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A Show House at the Sea Shore

by Lorie Russo
photos by Daniel Eifert

For a Bergen County couple who preferred the character of an 1870s Dutch Colonial-style home, a sleek modern mansion at the Jersey Shore was out of the question. With the help of Montclair interior planner and designer Tere Bresin, they lovingly restored a Bay Head house, and in the process, created a bayside haven that began as a weekend retreat and became a main residence filled with art and family mementos.

"They had owned the house for at least 15 years. It had always been a place for them to crash on weekends," said Bresin, president-elect of the New Jersey Chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID). "After looking at beautiful beach houses, they opted to renovate this house and make it into a home. They looked at it as a diamond in the rough. They really wanted it to become their home. What I gave them was their vision."

That vision took a year and a half to complete. It was based on total respect for the architectural integrity of the bay-front home, and earned Bresin two gold awards in 1997 from ASID, one of them for design excellence.

"The house had shown signs of elegant aging," she said. "It's unusual architecture for the beach – a definitively styled cottage. I think we were able to return some of its dignity."

Bresin and her clients wanted to achieve several things during the remodeling and restoration, including the right mix of color, texture and comfort. The overriding mission was to create a sanctuary for family mementos and cherished collections.

Angled ceilings generate a contemporary look in the master bedroom suite. The upholstered bed dressed in a tea-stained slip covering faces a set of French doors that offer ocean views. At night, curtains block out any outside glare. "These are beautiful, dramatic window treatments," says Bresin. A chair in the foreground covered in rich goldenrod fabric adds a touch of warm color.

Above top, the hand-painted leaf border outlines the garden room, in which sconces of woven twigs and wicker furniture stained in dark blacks and browns lend the room an earthy feel. Original walnut floors accent the furnishings' rich textures.

Black, white and pumpkin-colored tiles define areas between cabinets and countertops, creating a striking color motif. "The tile is exciting, bold," says Bresin, who custom-designed the pattern. A sconce on the far wall highlights another find by the owner - a wrought iron rack with peach-colored doves from Milan that hangs near an original window.

Right, a three-foot wall was knocked out to make room for French doors that bring daylight into an otherwise dark area of the kitchen. In the background, stairs lead directly to the master bedroom. Custom-made white lacquered cabinets display the owner's collection of china and other favorite pieces gathered during trips abroad. Colorful, hand-painted canisters and a gold-framed landscape painting add a splash of color against the earthy granite countertop. In the background, a late 1800s oil-on-canvas study for an Aubusson rug adds depth to an area described as "the gallery."

The cozy banquette area is decorated with English fabrics in a romantic floral pattern, original French cafe chairs and a delicately designed, yet sturdy, wrought iron table. Here, the pumpkin stripe on the walls brings life to the room. Italian stoneware plates collected by the owner are displayed attractively on a wrought iron hanger. A simple wrought iron chandelier rounds out a lighting scheme that Bresin describes as "phenomenal."

An imported multi-colored Tibetan rug adds character to the family room and gives attention to the sage and flesh-toned fabrics of the couches and ottoman. In the summer, the wool rug is replaced with woven matting for a clean, fresh and functional look. A Michael Abrams painting over the fireplace adds balance of color. Details of the fireplace are repeated in the lines around the windows, where shelves become havens for collectibles and family photos. "I like to encourage people to do their own thing," says Bresin. In the foreground, the simple lines of a Baker chair add to the room's practical elegance.

"I've always been conscious of being in spaces and redoing them mentally. I've always had a respect and understanding of space," said Bresin, whose memories of interiors began at age two.

A master bedroom suite with full bathroom and walk-in closets, a family room and a second bathroom were added to the house's original seven rooms: a living room, dining room, foyer, kitchen, den and two bedrooms. Bresin oversaw the additions, keeping two important design concepts in the forefront: the use of lighting and spatial relationships.

"Whenever I (design) anything," said the 20-year interior design veteran, "I do it in terms of the relationship to the spaces around it." Estimating a space's potential cannot be done without considering how light will affect it. Bresin typically designs a lighting plan before laying out the rest of the room. The result, as seen in the Bay Head home, is a "subtle and sensitive" lighting scheme implemented throughout the house. "The pizazz of any project is attributable to the lighting," she said. "You have to find lighting that adds interest and balance to a wall so that you walk in and say, 'Whoa, that looks beautiful.'"

She met her biggest challenge in the "heart of the house," the small kitchen. "It's in the middle of the house and connects the old to the new," Bresin said. The room was small, with little natural light, so she suggested that the architect knock out three feet of wall and install French doors and banquette seating to bring the outdoors in. She also integrated an original window above the sink into the overall design. "It's a very strange window but we opted not to do anything with it because when you're at the sink you can look out at the bay, (or) onto the porch, which (becomes the) main room during the summer," Bresin said.

The kitchen, for which Bresin won an

YANKEES

A Michael Abrams hand-painted mirror invites the viewer's gaze; the subtle colors of the landscape accent the softness of the dining room walls.

The Michael Graves chandelier lends a dynamic contrast to the lines of the Queen Anne-style chairs and dining room table. A trio of topiaries decorates a French buffet finished in ebony. A cream-on-cream Tibetan rug completes the room's soft shades.

Another architectural obstacle in the dining room was eliminated with less difficulty. A 2x3-foot brick wall jutted into the room, its purpose unknown. Removing it created more space. A place for elegant, formal meals, the dining room is furnished with a French ebony buffet, complemented in tone and style by a curio cabinet finished in cherry stain to give it a delicate French Victorian appearance. Within it, the owner keeps a collection of Victorian silver cranberry glass that adds a splash of color to the room's rich woods and soft shades.

Black stain was used on the buffet, and Queen Anne-style chairs were finished to match the cherry of the oval dining table. "They look beautiful against the cream of the room," Bresin said.

A gentle coral oil-on-paper landscape by Michael Graves hangs over the mantel in the family room. "The colors make it seem almost like a window into somewhere else," said Bresin.

Bresin likes to "excite" her clients about art collecting. "I like to give them direction as to where art should go, about lighting and sizes appropriate for spaces. I like to start them on collections and encourage them on travels to add to their collections."

Subtle decorations are a hallmark of Bresin's work, which includes a stint in a commercial design firm that created the interior of the Continental Airlines terminal at Newark International Airport. Now, Bresin primarily concentrates on high-end residential planning and interior design.

Her design philosophy is simple. "You have to walk in that door and say, 'Wow, there's no other place I want to be.' But clients ultimately make the choices. This couple had confidence in my decisions and now they love their home. They're very happy there." **NJCR**

Lorie Russo is a New Jersey-based freelance writer.