

Habitats/Clinton Township, N.J.

Renovating Their House To Fit Their Needs



Photographs by Frank C. Dougherty for The New York Times

Chuck and Pattie Bierwirth outside their just-renovated and expanded 19th-century house.

Rather than move, a couple expand a too-small home.

By TRISH HALL

AT some point, houses no longer fit. They don't feel right because they're too big or too small or designed in a way that has become uncomfortable.

It's then that many people decide to move. Pattie and Chuck Bierwirth, who had lived in their house in Clinton Township, N.J., for more than a decade, knew they had to look around. Their two children had tiny bedrooms that no longer suited them. Mrs. Bierwirth, a decorative artist, wanted a work space. Mr. Bierwirth, who sells software to architects, wanted a home office that wasn't right by the front door so he wouldn't have to shush people if they walked in while he was talking to clients.

But although Mr. Bierwirth was willing to consider some of the places they looked at, Mrs. Bierwirth was not. The affection for a house, and its land, is a deep and inherently irrational emotion. And for her, it was a connection that refused to be broken. She had planted many perennials around the house and wanted to keep nurturing them. The family had lots of friends within walking distance. There was a duck pond on the land, and a stream where her children could catch crayfish and crabs.

"Pattie said she was going to die in this house," her husband said. And after they decided to renovate and expand the house rather than move, he said, "there were times I thought, sooner than you think."

Their house, built in the 19th century, was originally a two-room structure used to house farmhands. Now, of course, what was once farmland is houseland, about 70 minutes west of Manhattan. In the 1970's, their house was significantly expanded, and that was the structure they bought in 1986.

After they made their renovation decision, Mrs. Bierwirth called an architect, Susan Rochelle, in Milford N.J., in Hunterdon County, whose work she had seen in a local newspaper. It turned out that Mrs. Rochelle had done some work for a friend, and Mrs. Bierwirth liked the work, so they became architect and client.

The Bierwirths were clear about their main goal. They wanted a kitchen and family room that wasn't just a space on the way to another space, but a room where they could all be together, to eat, to sit by a fire, to do jigsaw puzzles, to play with one of



Courtesy of the Bierwirths

Garage being torn down during first phase of construction.

the puppies they train to become guide dogs for the blind. At first, they wanted to renovate the garage, but their architect convinced them that it made more sense to tear it down and start over, retaining only the slab.

Expanding a house from 2,000 to 3,600 square feet is a radical act that completely changes its look. But Mrs. Bierwirth didn't want it to also change the character. "I didn't want it to get large and have rooms we would never use," she said. "I still wanted that warm, comfortable feeling." And she wanted it to visually reflect its long history. "I didn't want it to look like those developments where the houses are all cookie cutter," she said.

Inside, she wanted to add details consistent with an old structure. They hunted for beams for the family room, she said, finally finding them near Allentown, Pa. "The guy had a beam farm," she said.

She picked rocks from their property and took them to local quarries so she could match their feel and color for the new stone fireplace in the family room.

IN June, they started working with their contractor, John Bohnel Construction in Annandale, N.J., and their kitchen contractor, Rotonido Cabinetry in Pittstown, N.J. To save money, they did all the inside and outside painting themselves, laid the wide plank cherrywood floor in the kitchen, and tiled the new bathroom that the children use on the second floor, probably cutting about \$20,000 from the total cost, which reached \$230,000.

They finished in November, exhausted but satisfied. They lived in the house the entire time, with all the dirt, noise and chaos, leaving only for a two-week trip to Europe just after the bulldozer arrived and flattened the garage. There were times, Mrs. Bierwirth said, that she felt completely overwhelmed by the number of decisions that had to be made.

"They would tell me we need the bathtub by tomorrow, and I hadn't even picked out the bathtub," she said. But, she said, "as painful as it was, I am so glad I was here." Her close attention to details meant they got what they wanted.

Her husband, who was traveling much of the time, also thinks his wife's hospitality softened up the contractors and encouraged them to offer useful suggestions. "She befriended every one of these workers," he said. "She made them margaritas and frozen coffee drinks after work, and had lots of snacks and sodas."

Mr. Bierwirth is pleased that they took some steps to plan for the future, such as wiring the house for computers. He said, though, that he wished he had been more realistic about cost overruns. "You inevitably run into things you don't anticipate," he said. "When I budgeted I went up to the threshold of pain, and with the cost overruns, I've gone beyond."

Because of the cost, he said, it probably would have been less expensive just to buy a new house. Even after the plans were drawn up, he was still looking, because the cost worried him. But the only house they really liked turned out to have been built on a toxic waste dump.

Now, of course, the pain is behind them, as they make chocolate chip cookies in their new kitchen with cherry cabinets, Corian counters and a granite stove top. Now, when Mr. Bierwirth goes up to his bedroom, he doesn't have to duck to keep from hitting his head in the narrow stairwell. His office is down a few stairs, made private by a sliding glass door.

Mrs. Bierwirth has an upstairs studio to paint floor cloths and furniture. Their daughter, Julianne, 11, has a large room painted pink, the color she chose, and their son, Fraser, 13, has a similar one, but in an intense blue. In their big family room, they can sit in front of the fire and drink tea while their little black Labrador, Velvet, snores softly in his cage.

Outside, the house looks just right, not as if a watermelon had been grafted onto a pea. The new two-car garage is built so that one section juts out farther than the other, and it also juts out farther than the part added for a laundry and bathroom. The effect is to make the front varied and pleasingly angled.

"I wanted to give the facade some relief," Ms. Rochelle, their architect, said. "If it is big and flat, there is no human scale." The eaves of the new section are consistent with and aligned with those of the old. There is a front porch of bluestone, with simple columns and a railing.

During thunderstorms, the Bierwirths sit out there and watch the rain. On nice days, they follow the peregrinations of the ducks. Although they didn't enlarge the pond, they might have to. Two white females up the road, apparently deciding they wanted to live with their five brown males, have moved in, and now all seven are gliding back and forth, back and forth.



To save money, the couple laid kitchen's cherrywood floor.