

# From production split-level to custom contemporary

## Inherited house becomes home of tomorrow for McLean resident

BY JOHN BYRD  
Special to Homes

Some people are just not meant to live in a suburban split-level in McLean, no matter how conveniently it is located, no matter how spacious and green its half-acre corner lot is.

Certainly Margaret Straub fits in this category. Returning to Washington from postings overseas, it was hard for her to imagine settling into a circa-1960s split-level bequeathed by her father.

With its smallish, double-hung windows and cramped bedrooms, the house seemed blandly inappropriate as a place for displaying rare antiques and far eastern furnishings — exotica gathered in a life time of interesting travels. No, there was just too much of a contradiction between Straub's evolved tastes and the nondescript, know-nothing face this house presented to the world.

So the question upon accepting an assignment in Washington was: where does one go to find the dream house?

"I was living in the family home convinced I would soon be selling it and buying something larger," Straub admitted. "Yet when I really looked seriously, I wasn't satisfied with the quality of what was available. Even much larger, new homes seemed undistinguished. It was then that I began pondering my options for transforming this place into something I'd be happy with."

After interviewing some 18 remodelers, Straub selected the Apollo Group of Clifton.

Current winners of a coveted "Contractor of the Year" award from the National Association of the Remodeling Industry, Apollo's track record and willingness to help Straub maximize her budget added up to an especially good fit.

"I wasn't sure what I wanted, or how fully to utilize the firm's range of talents," Straub said. "But our agreement allowed me to pull in the principals as consultants as my questions arose. This turned out to be very comfortable. The whole team gave me lots of



**BEFORE:** Above, this split-level was typical of many 1960s homes found all over Northern Virginia.

**AFTER:** Left, dramatic renovation created by the owner, the Apollo Group and consultants changed the rambler into this executive home with all sorts of custom touches.

support, but kept everything focused and on track."

Apollo President Scott Kestner added, "Our approach was to just make our resources available. We pointed to places where Margaret could, for instance, save money by making certain purchases herself. Often we'd bring samples of materials around and talk through options. This gave her a lot of control over various line-item costs."

### Setbacks dictate the floor plan

Of course, converting an 1,800-square-foot split-level to a Stick-style contemporary almost 75 percent larger doesn't begin with interior design. From the outset Kestner confronted unusually demanding zoning regulations, and a

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**A SPECIAL SPOT:** Above, large windows and arches add special comforts.

**COMFORT:** Left, interesting ceiling work, a beautiful mantle and French doors highlight this living area.

**DREAMY BATH:** Far left, the whirlpool bath has a large picture window, a huge shower and Mediterranean tiles.



# MAKEOVER

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series of structural challenges within the home itself.

"A home situated on a corner lot is considered to have two fronts," Kestner said. "That meant, if we concentrated the entire 1,100 square foot addition as a single wing off the left side of the house, we would be violating the setback requirements off the road abutting the left side of the lot."

To solve this riddle, Apollo's plan calls for a two-part wing that steps back from the original front elevation. On the lower level, a fourth bedroom and rumpus room were eliminated to create space for a well-appointed library and substantially enlarged entertainment area, which, in turn, segues into a guest wing 13 feet back from the front elevation. Above, three small bedrooms and two baths have been replaced by a newly appointed guest bedroom and bath plus a 600 square feet master bedroom suite complete with luxury bathing spa, a sizeable private office and sweeping views in all directions.

But if the odd footprint is tricky to execute it also presented Apollo with a compelling aesthetic solution.

"We were concerned that an addition of this size could look like a big

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**There are no parts of the house that are not thoroughly mainstreamed.**

Scott Kestner

barn grafted to the side of a split-level," Kestner said. "The smaller, stepped-back units help to scale down and balance the whole. The new foyer and portico create a forward visual element which softens the effect of a larger side facing gable behind. Likewise, the stone course on the lower level provides a horizontal focal points that unifies."

As with any addition with a challenging footprint, the firm also encountered inherent engineering problems. At two junctures in the lower level Apollo had to remove bearing walls carefully installing micro laminate beams to keep the second floor rooms securely in place. Space allocated for the upstairs study, too, had to be re-engineered to avoid the call for undergirding that



**BUILT-INS:** There is plenty of room for favorite books in this part of the transformed house.

would have reduced headroom in the rooms below.

The end result of skillfully applied engineering, though, are rooms that are uniformly spacious, solid and visually linked to the tree-shaded surroundings.

"There are no parts of the house that are not thoroughly mainstreamed," Kestner said. "The guest room and the library exit through French doors to grade-level patios. The upstairs hallway is now over 5 feet wide. There is openness and visual continuum in every part of the house."

And above all, there is natural

light to spare. Old double-hungs have been replaced by fixed-and-half circle windows. The second floor master bedroom features three sets of windows on the side elevation and a 12-foot window wall on the rear. A whirlpool bath in master bathroom is tucked below a picture window with a panoramic view. A four-by-seven-foot shower festooned in Mediterranean ceramics is crowned with a skylight.

"It's just become a very pretty place," Straub said, noting that while she could recover everything she's invested in the home "tomorrow," her current plan is "to stay put for a long, long time."



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