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Out of Darkness, Into Light

Steve and Andrea Strawn furnished their turn-of-the-century urban villa, rumored to have once been a U.S. government spy house, with contemporary furniture and antique art.

BY VIRGINIA COYNE

PORTRAIT BY TONY POWELL | INTERIOR PHOTOS BY MORGAN HOWARTH AND TONY POWELL



When builder John Cecchi of IDI Residential purchased and renovated the turn-of-the-century Kalorama house that Steve and Andrea Strawn would buy from him upon completion two years later, the building was dark and the grounds were overgrown. No one had lived there in years and yet, rather oddly, there was furniture inside: the entire first floor was lined with work desks and the small second floor bedrooms were filled with single beds or cots. A makeshift kitchen, pushed against the back wall, contained only cupboards and a refrigerator.

Even the seller was mysterious. Cecchi tracked him down to a holding company in Lorton, Va. that he believes was affiliated with the F.B.I. or CIA. His conclusions were on par with what nearby residents had long been whispering — that U.S. spies were based in the house during the Cold War and beyond to perform surveillance over the Russian Cultural Center across the street.

There are, of course, no public records to substantiate the rumors, but for the Strawns the story proved to be the perfect excuse for breaking the ice with their new neighbors. They invited them to a spy-themed Halloween party giving them a look inside the formerly untended corner house they'd wondered about for years. What they saw was a far cry from the essentially abandoned structure Cecchi had acquired and totally renovated.

The Queen Anne-style house, which was designed in 1895 by the former Supervising Architect of the Treasury James G. Hill (who is also credited with the Government Printing Office and the former Riggs National Bank building at the corner of 9th and F streets NW) had been completely transformed, with walls and floors taken down and light flooding through. "Light comes in from all sides," Andrea says. The builder and his team discovered a skylight in the third floor attic, refurbished it and partially removed two floors below it to provide a clear view from the bottom





OPENING PAGE:
Andrea and Steve Strawn stand at the foot of their three-story staircase. A 1911 copy of a 1755 painting of Mrs. John Erving Jr. by Joseph B. Blackburn is on the wall behind them.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
(clockwise from top left) The Queen Anne-style "urban villa" was designed in 1895 and built in 1905 for the president of Lincoln National Bank; window treatments by Soulie's Interiors in the parlor pay homage to the city's cherry blossoms. A copy of Blackburn's "Mr. John Erving" graces the wall above the sofa by Dessin Fournir; Builder John Cecchi removed sections of two floors to create a clear view to an uncovered attic skylight; Holland & Sherry in London embroidered the dining room curtains to match the existing molding. The chandelier is by Dennis & Leen, dining table by Dessin Fournir and chairs by Caperton Collection; the vestibule is lined in weather-proofed Pintura wallpaper.

THIS PAGE:
(clockwise from top left) A painting by Seattle-based artist Deborah Bell provides a pop of color in Andrea Strawn's office; the bedroom is appointed in soothing gray; Andrea's closet is her favorite room in the house; Steve Strawn houses his collection of rare maps in a "map room" on the third floor; A massive bookcase with nickel inlay was brought up to the third floor by a crane; An antique bust of George Washington in the living room contrasts the new marble fireplace.



of the first floor stairwell to the top of the house. "It's one of my favorite features," says Steve, the founder of healthcare technology company Imagenet.

Cecchi painted the interior and exterior in light colors, put in an airy white kitchen and bathrooms with expanses of marble, knocked down a wall in the back of the house, installed French doors and created a patio space. He also refurbished the original moldings, the first floor railing and floor-to-ceiling pocket doors, reaching over 12 feet high, restoring them to their original grandeur.

"It has a really clean, modern feel yet still traditional," Andrea says, adding that their "goal with the house was to try to create a space where it was honoring that."

The Strawns relocated to Washington from Miami, where they'd lived in a "super modern" structure appointed with modern furniture and art. They brought nothing from their old residence here, choosing to start from scratch and hiring designer Jennifer Sullivan of Enchanted Interiors Inc. to help fulfill their vision of creating a contemporary, custom space to suit their every need while still acknowledging the history of the house.

"[We brought in] modern bespoke furnishings with an infusion of fine antiques and art, to compliment the scale and grandeur of the architectural elements," Sullivan says.

In the living room, for example, the Strawns took out an old fireplace enclosure and replaced it with a dramatic floor-to-ceiling marble slab. Contemporary furniture by Holly Hunt completed the fresh, modern look but they chose to juxtapose the pieces next to a tall walnut John Fessler case clock from circa 1800 (which still works) and a plaster 19th century copy of Jean Antoine Houdon's famous sculpture of George Washington, both acquired from Christopher Jones Antiques in Old Town Alexandria.

The contrast in style continues throughout the house, reflecting the personalities of its inhabitants. Steve's favorite space is on the third floor where he's built an office and a room to house his collection of antique maps. Andrea's go-to spots are her office, featuring a contemporary painting by Deborah Bell, and her vast closet with floor-to-ceiling shelves for her collection of designer shoes. "I almost hate saying this, but it's like Barbie's Dream House," she says with a smile. "Everything is perfect." 

