Mr. Bilhuber Gets His Dream House

By Bill Slocum

When Eric Bilhuber first saw the cramped three-bedroom house on Riverside Lane while house hunting with his family three years ago, it was what he called a “sow’s ear.”

Less than 900 square feet in size, it was a plain-vanilla cookie-cutter structure basically unchanged from when it was first built as spec housing for vets after World War II. The master bedroom was as wide as a service elevator, the kitchen and dining room looked like the set of The Honeymooners, and you had to leave the house and crawl through a Bilco hatch to reach the washing machine in the basement.

“It was a real piece of junk,” notes the blunt Bilhuber, “on a great piece of land.”

The house sits on a rise overlooking the Mianus River, and the sunlight reflecting off the river’s surface casts a gentle glow upon the home’s western face at dusk. As features go, the view didn’t entirely make up for the lack of a second floor, but it was enough to get Bilhuber to put pen to checkbook, and pencil to paper.

A builder of mid- and high-rise apartment buildings in Manhattan, Bilhuber worked on Whitney Houston’s first home after the pop diva hit it big in the mid-1980s. In his head are favorite parts from every construction project he’s ever worked on, all things he wants for the residence he shares with his wife, Lisa, and daughters Jessica, six, and Jennifer, nearly two.

“All the houses on this street were built exactly the same way,” Bilhuber explains. “Go down the street and you can see all the homeowners have added little bits over time. We bought with the intention of adding on, too, but we waited until we mustered the money and chutzpah to do this.”

This, as Bilhuber gestures at the building in front of him, is what the little veteran’s house on Riverside Lane has become. Three peaked dormer windows gaze out at the street from the new second floor, while just below, a roofed porch forms an entranceway for the cottage farmhouse façade. A corner of the house protrudes toward the street to accommodate a master bedroom, which will become a guest room when the
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The Bilhubers’ house was literally transformed from a bungalow into a very comfortable Colonial with dormer windows. Architect Ann Sellars Lathrop cleverly carved a 2-car garage out of the basement (the garage doors are seen at the lower right of the bottom photograph).
second phase of the project is completed upstairs. In back, the shimmering surface of the tranquil Mianus and the cooling canopy of summer tree foliage is reflected in the massive windows of a family room, whose ceiling soars seventeen feet high.

The house is now 4,000 square feet, more than four times its original size, and the half-million-dollar cost of renovation exceeds the house’s original sticker price. The Bilhubers have already been offered $1.7 million for their new estate, but while Eric confers with a pair of contractors about the still-unfinished second floor, Lisa, a native of Cos Cob, smiles as Jennifer toddles around the new basement playroom. “I’ll never move from this place,” she says.

Welcome to local homeownership, twenty-first century style, where renovation is often the first thing people do when moving into a home rather than the last thing they do before selling it. If the yards of Tyvek HomeWrap and fleets of driveway Dumpsters are any indication, renovation may be replacing golf and polo as Greenwich's favorite pastimes.

Elisabeth Wadsworth, a partner in the Byram-based architectural firm Jones Footer Margeotes, estimates that the average renovation projects she and her associates handle in towns like Greenwich, Darien, New Canaan and Westport range in price between $500,000 and $13 million.

“Those large projects have always been there, but we’re probably seeing more now because of the value of real estate,” she explains. “It makes sense to put that kind of value in a piece of property. People think it’s a smart investment.”

Ann Sellars Lathrop, an architect based in Westport, designed the Bilhuber house (with significant input from Eric). “Everyone seems to want to improve their house, and has the money to do so,” she says. “What’s slowed down is new construction.”

Although a precise estimate on just how much renovation work is being done remains elusive, many who make their living in the real estate business agree that “building on” or extensively refurbishing an existing home is at least as popular as ever.

“There’s a lot of it, and it’s been steady for the last decade,” says Kelly Wright, a contractor and co-owner of Wright Brothers Builders in Westport. “Maybe it’s been a little more since the amount of available new land has decreased.”

Wright notes that there are some people whose renovations are simple, like adding a dormer window or finishing a basement room, yet most are elaborate projects, he says, that require an architect and take six to nine months to complete. “In order of frequency, it’s generally improving a kitchen/family area, creating a master suite, and then a total upgrade with new moldings, electricity, plumbing and modernizing.”

“Sometimes a home is too small and owners need more room,” says architect Jonathan Wagner of Westport. “That’s the driving force. Anyone who has lived in a house around here generally finds their property appreciates in value and therefore they can borrow money to do a renovation.”

An interior designer who runs Sterling Design Associates in Fairfield, Julianne Sterling remembers the early 1990s when business was so dead: “I didn’t see a dump truck for three years.” Not so now.

“Lives are so pressured, people are looking at their home as a retreat,” she says. “They want to come home to something that is relaxing. They are looking for a place of peace in their lives.”

Much of the demand for renovation has to do with the outdated nature of much of the existing housing stock. A house built as recently as the 1970s is often not equipped for the needs of dual-income families. Maybe it’s the one-car garage or the lack of a home office. Parents want special computer rooms for their children so homework and online activities can be supervised. Entertaining is no longer a matter for one richly appointed living room or dining room but can entail everything from wine cellars to hot tubs to media rooms with wide-screen televisions. And where’s the nanny going to sleep?