

(habitat)



Artsy Elegance

A pair of (almost) empty nesters upgrade to a revamped gatekeeper's house in Villanova. *By Tara Behan*

There aren't many Main Line homes that could pull off a kitchen accented with artificial black crows perched on exposed beams. A distinctive touch like this calls for the perfect combination of a one-of-a-kind house, an interior designer whose artistic sensibilities veer toward the unexpected, and homeowners courageous enough to go along for the ride.

All these components came together at Villanova's historic Harriton Farm. The result was a stunning restoration

and renovation of the property's original gatekeeper's house into a spacious four-bedroom home.

On her initial walk-through, West Chester-based interior designer Miho Kahn envisioned how the kitchen would look, right down to the last detail—including the birds. "It was just a shell of the original building," she says. "This was never a fine, nice home; no one had ever done anything to it to make it nice. It was in very bad shape." *continued on page 65*

(resources)

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SIGNATURE STYLE: (Clockwise from far left) a 200-year-old sugar maple tree is the focal point of the dining room; the staircase's vine-and-leaf railing was the creation of interior designer Miho Kahn and artist/blacksmith Ricardo Cabrera; the master bedroom has a variety of custom-made Kahn touches, including the fireplace and a comforter with tutu skirt; four ornate lanterns accent the living room.







The decades of obvious neglect never intimidated Kahn, who has transformed a number of aged, shabby barns and stables into chic homes. "The worse the condition of the space, the better for me," she says.

The kitchen was the sole room on the first floor of the original structure. Above it was a bedroom, and on the third level, a small attic. The owners wanted to transform the kitchen into a soaring three-story space. The windows from the other floors remained intact, allowing for

plenty of natural light.

For her part, Kahn imagined a three-tiered, floor-to-ceiling beadboard fireplace. Tom Transue, a master woodworker who collaborates with Kahn on all of her projects, turned that vision into reality with a cream version made of historically accurate material reproduced to mimic what was used in the 1860s, when the gatehouse was built. The beadboard was repeated on the pitched ceiling.

Initially, the

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CUSTOM CREATIONS: (Opposite page) the original gatekeeper's house was opened up to allow for a soaring, three-story breakfast room off the kitchen. The black crows perched on the exposed beams were interior designer Milo Kahn's idea, and the beadboard fireplace was a collaboration between Kahn and master woodworker Tom Transue. (Above) gorgeous hand-clipped Giallo tile surrounds the wall around the bathtub as well as the sink's back-splash. Sculptures by the owner's mother adorn the tub's surround, while the vanity was designed and built by Transue.

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homeowners were looking for a stone fireplace, but Kahn convinced them otherwise. "Stone would've been too heavy for the massive size of the fireplace," she says. "I didn't want it to look like a log cabin."

And stone was too common for a space Kahn knew had to be unique. "I saw the fireplace immediately in my mind that first day, and that's exactly what's there now," she says. "I saw the birds, and I just thought that would be so crazy cool. I knew it would look amazing."

Great care was taken to protect the 200-year-old sugar maple tree during construction. The size of the patio was reduced to minimize any impact on the exposed roots.

The owners weren't looking for a major renovation project when they found the gatekeeper's house. At the time, the couple was living in a traditional French Colonial home in Bryn Mawr. As future empty nesters (they have one of five daughters still at home), they wanted their next place to be architecturally interesting, with some history behind it. Still, they were concerned that they wouldn't find a property on the Main Line and would have to move further west.

A brief Internet search led the couple to Harriton Farm. In the mid-1800s, it covered more than 800 acres, and various structures and homes from that period are preserved among the new construction. The gatekeeper's house, along with the stables and main farmhouse further up the hill, was named to the National Register for Historic Places.

While the farmhouse and stables were recently renovated, the rundown gatekeeper's house had been ignored. The structure was modeled after an Andrew Jackson Downing Victorian cottage, with Gothic influences. Known for his landscape design, Downing introduced the country to the style. Interestingly, having

a small, detached house apart from the property's main home was a novel concept back then.

While the house had no plumbing or electricity, and weeds were growing through the floorboards, the new owners saw the property's potential. "The previous owners had planned to renovate the house, but then decided it wasn't the right project for them," says the homeowner. "The architectural plans (pre-approved by the township) were included in the sale of the house. All the foreseeable problems had been worked out. It was a huge bonus."

Chester County architects Archer & Buchanan were behind the plans, which addressed all the new owners' needs. The next step was to find an interior designer to guide them through a potentially overwhelming experience. The couple was especially impressed by a barn renovation done by Kahn and featured in the June 2006 issue of *Main Line Today*. "I loved the warm colors she used," says the home's owner. "And I couldn't stop thinking about these gorgeous lanterns she had in the living room."

The fact that Kahn doesn't like to be micromanaged (a fact revealed in the article) was another plus for the clients, who preferred to set the designer loose on the project. "Our personalities clicked right away," says the owner. "We knew she understood what we were trying to accomplish with the design."

In every space she designs, Miho Kahn ensures that at least one element leaves an impression. In the dining room of the gatekeeper's house, that element happens to be the work of Mother Nature—a 200-year-old sugar maple tree (called the Harry Potter tree by young visitors) framed like a photograph by the doorway. Great care was taken to protect the tree during construction. The size of the patio was reduced to minimize any impact on the exposed roots.

Massive accordion-style doors can be folded back to allow the dining room table to extend onto the patio when needed. Surrounding the table are eight Gothic-inspired chairs with hand-tooled leather backs and nail-head trimming. As is the case throughout the house, many of the room's pieces are custom "re-made" by Kahn's master woodworking partner, Transue. "There are so many gorgeous

pieces out there that just need to be reconfigured for a new use," says Kahn. "The idea of something being thrown away and a person coming along and redeeming it is a theme in my life. I've been green my entire career. It's a huge philosophy for me."

The side tables and buffets in the room are salvaged pieces refreshed with granite tops. And the two acrylic paintings are the work of Kahn's mother, artist Eiko Kahn. "They work perfectly in the room," she says.

First impressions are lasting, so Kahn

knew she had to set the tone for the home in the two-story foyer. "In the beginning, there was discussion among the owners to have a curved grand staircase and a large crystal chandelier in this space," she says. "I knew that wasn't the look we should be going for."

Kahn went with a straight set of stairs and a three-step landing. "Everything in this house is so unique, and that's what this space deserved," she says.

Kahn's artistic instincts kicked into full-gear with her conception of the vine-and-leaf stair railing she drew to scale

and commissioned artist/blacksmith Ricardo Cabrera to create. Cabrera's work is featured in Manayunk's Artesano Iron Works Gallery. A newel post made by Transue from the ends of salvaged chair legs and other reclaimed pieces (including a bocce ball) completes the custom look.

As wine connoisseurs, the owners appreciated the compromise Kahn made for the proposed crystal chandelier: a metal, eight-candle version made in France from reclaimed wine barrel staves and hoops. "The rustic nature of the piece was perfect for the space," she says.

The sunken living room off the kitchen was the perfect spot for lanterns similar to the ones the owners had admired in the previous project. "I tried to find the same lanterns I used, but they were discontinued," says Kahn.

Four reverse-painted lanterns were a more-than-suitable substitute. "Since it is such a big room, I knew the ceiling had to come down or it would feel too high," she says. "These lanterns were a perfect way to bring it down."

The living room's ornate fireplace mantel is another Miho-Transue collaboration. "I had this little slate Victorian parlor surround that I'd bought and kept in storage, waiting for the perfect project," she says.

Transue created a beautiful piece from the surround and old church pew parts. An elegant screen in front of the fireplace is made of twisted wire from a confessional Kahn had salvaged.

Elsewhere, twin plush sofas in a subtle gray and antique side chairs with striped upholstery comprise the seating areas. Gleaming chestnut floors remain uncovered except for an Oriental rug beneath the coffee table. French doors open to an intimate patio area featuring an impressive vanishing-edge pool.

In Kahn's opinion, a great piece of art can make a room stand apart. Her and the owners share an appreciation for Russian painter Serge Hollerbach, whose early watercolor, "Beach Scene: Red Towel," now hangs above the mantel.

During renovations, the owners lovingly referred to their new home as "the shack." No more. This November marks the first anniversary of the gatehouse's remarkable transformation.

"People say, 'It looks like you've lived here a long time,'" says the owner. **MLT**

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