

This is Home

A local architect tackles his own home renovation, keeping it personal

BY ELLEN DONKER PHOTOS BY JULIA VERDEROSA



Eileen, Mary, Aidan and Tom enjoy time with Brewster in the sun room.

Tom Conway likes to joke about how his wife, Mary, couldn't imagine raising a family in the dinky little cottage he had bought before they were married. A partner at the Summit-based architecture firm, Rosen Kelly Conway, Tom appreciates the good bones of a home and this gem positioned at the entrance of Washington Park in Maplewood was one of a kind. But Mary was from a big family and this house with its tiny bedrooms carved into the eaves and scant storage, wasn't anything she had imagined for herself. After

all, it was built in 1926 as a weekend cottage for a New York-based engineer, not as a family home.

Nevertheless, in 2000, four years after Tom bought the house, he and Mary tied the knot. She learned to love the house for all of its idiosyncracies and with Tom's pristine design sense they made it a beautiful home. In time, they added Dexter, a yellow Labrador to the mix. And then came son Aidan and daughter Eileen.

When Tom's mother died last February, they decided that it made sense to move his dad to their home since he now needed full-time care. But this

required more space than they had – two new bedrooms (one each for his dad and caregiver) and bath – plus special accommodations for a man who was no longer steady on his feet.

Tom got to work and designed a two-car garage with two bedrooms and a bath above. Given Tom's profession, every detail was carefully considered and planned. To connect the addition to the rest of the house, he moved some walls and doorways and re-configured a staircase. He also ensured that the space be ADA-compliant, adding wide entryways with no steps to get indoors as well as an elevator.



Above left: The family room sits where the garage was located and flows nicely into the kitchen and dining room. Above right: Tom enjoys mixing mid-century modern pieces with some of the traditional items the family inherited. Middle left: Brewster patiently waits in the mudroom next to his favorite boot to go outside. Middle right: The entrance to the living room was widened and made into an arch to reflect other arches throughout the house. Bottom left: A favorite throw from Notre Dame that belonged to Tom's father.

He was aiming for a move-in date early this year. Unfortunately, his father came down with pneumonia and died in October before the work was completed. On top of that, Mary's mother, Joan, died unexpectedly three days later. All this happened after they had just finished mourning the passing of their beloved dog Dexter. The accumulation of sorrow was almost too much to bear for Tom and Mary and their young children, now 11 and 14. They credit their strong Catholic faith for helping them through such profound loss.

In the midst of grieving and having to attend to the necessary activities connected with a family member's death, they were forced to reimagine the new space and how it would accommodate just the four of them. "The first thing Tom did when he heard his father had passed was take out a tape measure and start reconfiguring the space," Mary recalls. Throwing himself into the home design was his way of coping with the otherwise crippling grief.

The result is a stunning and seamless expansion that is modern, yet utterly true to the house's shingle-style heritage. What's more, it has a sense of home that feels deeply personal and suited to the family.

On the first floor, Tom opened up the walls on the south side of the house so that the dining room, kitchen, fam-

ily room and breakfast nook are open with one room flowing into another. They were able to convert the space from the original garage to a good-sized family room that now features a large sectional. For a family who likes to entertain, the room can accommodate plenty of family and friends.

Upstairs, Tom and Mary's new master suite has a connected bathroom far more luxurious than they ever had before, along with a spacious closet to accommodate both of their wardrobes. In fact, they took advantage of this renovation to add several more closets in the hallway to compensate for the lack of storage so typical in older homes. Next door to the master suite is Mary's



Many pieces hang in the house reflecting the family's love of Cape Cod, where Tom has been vacationing since he was six years old.

studio, where she works as a voice-over artist. The room has a hushed quality to it, as it is fully insulated and features special curtains to block street noise.

What stands out about the redesign is the way Tom personalized the space with nods to some of their favorite vacation spots, many of them nautical. Take the mudroom entryway: The pattern of the floor tile looks like something they'd seen while visiting Cabo San Lucas in Mexico. Hung throughout the home are various pieces of artwork featuring Cape Cod, a destina-



This circular window mimics a ship's wheel, a nod to the family's love of the ocean.

tion for Tom since he was six years old. Even the round window on the second floor mimics a ship's wheel. Tom also added arched doorways in some of the rooms to echo arches found in other parts of the home. These details may not be obvious at first, but the repetition provides cohesion.

Having inherited furniture, china, antiques and artwork of various periods from their parents, Tom and Mary also had the staggering job of deciding what to keep and how to integrate the



This Edwardian chandelier belonged to Tom's mother.

pieces into their home. An Edwardian crystal chandelier from Tom's mother now hangs in their dining room. A reupholstered federal-style couch mixes well with a pair of wing chairs in the living room. These pieces co-exist nicely with the round midcentury modern table and green leatherette chairs near



This picture, painted by Mary's mother, hangs in the vestibule of the front door.



Eileen asked for her Grandma Betty's secretary desk and uses it to prominently display Grandma Joan's Royal Doultons.

the kitchen.

Upstairs, their daughter Eileen asked for her Grandma Betty's secretary desk and uses it to prominently display Grandma Joan's Royal Doultons. And in the vestibule to the front door, Tom hung a picture painted by his mother-in-law. "Joan was like a second mother to me," he explains. "I adored her. This is like a little shrine to her." Such important heirlooms, lovingly placed throughout the home, not only honor their parents but infuse it with the warmth of happy memories and lives well lived.

Although the renovations were completed under trying circumstances, the Conways look ahead to making new memories in a home that has doubled in size and suits their needs better than ever. Already they've added a yellow Labrador puppy named Brewster who tears around the house, appearing both cute and impish simultaneously.

Reflecting on his house, Tom shares, "I've been designing this in my mind for 22 years. Now it gives me joy to see all these things from our parents. It feels like they've moved in with us... it's a continuum of family." 

Ellen Donker watched this house expand and was grateful to be able to tell the family's story.



An old-fashioned mechanical doorbell hangs on the new door near the garage and rings a bell inside when the knob is pulled.



Above left: This beautiful new bedroom suite sits above the garage. Tom painted the water colors above the bed. Middle left: Eileen's room got a redo. The ceiling mimics a cabana stripe. Middle right: The addition starts with the black door and two-car garage. Bottom left: Eileen has a sweet study nook carved into the eaves. Bottom right: The guest room, formerly the master bedroom, features an arched alcove.

