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Vertical living in a city pier home

BY CHRISTIANNA MCCAUSLAND | PHOTOS BY THOMAS ARLEDGE

Peter Bowe and his wife, Barbara Stewart, chose their waterfront townhome for its location. An end unit at the tip of a pier in the HarborView complex, the home soars next to Baltimore's harbor, affording spectacular views, a stellar seat for Pier Six concerts and a quick, five-minute commute to Bowe's job as president of Ellicott Dredges in South Baltimore.

Above: The panoramic view of Peir Six and the Baltimore harbor from the living room. **Right:** One-quarter of the home's space is devoted to a stairwell and elevator shaft.

LIGHTHOUSE

"I describe it by saying you can fish out of every room in the house except the kitchen," quips Bowe.

"You look out the window every day, and you're connected to the city and the water," Stewart continues, "but it's remarkably quiet."

Bowe, 58, and Stewart, 51, a retired executive at JP Morgan, share a life goal of spending more time with friends and family, and this house, which they purchased a year ago, is an idyllic spot. Ironically, the thing that makes the home so perfect also made it a design challenge. Unlike many city homes that are long and narrow, the townhouse has a pleasant, wide floor plan. But its verticality is more like a lighthouse than a townhouse. And the constant, shifting light and shadow caused by the reflection of sunlight off the water was as key to the design as the walls and fixtures.

The home, though constructed, was not fully built-out inside. The couple would be able to tailor it to their needs. To help them navigate the process, a friend connected the couple with Dianne Rohrer of Rohrer Studio.

"They were clear that they liked more traditional detailing," Rohrer recalls. "However, we talked about the movement of light from the reflections from the water and how that might not work with a strictly traditional mode."

Rohrer's first task was to customize the builder's original floor plan. The most striking piece of handiwork is her treatment of the staircase. Given the home's verticality, nearly one-quarter of its space is devoted to a stairwell and elevator shaft. Rohrer was able to widen the stairwell by nearly five inches and filled the space with a dramatic spiral stair punctuated by three lanterns suspended like the pendulums of a massive clock. She widened the doorway between the kitchen and dining room to give the kitchen a better view of the water and sculpted the existing double-sided fireplaces. In other rooms, she took walls away entirely; in the library, what was once a wall is now a bar that gives the room a spacious feel and conceals amenities for visitors using the two adjacent guest suites on that floor.

Above: The kitchen was designed by Illinois-based childhood friends of Stewart, featuring custom cabinets. **Right:** The doorway leading from the kitchen to the dining room was widened to give the kitchen a better view of the harbor.

LIGHTHOUSE

Despite its airy feel, the house has no attic or basement, so creative storage solutions abound. The kitchen, designed by Illinois-based designers who are childhood friends of Stewart, features custom cabinets for Bowe's breakfast shake equipment, while drawers in the bathroom vanity feature in-drawer plugs so hairdryers or shavers can remain plugged in and out of sight. In many rooms, what appears to be a wall will slide or pop open to reveal hidden closets. This same technique was used to conceal the home's mechanics. A massive HVAC return, for example, was relocated from the ceiling to a hiding spot behind a wall panel. Pocket doors are used throughout to maximize space in the rooms.

Light plays a large role in the design of the house as its reflection off the water creates magical displays on floors and walls at different times of day and in different weather. Rohrer selected dark, Acacia floors (scraped and hand-stained) to "act as a reflecting pool, carrying light across the rooms." They also provide a dramatic contrast to the white walls and the couple's collection of rugs, acquired on trips abroad, which dictated much of the interior design.

In addition to their rugs, Stewart explains that, "We've been married eight years, so we have a lot of his, hers and ours furnishings," that needed to blend together, as well as an eclectic collection of artwork that includes nautical-themed historical posters (a nod to Bowe's maritime employment) and original Dr. Seuss prints. Bowe and Stewart wanted it all to come together in a setting that was both elegant and comfortable.

The resultant design relies on simplicity, exquisite architectural detailing and punctuations of color. Although Stewart wanted crown moulding, it would not work with the window layout, so Rohrer used stepped ceilings and wall mouldings to create architectural interest. Fabric, particularly in window treatments, brings pops of color to the rooms.

"Barbara made it clear that she really liked textiles," says Rohrer. "She liked floral, organic shapes that were bold."

In the couple's dining room, where they've already hosted more than 15 dinner parties, Rohrer blended Stewart's dining room table and Bowe's side chairs (with seats needlepointed by his mother) by selecting new, minimalist wing chairs and highly reflective, contemporary light fixtures in simple yet bold geometric shapes.

"There are hints of traditionalism and modernism and a historic approach to detailing, and yet it feels like a modern room," says Rohrer.

If the home melds modern and traditional elements in a minimalist setting with dabs of color, the master suite is a perfect example of success. "I love purple, but to do a purple bedroom, well, is not easy," says Stewart. "I have tried before and failed. Dianne had great ideas for using purple that didn't make it look like a Ravens game."

To give Stewart the purple bedroom she desired without making it overly feminine for Bowe, Rohrer selected a drapery in a bold Ikat print to go with a subtle grass wall covering by J. Lambeth and white wool rugs in a classic weave that were imported from Spain. In the master sitting room, Rohrer used soft lavender Roman shades and upholstered chairs to complement the owner's rug. The suspended

Above: A massive built-in with a wet bar offers plenty of storage at one end of the fourth-floor living room. **Right:** The homeowner's choice of fabrics, particularly the window treatments, brings pops of color to the rooms.

Top: Much like the rest of the home, the master bathroom is a blend of modern and traditional styles.

Bottom: The double-sided fireplace in the master suite gives the space its airy feel.

daybed (a whimsical touch Stewart picked up from an aunt who had a similar hanging bed) matches the overarching British West Indies feel of the room. There are hints of a British Colonial vibe throughout the house, which Rohrer explains is itself an eclectic style that lends well to the home of world travelers with a penchant for bold and sometimes disparate accessories.

Rowe and Stewart love having a home that showcases all the things that are special to them — be it Rowe's pewter sailing trophies or Stewart's collection of china — in an elegant setting. "We did a lot around the things we value," says Stewart. "Every detail, every piece of art is ours, is authentic."

Rohrer says the project is an example of what can happen when homeowners and professionals work as a team. "I feel that everything that happened here was about the relationship between the three of us and the understanding we had of each other," she says. "That pushed me to come up with a solution I may not have, and the result is richer."

Get the look

Architecture and interiors:
Rohrer Studio

Hanging bed steel fabrication:
Gutierrez Studios

Millwork and trim fabrication:
Phoenix Woodworking

Kitchen:
DDK Kitchens (Illinois)

Flooring:
Floors Etc.

Stone and tile:
Chesapeake Tile