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PAGE 25

Historic charmer

Two tours showcase the renovation of a Portland Avenue home that was four years in the making

By Dave Page

Brad Belka of David Heide Design Studio is used to whole home renovation projects that stretch on for months and months. “A kitchen by itself can take over a year,” he noted.

Part of the reason can be the time it takes to work around the schedules of designers, contractors and clients. Part of it is the natural give-and-take process of meeting the big dreams of customers while staying within their budgets. And part of it can even be the comfort level that the parties begin to experience as they develop strong relationships.

“It’s almost as if you don’t want it to end,” said one of the owners of the century-old, brick-and-stucco home at 1599 Portland Ave., which has been undergoing interior renovations for the past four years.

The relationship of the owners, designers and contractors who have been working on the Prairie School-style structure, also known as the Albert Wunderlich house, will continue a little longer as the residence is slated to be part of the ninth annual AIA Minnesota’s Homes by Architects Tour on September 17-18 as well as the Fall Parade of Homes Remodelers Showcase on September 30-October 2.

Wunderlich, who was president of the Security Mercantile Agency, built the home in 1915. According to Placeography.org, the house “contains several unmistakable signs” of the first work of St. Paul architects Percy D. Bentley and Charles H. Hausler.

The home’s Prairie School style, which grew out of the Arts and Crafts Movement, drew the most recent own-



The century-old home at 1599 Portland Ave., whose master bath is shown above, is one of 17 residences on the upcoming AIA Minnesota’s Homes by Architects Tour and 57 on the Fall Parade of Homes Remodelers Showcase.

ers (who do not wish their names to be mentioned) to purchase the property four years ago. After finding many of the existing Arts and Crafts homes too large, they thought about new construction. But after seeing 1599 Portland and realizing all the benefits of being able to walk to stores and restaurants, they said they fell in love with it.

The former owners, who had lived in the house for the previous 40 years, had been good stewards. They recently removed all the Prairie-style leaded windows and had them refurbished. They also repaired all the soffits.

“The bones of the house were in great shape,” one of the current owners said. “We didn’t have to do anything with the exterior.”

Even though the house did not have an art studio, an updated kitchen, or a master bedroom suite, which were amenities the new owners desired, they said it felt like home.

Soon after purchasing the property, they brought in David Heide Design Studio. They had seen some of the firm’s remodeling work at other Arts and Crafts houses, including Heide’s own home in Summit Hill. Wanting to have the upgrades before they moved in, they started to review ideas with Belka. The owners were also familiar with Tim Lemke Construction, so that Mendota Heights firm was also included in the discussions.

“The time didn’t bother us,” one of the owners said. “In the back of our minds,

we knew that if we couldn’t end up with our dream house, we would sell it and move on to another property.”

After three years of planning, work began last July and finished up in February. Not having to work around any occupants made the going a little easier.

For their part, the owners said they actually miss having all the people around, “seeing them all working together to figure out a challenge.”

According to Belka, there were several. Three of the five second-floor bedrooms were joined into a master suite. Access to the tub in the master bath proved to be a problem, but it was solved by putting an almost invisible panel in the kitchen ceiling.

Another tricky goal was to bring more natural light into the main stairwell. Installing pocket doors with glass panels leading into a former bedroom now being used as office space helped. However, the most ingenious solution involved channeling light from solar tubes through the attic into a large, rectangular custom-made fixture directly over the stairs. LED lighting in the fixture can be turned on at night.

Lemke suggested putting drain tile in the basement because there was some evidence of past moisture problems. Since the basement will be used for casual living space, it was important that it stay dry.

Most of the new in-floor heat in the

1599 PORTLAND ► 26

25◀ 1599 PORTLAND

kitchen and bathrooms, plumbing, electrical and high velocity air conditioning are hidden in the walls. However, custom-made grills that match the Prairie-style accents in the house cover the air-conditioning vents on the first floor.

Besides refinishing floors, painting walls, re-varnishing woodwork and hiding accent lighting in the formal living room’s plate rail, little was done on the first floor except for the kitchen.

One of the many remodeling plans over the three years included bumping out a back wall for an updated kitchen and mudroom, but the new kitchen ended up on almost the exact same footprint as the original. A back stair was removed to provide a bit more space for a new refrigerator. In addition, the look of the plate rail in the living room was continued through the kitchen. Custom-made lighting fixtures round out the upgrades.

“Surprisingly, they’re about the same cost as lights you might get at a high end store,” Belka said.

About the only thing the owners are still lacking is art studio space. Plans and permissions for a replacement of the current one-stall garage are almost complete. There are still some kinks to work out, but the owners are confident they can be resolved.



The renovated kitchen at 1599 Portland Ave. features custom cabinets, white granite counters, bold slate flooring and a brick tile backsplash.

The self-guided AIA Minnesota’s Homes by Architects Tour will run from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, September 17-18. The tour will showcase 17 new and remodeled residences all designed by registered members of the American Institute of Architects Minnesota. Tickets are \$15 in advance at Homes-ByArchitects.org or \$20 at each home during the weekend. Visitors also can purchase a \$10 ticket to see a single home.

The Fall Parade of Homes Remodelers Showcase also is a self-guided tour that will run from 1-7 p.m. Friday, September 30, and noon-6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, October 1-2. Guides for the 57 homes on the tour are available at Holiday Stations. The tour is free except for two Dream Homes where a \$5 donation is requested to support the Builders Association of the Twin Cities Foundation. For information, visit ParadeofHomes.org.