The Owl's Nest, Reborn

CHRIS AND KAREN DONATELLI BRING HISTORIC DC ESTATE BACK TO SPLENDOR

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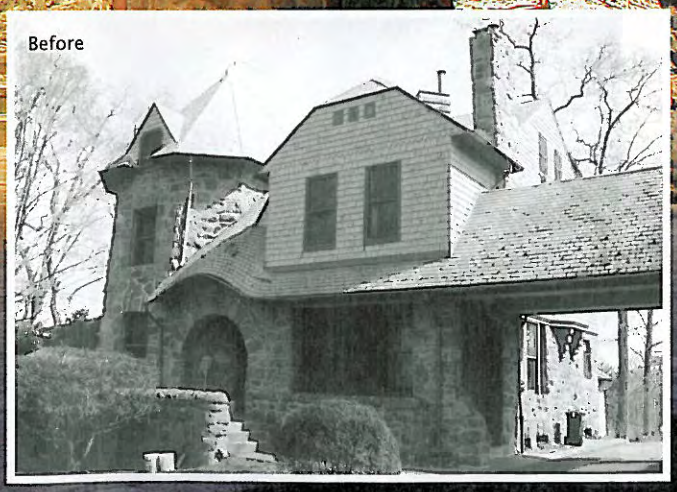
Journalist William Crounse made headlines in 1897 when he hired prominent DC Architect Appleton P. Clark, Jr. to build "a modern country dwelling" called the Owl's Nest on the city's outskirts. The shingle-style home in Forest Hills, with its stone pillars, arches, and distinctive porte-cochère, joined the growing number of estates and summer houses that were coming up as Connecticut Avenue was being extended into Maryland.



The exterior stonework is unusual in that it incorporates smooth, rounded rocks jutting out randomly from the face. A rock border highlights the arch framing the entry. The addition, seen just beyond the turret, incorporates the same shingle-and-stone style to make the look cohesive.

A stained-glass owl, undamaged after more than a century, keeps watch over its nest. The new owners had a light installed outside to make the windows glow at night.

"It's kind of neat that nobody in the 100-plus years ever painted anything or changed anything out." – Chris Donatelli

BEFORE: The living room, pre-renovation. The entry was greatly expanded, and new window treatmeants add character.

AFTER: Justine Sancho sourced period chandeliers to hang in the grand living room. Two love seats and a cocktail table by Minton-Spidell frame the entrance, along with a wool rug by Stark. The monumental fireplace surround is by Stone Yard Inc. in San Diego.

Historic, Yet Orphaned

More than a century after the Owl's Nest was noted in *The Evening Star*'s "Real Estate Gossip" column, developer Chris Donatelli found it in 2006, a shell of its former self. The Jewish Primary Day School had purchased the two-acre property in 2001 with plans to demolish it and build a three-story elementary school. That spurred to action the Forest Hills Neighborhood Alliance, which mobilized its homeowners to successfully secure a DC Historic Landmark designation to prevent the demolition. The school sold the property to a developer, who subdivided half of it for new construction. "Then there was this white elephant, declared historic," Jim Gibson of Gibson Builders says. The original developer had designed an addition, but abandoned the plans and instead asked Donatelli, a building industry acquaintance, to take a look.

"It was in real rough shape," says Donatelli, president of Donatelli Development. The upper floors and basement were open to the elements, but the main level, with its elaborate paneling, floor inlays and ceiling coffers, "was pretty high and dry," he adds. "It's kind of neat that nobody in the 100-plus years [since the house was built] ever painted anything or changed anything out – all the original hardware is still here."

Remodeling Plans

"My original intention was just to renovate it" and sell it, Donatelli says. But then he started learning more about the home's history, and when he brought in Gibson and Architect George Myers of GTM Architects to design and build the remodel, "they said this is a really special property." So even though they were not done decorating their home of two years in Potomac, MD, Donatelli, his wife Karen, and their three children were making plans to move.

Myers was restricted by the landmark designation in how he could add onto the house, which meant he had to leave the front and side elevations intact. That created issues with flow – it's a long walk between the kitchen and dining room, for example – yet the result is an addition that houses the home's casual living areas, while the formal, public spaces occupy the original structure.

The leopard-print chair by Pearson with Cowtan & Tout fabic is one of Karen Donatelli's favorite pieces, Sancho says. Sofa by O. Henry House. Chairs and ottoman by Hickory White.

Sancho had the dining-room walls faux-finished to complement the drapery fabrics. A Niermann Weeks chandelier hangs over the dining table.

Family Room Drapes
Nobilis/Odessa/Red

Family Room Drapery Border
Duralee/Patterson/Solid Taupe

Dining Room Drapes
Arte/Amadeus/Yellow Taupe

Integrating the Decor

Designer Justine Sancho, who had worked with Karen Donatelli's mother since Karen was a child, had also decorated Chris and Karen's previous two homes, so it didn't faze her to hear another one was in the offing.

"This house is much bigger," Sancho says. "This is a growth experience – they're into their next phase of life." Growth indeed, considering Karen was expecting her fourth child at press time.

While Sancho helped Karen choose furnishings and finishes for the new house in a more sophisticated and neutral style than the previous one, she also found a way to incorporate most of what they already owned.

Every piece of furniture in the family room came directly from the previous family room – no new upholstery needed. Sancho was even able to use the same drapes, although she added fabric to the leading edge and created a wide band below to extend their length for the new home's higher ceilings.

Sancho did the same thing to extend the dining room drapes, which came from the previous dining room. She purchased more of the same fabric and created a valance effect with trim on the upper portion. The same dining table, chairs, and carpet also fit into the new space. Two identical chests from the other home's foyer now flank the dining room's front window.

In the grand living room off the entry, Sancho reupholstered two armchairs that were in the living room of the previous house, and in the bedroom of the Donatellis' first house. The other furnishings were mostly new. "Karen wanted a very, very neutral room," Sancho says. She created a central seating area around the renovated fireplace, which originally had a floor-to-ceiling brick surround, and a separate seating area framed by the front windows. A game table and chest are on the other end of the room, so the long space reads as three separate areas instead of one large one.

ABOVE: Karen and Chris Donatelli stand on the steps with their remodeling team, from left to right: Interior Designer Justine Sancho; Construction Project Manager Larry Graham of Gibson Builders; Architect George Myers of GTM Archictects; and Bill Gibson of Gibson Builders.

His and Hers

Two spaces in the home each bear the stamp of husband and wife. The office is Chris Donatelli's domain, in a space the design team originally wanted to tear down, yet was prevented from doing so by the landmark designation. It used to be a servants' wing, separated into three small rooms. Now, it's one long space, with built-in cabinets designed to look like free-standing furniture, and rich wood paneling on the ceiling ("because the room was just a white bowling alley" without it, Sancho says). Brass chandeliers, rustic leather seating, and a wall-mounted flat-screen TV complete the masculine feel. "He wanted an area where he and his friends could just sit and watch a Sunday afternoon football game," Sancho says.

The large entertaining kitchen, on the other hand, was built specifically for Karen. "From Day 1, she wanted the white Carrara marble," Sancho says, referring to the swath that covers the 11-foot island and the surrounding counters and backsplash. "It was always going to be a white kitchen," Sancho adds. "They entertain a lot. She wanted something that's very clean-looking and traditional." Sancho put a finish on the base of the island "to add a little pop to the room."

RIGHT: Heartwood Design fabricated the cabinetry that surrounds Chris Donatelli's office. "Armillary" chandeliers by Visual Comfort. The sofa, armchairs, and ottoman all came from his previous home.

The long island is perfect for a buffet when the Donatellis entertain. Cabinetry by Heartwood Design. "Bell" light fixtures from Michael-Cleary LLC.

Making the Past Perfect

"This was like a dream scenario for us," Jim Gibson says of helping bring the Owl's Nest back to its former glory. But it took the right kind of clients to get it there, Gibson and Architect George Myers agree. "Chris and Karen deserve a lot of credit," Myers says. "They really did a good job to get the proper materials," such as a "Pennsylvania green" slate roof and cedar shingles that perfectly replicate the originals.

Architectural details are not the only way the Owl's Nest has come back. More than 110 years after that first gossip column hit the local papers, the press was buzzing again last December when a thousand people flocked there to attend DC Mayor Adrian Fenty's birthday fundraiser.

Chris Donatelli gives credit to the entire neighborhood for helping the house remain such an important fixture in the community: "The neighbors around here feel a real sense of identity with this house, because they're the ones who helped save it." **ws**

RESOURCES

- **Gibson Builders LLC**
  202.364.1555
  gibsonbuilders.com
- **GTM Architects**
  240.333.2000
  www.gtmarchitects.com
- **Heartwood Design**
  434.361.1262
  heartwoodkitchens.com
- **Justine Sancho Interior Design Ltd.**
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