

Keeping and Building Character

Great Falls family preserves and improves on an old farmhouse.

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Few people would have seen the potential in the small saltbox home that sat quietly decaying on Walker Road. It was in such a state of disrepair that the house stayed on the market for two years before Kelly and Michael Malesardi fell in love with the character of the house. More than a decade later, they made a shocking decision: to keep the house and design improvements that added to its history, rather than building a new house on the lot.

“This house tells a story. There is value in what someone else has built. The greatest part of this house is its story,” says owner Kelly Malesardi.

When the Malesardis’ family grew to include young twins, they knew they needed more room than the 1,600-square-foot, three-bedroom, one-bathroom house had to offer. As their friends began buying much bigger houses, Malesardi made a crucial decision. “This is a happy house, a neat house. I knew we wanted to stay here. I don’t want a center Colonial. I want a farmhouse, but one with contemporary spins,” said Malesardi.

“Our argument is this: You can still build a great house, but keep what’s originally there. There is so much more history here than just us,” said Malesardi.

There is quite a bit of local history associated with the house. Though not old like some of the historic properties in Great Falls, the builder of the house, B.Y. Martin, built the majority of the small brick ramblers that speckled the village in the 1940s.

Finding a builder and architect as passionate about preserving the farmhouse as the Malesardis’ was no easy feat. “We talked to a lot of builders, but no one really understood. We got a lot of tear it down and rebuild that will be cheaper,” recalls Malesardi.

Finally, she stumbled on to a young Virginia Tech graduate named John Heltzel, and a match was made. “He said, ‘I know what you want, a funky farmhouse.’ I said, ‘You’re right, you’re hired,’” recalled Malesardi.

Eleven months later she had a home so special that HGTV has been out on three occasions to film separate television shows. The draw, according to HGTV producer Jean Connolly, isn’t the grand scale of the house, but the livability and comfort of the home. “It’s just a beautiful house. It has a great sense to it, and it’s very warm and inviting. I was looking for a home that speaks to the family of 2005, and this is it,” said Connolly. The show “American Home 2005” will premiere in the first quarter of 2005.

One of the co-hosts of a pilot HGTV show shooting last week at the Malesardis’ said, “This house is incredibly comfortable, but it’s also very polished. We chose this house because it’s a great house. I love the rooms and that they’ve kept the history of the place. I look around [Great Falls], and you see the other houses and they clearly didn’t keep the old houses. That says a lot about Mike and Kelly,” said Amanda Bergen between takes of the back yard.

Kelly Malesardi grew up in Waterford, Va., where old houses are treasured and maintained. Mike Malesardi grew up in Arlington, the child of an architect. Their marriage brought together two values they learned in childhood - preservation and architecture. The remodeled home reflects that symbiotic relationship.

They kept all the hardwood floors and original baseboard heat from the original dwelling. The expansions occurred mainly on exterior portions of the house. Those, too, were preserved by doing small things like retaining the original back windows, which now look down onto the two story living room.

Some things had to change, and change dramatically. The old kitchen is now a nostalgic black-and-white tiled bathroom. The new kitchen is Malesardi’s piece de resistance and has been showcased on another HGTV show.

“Having been to culinary school, I knew exactly what I wanted,” said Malesardi. What she wanted was two of everything, so that she could pull off her dinner parties with grace. “As great as it is, we weren’t over the top,” she says of the kitchen.

Little additives, such as a walk-in pantry that holds a cache of food and is lined with her many cookbooks, make the kitchen both beautiful and functional.

Bergen said she was equally impressed with the refrigerated wine cellar and bar. “It’s pretty unusual. You don’t see that in every house. But it also looks very natural. That’s the thing about this house that makes it what it is,” Bergen said.

Malesardi designed the house to flow with how her family members live their lives. “We’re not going anywhere. We’re staying here, so it’s designed for us,” she said. That included putting her husband’s home office on the second floor next to the master bedroom. “I wanted to be able to talk to him at night. He works late, and I’m lying in bed watching TV. I didn’t want to have to scream down to him,” Malesardi said.

“If it can’t be lived in, it can’t be in my house,” explains Malesardi of her design style. Furnishings are as likely to be grand pieces she has collected at auctions over the years as they are to be inspired by modern artists. A Peter Max painting in the hallway, for example, flows fluidly into her dining room, which is inspired by a hunt scene chandelier.

The end result is something the Malesardis are delighted with. So happy, in fact, they have enrolled other family members into buying the land in front and behind of them. “We’ve got a little compound going,” said Malesardi. Convincing her family to move so close, according to Malesardi, was simple. “This is a great location and a peaceful place. To spend the money somewhere else, well, we could never find what we have here,” said Malesardi.