

Rebuilding a Dewey Beach home destroyed by fire gives homeowners an opportunity to blend new features with old character

BY LYNN R. PARKS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLYN WATSON

On Jan. 4, 2007, a blaze that fire marshals determined was set by an as yet unknown arsonist destroyed the Dewey Beach vacation home of Stuart Ortel and Scott Marker. The couple, who live in Pasadena, Md., had just returned home from a long New Year's weekend when they were summoned back to Dewey Beach.

"We drove up and the front didn't look too bad," says Marker, who manages an insurance agency. "All the front windows were blown out, but other than that, I thought, 'This is going to be OK.' But as soon as we walked through the front door, we saw that there was nothing left."

The 1950s house, which Ortel, a landscape architect, and Marker had bought in 2000 and renovated in 2003 and 2004, was gutted. The furniture was burned, the appliances ruined, even the bathroom fixtures destroyed.

All was devastation, say Ortel and Marker.

All, that is, except for one thing.

Tucked far in the back of a corner bedroom closet, where Ortel and Marker had stashed it so that it wouldn't get stained during a New Year's Eve party, was a cotton area rug, a needlepoint tapestry featuring hens and eggs, untouched by the flames.

"It was smoky and it had water damage, but it was salvageable," Marker says.

"It was just one thing of all the things that we had," adds Ortel. "But we were glad to have it."

Today, in the house that grew up from the ashes, that cotton rug, cleaned and deodorized, lies on the kitchen floor. Its colors, dusty golds, greens and reds, are the colors on which the decor through the rest of the house is based.

"Our color scheme starts right there," says Ortel, pointing to the rug. ➤

RIGHT: Stuart Ortel, left, and Scott Marker stand in the kitchen in their Dewey Beach home, with their dog, Carley, an Australian sheepad. The rug at the center of the room is all that was left after a fire destroyed the couple's first Dewey Beach home. The rug's color scheme is carried throughout their new house, which was built on the same lot.

Home again





The downstairs and stairwell of the new 2,300-square foot house are painted the dusty gold, almost corn yellow, of the rug. The granite countertop in the kitchen is shades of brown, the two armless leather side chairs in the living area are olive and an upholstered chair, also in the living area, has a floral pattern in blue, olive, red and gold.

Breaking the theme, the living area couch is gray-tinged blue, as is the interior of a Mennonite dry sink and glass-front cabinet combination that sits between the living area and the kitchen.

“I wasn’t sure about the green and blue together,” says Marker. But then Ortel remembered paintings of sunflowers created by their friend, Washington, D.C., artist Gary Fisher. One of Fisher’s works, in sunflower yellows and oranges as well as blues and greens, hangs over the mantel “and helps make the green and blue go together,” Marker says.

Marker and Ortel, with the occasional help of Baltimore architect Joel Pearson, designed their new vacation home themselves. “We did a lot of driving around, looking at old houses in Rehoboth Beach and Dewey Beach,”



ABOVE: *The painting of sunflowers that hangs over the living room mantel is a combination of gold, blue and olive, colors that are found elsewhere in the room.*

LEFT: *Ortel and Marker wanted the exterior of the house to look as though the building had been there as long as other homes in the neighborhood.*

RIGHT: *Contractor Randy Burton built the dining room bench, or ‘banquette.’ Burton also camouflaged an opening to a closet that is tucked underneath the steps. The battens on the wall hide the closet door hinges and the door handle.*



says Ortel. “We came up with concepts and ideas that we liked, and just kept refining them.”

Their contractor was Randy Burton of Burton Builders in Lewes.

“Randy understood what we were trying to achieve with the look of the house,” Ortel says. In addition, “he has great carpenters who are able to make things the way we wanted them to look. They are real craftsmen.”

Ortel says that he and Marker wanted a cottage look, something that would blend into its neighborhood, just a couple blocks from the beach, and would look like it has been there for years. “We didn’t want it to look like a new building,” he says. “We wanted it to look like other homes here, with all their charm and character.”

The old look of the house starts on the outside, with large brackets under the eaves and gray cedar-like shingles. A back section, which includes a guest bedroom, is covered with white board-and-batten siding. “We tried to make it look like there was an original house here with an addition added later,” Ortel says.

Inside, the dining area, living area and kitchen make up one space in the downstairs. “The other house had segregated rooms, a separate kitchen, dining room and

living room,” Marker says. “We wanted to have them open to each other.”

Floors throughout the downstairs are reclaimed knotty pine, rough hewn to look even more stressed. All of the woodwork, including the stairway banister and newel posts, was done by Burton’s carpenters. Wooden corbels underneath the mantel and decorative arm rests, which look like reverse brackets, on the ends of a built-in bench in the dining area imitate the shape of thick wooden brackets that hold up the granite countertop.

It was that built-in bench, or banquette, that pushed Marker and Ortel to select Burton as their contractor. They wanted it to be just right, with the back and seat at correct angles for comfortable dining, and when they told Burton that they had stumbled across an article about the perfect way to build a banquette, he told them that he had that same article.

“We told him right away that he was hired,” Ortel says with a laugh. “He won.”

Burton also solved the problem of how to use all the space underneath the stairway for storage. Marker and Ortel did not want to lose wall space to a traditional door; Burton suggested putting battens on one section



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of the wall to disguise the closet opening. One of several battens on the wall acts as the door handle, while another hides the hinges.

To enhance the camouflage, there are battens underneath a chair rail on the dining area wall opposite the stairway closet.

Tucked in behind the stairway, in the section of the house that from the outside looks like a later addition, are a guest bedroom and bathroom. The bathroom features a walk-in shower with a pebble floor and clear glass door. One of a pair of French doors salvaged from the original house acts as the bathroom closet door.

Another set of salvaged French doors, their glass removed and replaced with knotty pine paneling, pickled to give it a whitewashed look, act as closet doors in the downstairs guest bedroom.

Treads on the stairs that head to the second story are made of the same reclaimed knotty pine as are the downstairs floors. Upstairs, there is a small sitting area and two guest bedrooms, one painted pale blue, the other with twin beds and a red antique wardrobe. The master bedroom, also

upstairs, is light tan, the same color as the upstairs sitting area and hallway.

Ortel and Marker say that their Dewey Beach home, where the windows are usually open to catch the sea breeze, is always a pleasure to enter. “That’s why we are here nearly every week-end,” Marker says.

He adds that he is happy to have had the chance to build a house from scratch: to design it and to buy every fitting, appliance and piece of furniture new. “Not too many people get that opportunity,” he says.

Ortel adds that he is grateful that despite the fire that destroyed their home, circumstances worked out so that he and Marker were able to rebuild. He is also pleased with the design process they went through, and the house that resulted.

“We designed it, we imagined what we wanted, and it came out that way,” Ortel says. “Not once have we said, about any part of the house, ‘I wish we had done that differently.’” ■

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ABOVE: Paneling in the home’s downstairs guest bedroom has been pickled to give it a whitewashed look.

LEFT: The steps, whose treads are made of reclaimed knotty pine, descend in two sections.

RIGHT: Ortel, left, and Marker relax on their backyard deck.

FAR RIGHT: A small corner in the downstairs guest bathroom features the shower floor made of smooth pebbles set in concrete.

