



## Designed for Living

### Two preservation pros turned their c. 1880 Maryland house into an energy-efficient, wheelchair-accessible retreat

By James H. Schwartz | From *Preservation* | March/April 2011

From the outside, it looks like a predictable painted cottage, one of dozens lining the streets of Oxford, Md., at the end of the long road from Easton. But the house that landscape designer Barbara Paca and her husband, architect Philip Logan, have restored and transformed here is far from predictable. "It blends history with [sustainability](#)," Logan says. "It shows how you can extend the life of an existing house—honoring its memories—while also integrating cost efficiencies and intelligent maintenance." Or as Paca says, "It's sustainable preservation beautifully realized."

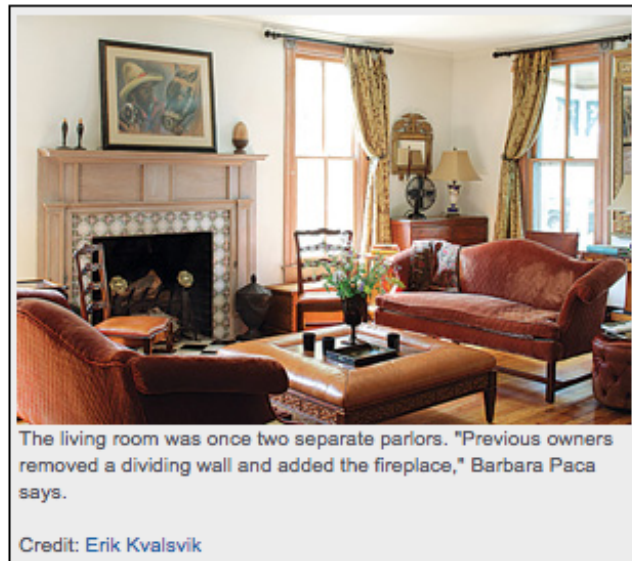
Walk around the house and note the details: the original front porch linking the house to the street and the boat slips nearby, the fine shiplap siding ("Look at those variations and irregularities ... that's the texture of time," Logan says), the working shutters, and the carefully restored historic wood windows. They all speak to the beauty of tradition and simplicity.

Paca and Logan have restored enormous formal houses and gardens elsewhere (they own the Manhattan-based consulting company [Preservation Green](#)), but when they transformed their own home on the Eastern Shore, they took a more modest approach. Gesturing to the neighbors and the waterfront, Paca says, "Oxford is a real town, and this is an honest house."

Inside, much of the c. 1880 Victorian survives intact: A front door surrounded by transom lights and sidelights opens to a steep staircase, a large living room (once two separate parlors), and a wide doorway that leads to the dining room. Three small bedrooms, a sitting room, and two baths fill the space above. New construction, including a guest house, is tucked to the south and almost completely hidden from the street.

Logan served as architect for the restoration and expansion of the house, directing an ambitious program that entailed six months of negotiations with the local historical commission, in part because the residence needed to be fully wheelchair accessible. Paca and Logan's son, Tilghman, an energetic nine-year-old, has special needs.

"When we started here in 2006, it was with Tilghman's needs in mind," Paca says. That meant enclosing a side porch and turning it into a wide hallway that slopes gently from the front of the house to the back, uninterrupted by saddles or narrow doorways. It also meant constructing an elevator behind the original house (a salvaged wood door makes it look like a closet) and building a brick access ramp from the street to the side door. "Since we finished work in 2007, older people who visit often say, 'We have the same needs he does,'" Paca notes with pleasure.



How do you adapt for [accessibility](#), preserve historic authenticity, and achieve energy efficiency? "Carefully," Logan says. "Very carefully."

He and Paca started with a simple plan: Retain as much as possible. "Yes, that approach takes longer and you find problems that leave you scratching your head," Paca says, "but it's incredibly informative. Learning from the past is one of the best parts of preservation work."

They agreed to leave the bedrooms upstairs virtually unchanged, limiting the scope of their work to replastering, renovating one bath, and removing vestiges of a roof discovered between a bedroom ceiling and the newer, shingled roof above. Logan also set a narrow staircase into a closet to provide access to the front attic. Formerly reached by ladder, the third-floor space is now well insulated and can eventually be used as an extra room.

Downstairs, the dining room, crowned by the massive beam that Paca says may have come from the keel of an old sailboat, retained the existing cabinetry, and Logan made sure that original doors and hardware became functional. Though narrow-board pine floors in the adjacent living room had needed only patching and refinishing, the floorboards in the dining room were in such poor condition, they had to be replaced. To preserve the integrity of the space, Logan sourced antique heart pine boards through Old Wood & Co. in Harbeson, Del., and rebuilt all the floors in the back of the house with the reclaimed wood.

When asked about the tension between repairing or replacing, Logan says homeowners need to balance efficiency, cost, and aesthetics. He cites the discussion he and his wife had with the contractor on this project, who recommended prying off and discarding the 19th-century siding on the exterior of the house. "I know why he suggested that—he wanted to make the house much tighter, and certainly could have done that with insulation and new materials—but there was no way we were getting rid of the shiplap siding. We stripped, patched, and caulked instead," Logan says, limiting air infiltration and markedly increasing efficiency. He also made certain that building crews insulated all the electrical outlets and switch plates in the exterior walls—notorious energy sinks in historic houses. If some cool air still penetrates the living room during the winter months, Logan says "we can live with that. Saving our old siding was worth it."

In much the same vein, he put a stop to any discussion about replacing the historic windows in the front of the house. "I'm happy to use modern thermal-pane windows in new construction," he says, "but just look at the originals here ... Look at how they contribute to the essence of the house. They really are irreplaceable."

Paca's brother, Robert, offered to restore those two-over-two windows—a mammoth and time-consuming project—and his sister accepted enthusiastically. "Bobby dismantled each one, numbered the parts, replaced frayed ropes, and recalibrated the sashes," Paca remembers. "Now you can open those windows with your pinky." Simple triple-track storms that were already on the house protect the historic windows and seal out drafts from the prevailing north winds.

Robert Paca also stripped and patched the original trim throughout the house, removing layers of paint ("like a neurosurgeon," his sister says) and sealing the wood with sanding sealer, a transparent, protective finish. To fill the gaps where doors or pieces of trim were missing, he used salvage mined from local yards and recycling centers. One particularly rewarding discovery was a trove of architectural details from Plimhimmon, a Talbot County plantation house, once owned by the Paca family, that Philip Logan and Barbara Paca had unsuccessfully tried to buy. New owners had stripped the 18th-century house of antique doors and railings, so Logan snapped them up to incorporate in Oxford.



A complementary modern addition at the rear of the house was always conceived as a key part of this project, so the same crews working on restoration also tackled new construction. Behind the dining room, Logan designed a new kitchen that opens to the sloping hallway and an ADA-compliant half bath. At the end of the hall, he built a dramatic, wheelchair-accessible studio and office with a south-facing facade modeled on the historic orangery at nearby Wye House. The addition also incorporates a family room and therapy room for Tilghman on the second floor. Enormous thermal jib windows—the sashes slide up and panels below open out like doors—allow the youngster to explore the back yard and his uncle's house across the lawn.

The addition makes fine use of rescued materials—including the pierced railings saved from Plimhimmon and an entire bank of 18th-century doors Paca discovered inside a North Carolina barn—but the biggest surprise is the tiled stove that warms the space. Elevated off the floor, a form once ubiquitous in European houses, the enormous antique was dismantled and completely rebuilt around a modern, highly efficient core. Fed with just two logs in the morning, it heats the room for 12 hours or more. "That," Paca says, pointing to the stove, "is the smartest thing in the whole house."

It's ironic that, although climate control in the new part of the house is aided by an antique, the Victorian core of the residence is heated and cooled by a modern geothermal system. Logan explains that the system relies on 11 wells, each descending to a depth of 200 feet. Refrigerant circulating through the wells in a closed loop assumes the near-constant temperature found at the lowest depth, then returns to condensers in the basement. Air handlers cool or heat the air as required. "What's great about the system is that it's cost saving and that it did not impact the original fabric of the house," Logan explains. He made certain of that by locating condensers and air handlers for the system in the basement and attic, where they could not detract from the form of the exterior or create an audible hum. And he placed forced-air vents in locations where they would not adversely affect Tilghman's health.

Logan acknowledges that the house responds to the special needs of a child who uses a wheelchair, but adds that "there's nothing clinical about it. Barbara and I appreciated the aesthetic value of the simple Victorian vernacular. We kept our enhancements and required amendments simple and respectful. We needed the finished house to work for our family, but we didn't want it to feel out of place in Oxford."

He adds that the goals of restoring the historic building and "maximizing its potential" were supported by the local historical commission. In fact, he lauds the often arduous compliance process that exists in Oxford. "Our commission is really important," he says. "They put roadblocks in front of thoughtless development for a reason: to retain the character of this waterfront town." Although it does demand patience to move through the levels of approval, the end justifies the means.

"Our house is an example of sustainable preservation. It means we protected the traditional forms and functions of the house and made sure that anything we added or amended was thoughtful," Logan says.

Today, Paca is focused on restoring the gardens at Hope House, a National Register-listed property northwest of Easton, and Logan is working on four restoration projects nearby. "In a way, our experience here in Oxford has generated interest in sustainably preserving historic houses," he says. "People walk by our house and say, 'I love what you did here. Can you help me?' And we're happy to say, 'Yes.' "