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GOOD CALL

Life coach's vision, determination turn Lawrenceville shell into a showplace

By Gretchen McKay
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As a personal life coach, psychologist Rosemarie Perla has helped many professionals articulate what they want out of life and form strategies to achieve those goals. But she didn't really walk the walk herself until she purchased a century-old twin row house in Lawrenceville in May 2005 and embarked on a yearlong renovation.

Lots of houses in this up-and-coming and affordable city neighborhood could benefit from a renovator's skilled hand. But this particular three-story brick house had been gutted by a previous owner and, with no water, gas or electric, was uninhabitable. So like the people she counsels, Ms. Perla had to: 1) develop a clear vision of what she wanted, and 2) decide how to get it done.

"Thinking back, it really took so much courage to do it," Ms. Perla admits.

At the time, she was downsizing from an old house in the Schenley Farms section of Oakland.

"I knew I wanted to stay in the city and really loved what was happening in Lawrenceville."

The results of Ms. Perla's 13-month renovation project proved so dramatic that she won first place in the Post-Gazette's Renovation Inspiration home renovation contest, large category. (The runners-up will be featured over the next two Saturdays.)

In its first year, the contest is co-sponsored by the Community Design Center of Pittsburgh and aims to honor and encourage sensitive renovation. The six winning projects were selected by a panel of local architects, design professionals and PG staffers based on appropriateness of construction and materials, functionality and imagination.

Ms. Perla's restoration is strongest on imagination. Looking at the row house's light-filled spaces, it's hard to imagine the decrepit, broken-down mess Ms. Perla encountered when her cousin Leonard Gonnella, a contractor, called and suggested she take a look. The



Andy Starnes/Post-Gazette

The kitchen in Rosemarie Perla's home was enlarged by enclosing what had been a side porch. A transom window and glass doors bring in natural light.

house, priced at \$30,000, was so bad that he was sure she would quickly move on. Instead, Ms. Perla seized on its potential.

"All I saw was space," she recalls. "I just decided to go for it."

Turning that enormous blank slate into an inviting and functional home, however, would take professional help. Ms. Perla turned to Squirrel Hill architect Batia Rascoe and Ms. Perla's contractor cousin, whose business partner Al DePasquale just happened to own the other twin.

In designing an interior space that is just one room wide and three rooms deep, Ms. Perla had one main goal: to foster a feeling of openness but also create intimate spots where people could sit and talk. She also wanted a home that reflected her interest in the arts, had room for her two children to visit and had a terrific kitchen.

"Because of my Italian heritage, cooking is a huge part of my life," says Ms. Perla, who teaches cooking at Whole Foods and incorporates it into her coaching. "We had to design it so a lot of people could come over."

The row house, which dates from 1860, is thought to have been a tavern and Conestoga wagon stop on the Pittsburgh-Greensburg turnpike. How appropriate then, that the kitchen today is the heart and soul of the house.



Andy Starnes/Post-Gazette

Rosemarie Perla has a porch that's as welcoming as the rest of her restored Lawrenceville home.

A large center island has granite counter tops and vanilla-glazed cabinets from Oread Kitchen Design in Leechburg. And the old pumpkin brick chimney holds a professional-grade stove and stainless-steel Broan range hood.

Ms. Rascoe also turned a side porch into a sunny atrium for the breakfast table and added a tiered deck that looks out on a row of Edward Hopperesque houses across the alley.

A large transom over the glass doors frames the houses' backdrop: the spires of St. Augustine Catholic Church's on 37th Street.

"Who woulda thought?" Ms. Perla asks with a grin, motioning toward the landmark's Italian Romanesque lines. "And in the middle of Lawrenceville!"

Her formal dining room is just as welcoming. Purists might have saved the original dark wood floors and drab pumpkin brick walls.



Andy Starnes/Post-Gazette

The living room of Rosemarie Perla's renovated house in Lawrenceville has one of three gas fireplaces. The door leads to the basement and to a new powder room carved out of a corner of the adjacent dining room



Andy Starnes/Post-Gazette

The front porch, above, offers a clue to how the rest of the house looked before its transformation.

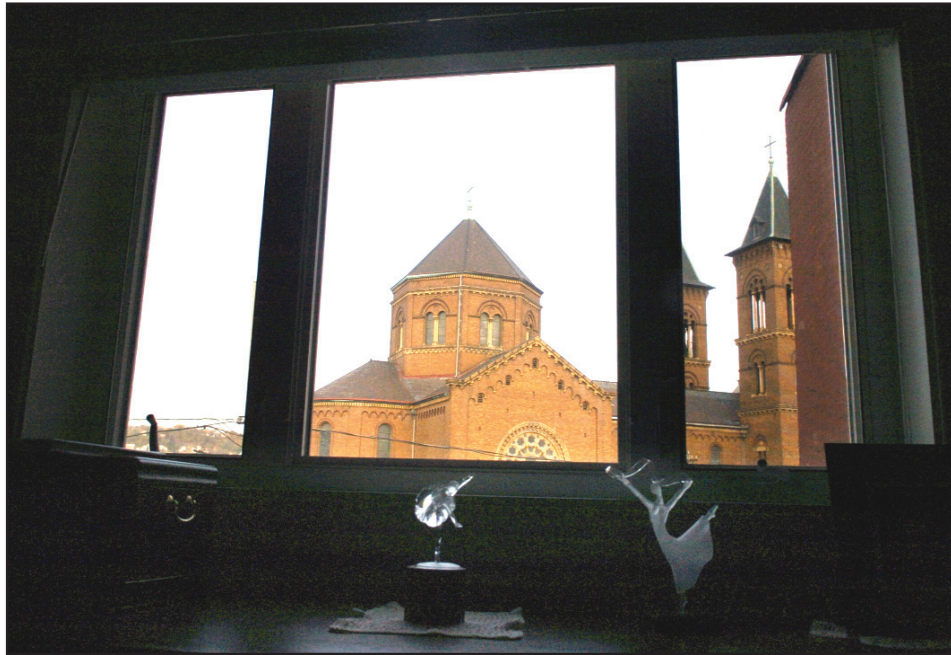


Rosemarie Perla

Before image of the kitchen in Rosemarie Perla's Lawrenceville home. This shows the side porch that was eventually enclosed to enlarge the room.

Instead, Ms. Perla jazzed up the space with light-colored walls and bright woodwork. The amber tones of the carbonized bamboo floors perfectly complement the cream-colored walls, further warmed by a gas fireplace whose simple wooden mantel was gleaned from the third floor. The 1940s light fixture over the table once hung in a friend's garage.

The living room has another gas fireplace and is linked, through a pair of sliding doors, to a small powder room that was cleverly carved out of a corner of the dining room. A



Andy Starnes/Post-Gazette

In the master bedroom, Ms. Perla had contractors close up a corner window and install three new ones that frame a view of St. Augustine Catholic Church on 37th Street.

picture window overlooks the front porch, which features new pediments crafted by Mr. DePasquale. Next to it is a wood privacy partition that incorporates a leaded-glass window. A treasured piece of family history, it came from the Cape Cod-style house in Penn Hills that Ms. Perla grew up in.

"I had it in my cellar for years," she says.

When Ms. Perla bought the house, the second floor was one vast space, open from front to back. No longer. On the Penn Avenue side, there's a comfortable office and on the back end is a spacious master bedroom suite. A self-declared "comfort girl," Ms. Perla insisted on a "fun" bathroom. So in addition to a walk-in shower with glass walls, there's a huge soaking tub and a marble vanity with a frosted-glass vessel sink. The installers also raised the Listello tile accents on the backsplash the tiniest bit to showcase the texture of the stone.

To capture the best view possible of the church in the bedroom, Ms. Perla had three new windows installed. Other touches include a loft area that Ms. Perla plans on turning into a meditation space and a new gas fireplace that incorporates the original bright aqua-colored tile hearth.

An extra-wide, open staircase in the front office leads to the third-floor "tree house." Painted the palest of pale green, this airy guest room offers a splendid view through giant oak trees of the Stephen Foster house across the street. A guest bath around the corner has tile walls and beadboard cabinets from Houston-Starr in Homewood, and there's also a large walk-in closet that doubles as a workout room.

A cheerleader for the neighborhood, Ms. Perla used local merchants and craftsmen wherever possible. For example, Gerald's Forge on Butler Street handcrafted all of the artistic ironwork while Billy Noble, a local carpenter, fashioned the handrail on the staircase and did the tile work in the master bath. Artemis, a "green" building supplies store on Butler Street, provided the bamboo butcher block around the cooktop, the recycled glass tile in the master bath and the bamboo floors throughout the first and second floors.

As expected, the project wasn't without its challenges. There were plenty of times when jobs got postponed, and other instances when Ms. Perla had to make quick decisions.

"I really had to dig deep, and really believe in my own practices of patience and kindness," she says. "My architect kept telling me, 'Just like you tell your clients, you have to remember the end.'"

On the plus side, all those decisions and frustrations allowed her to get in touch with her "inner designer."

As for the end result? Seeing that she started with a 140-year-old shell, it's not quite perfect. The house as a whole is so crooked, she notes with a laugh, that every piece of furniture is shimmed up somehow. The transom above the front door is also somewhat slanted (or is it the walls?) and the paint on the exterior wall facing the deck isn't an exact match. But really, those are piddling details.

"I have a house that reflects who I am, and I'm very proud of what I've done," she says.