the back of the house, left, contrasts with a backyard shot of the finished renovation, with builder Mike Dolgas of Premier Development LLC flanked by owners Michael Fischetti, left, and Michael McManus.

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