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Take a tour of remodeled homes

Quiet retreat was carved from two-room apartment in Old Louisville home

By Susan Hall
Special to The Courier-Journal

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For Karen Keller, the Tour of Remodeled Homes will be the perfect conclusion to the summer.

After living amid workers for nine months, the kindergarten teacher at Byck Elementary said, "The work will be finished, school will start again and all these people will go away."

Since December, Todd Stengel Construction has been creating a soothing master suite from a third-floor, two-bedroom apartment in her historic St. James Court home.

It will be one of 14 remodeled homes open to the public during the tour next Saturday and Sunday.

Karen and her husband, Doug, wanted to maintain the historic integrity of the house -- the first two floors are in keeping with the Victorian era in which the house was built -- but to create a private retreat for themselves. Doug, a CPA, found climbing three floors at the end of a hard day tiresome and insisted on an elevator.

Karen wanted to incorporate the principles of Zen, including the five elements of water, wood, glass, metal and earth and clean, simple lines.

"This is basically stuff I already knew," she said of her research on Zen and her work with Stengel to bring it to life. "It's all about how to make it feel right."

The old apartment area was gutted.

The new master suite includes a 238-square-foot bedroom, an 11-foot-diameter sitting room in the turret, and a modern bath with doorless shower and tub room. An exterior stairway was incorporated into the elevator shaft so that the lift added only 6¾ inches to the width of the house.

Built-ins will disguise the fact that those exiting the elevator will walk out through the long closet. The area also will include a stacked washer/dryer combo and mini-kitchen.

"I've always lived in old houses," Karen said. "This is the most modern thing I've ever done to a house."

She said she just needed three things: good lighting, a modern bathroom and a big closet.

"I swear, without good lighting, I'm in the floor of the closet with a flashlight saying, 'Just give me two shoes that match -- any two.' "

Inside the new space, corners are rounded and the hardwoods, which match the rest of the house, are set on an angle. The original mahogany window casings were sent off to be rebuilt as thermal-pane windows. Original baseboards were copied to be consistent with that on other floors.

The bath features honed marble tile, which represents earth; one wall of iridescent tile, mirror and windows represent glass; a metal vase and sun wall art piece are metal; and Stengel designed a vanity for Karen crafted from 110-year-old poplar salvaged from the demolition. Original nails have been reused as door pulls. Doug's vanity is of backlit onyx.

Because the windows look out on other rooflines, the glass was tinted to resemble rice paper. That look is repeated in vanity doors and elsewhere. Three squares are another repeated motif.

"One of the things about Zen is continuity," Karen said. "It can be continuity of color, but also of texture. So we tried to repeat textures too."

Karen's childhood friend, Brook White, owner of the glass gallery Flame Run, is custom-making the sitting room light fixture, a kind of mobile, as well as a 3-D piece for the tall, raised stairwell wall.

Before, the low stairwell ceiling made entering the space "creepy," Karen said. Stengel raised and squared off that space.

The artwork idea, which Keller said she'd only recently sprung on Stengel, will consist of curvy vessels -- one yellow, one red and one purple -- protruding outward from the three frames.

"It's like this art cannot be contained [by the frames] -- kind of like me!" Karen said.

Stengel said the Kellers have been totally involved in the project and that some of the coolest aspects of it, such as where to put the ductwork for heating and air conditioning, started as a problem, then turned into an opportunity to do something really neat.

Meanwhile, the work has been seeping into the downstairs too.

"For months, the only way I knew they were here was that they put paper down leading to the door where they came in," Karen said.

But then she started using the phrase, "Well, while you're here ..."

She wanted the carpet on the stairs to go away, as well as some "historically accurate, but awful" wallpaper. The work just snowballed from there.

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