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If only we could... Designer Gail Brinn Wilkins transforms her dreams into reality

TEXT BY MICHELLE A. ZINER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERIN CHOINIERE

Ten years ago, Gail Brinn Wilkins, a prominent Charlotte ASID interior designer, marveled at how often she found herself noticing ways she would add to or change her home if she could. To tame the thoughts running in her head, she sat down and put them in writing. Although she titled them “dreaming,” the act of writing the list was the first step in bringing her dreams to reality.

Wilkins and her husband, Howard Freese, lived in a traditional one bedroom home in the Myers Park/

Midtown area, and although it was beautiful, it was too small for entertaining or overnight guests. Wilkins met John Morgan, President of Urban Building Group of Charlotte, while working together on multiple projects. Urban Building Group is a design-build building contracting group that specializes in designing and renovating existing structures.

“Our emphasis is to transform the way our clients feel about their homes,” said Morgan. “Gail and I developed a relationship built on quality customer

service and most importantly, giving back to the community,” he said. Wilkins dreamed about adding on to her home and contracted Morgan for the project.

“I have an innate feeling about people, and when I met John, I knew without a doubt that he was an honest, upstanding individual. I felt I could trust him with my personal project,” said Wilkins. Morgan and Wilkins spent many hours designing and drawing a peninsula addition which would double the size of Wilkins’ home.



*If only we had a garage, the birds would miss the cars...
If only we had a place for the yard tools...*

The project lasted a year from start to finish and progressed smoothly. The exterior style is French with stucco and brick and includes a carriage-type two car garage with raised panel doors. A pea gravel driveway and walkway wind to the rear of the new addition where major site work created a spectacular courtyard and pool area. Stucco arches denote a subtle separation between sitting areas and the pool area. Numerous gorgeous statues, plant pots and pediments over doors are strategically placed around the courtyard and in the foliage areas. The pool is trimmed with black galaxy granite edging under travertine coping, giving the water a dark appearance similar to a coy pond. Marble and glass top tables add a sense of indoor comfort and style to the exterior. A large pool house with French doors includes seating, entertainment areas and a large whirlpool bath. "Everything used

in the courtyard area is sustainable and low maintenance," said Morgan.

If only we had a beautiful place to get out of the rain and entertain...

Stepping into the front foyer of the home causes immediate amazement and awe. It is impossible to decide which item of beauty to look at first. A European eclectic table with an oversized oval glass top sits in the center of the foyer and is used for champagne and hors d'oeuvres while entertaining or as a display base for silver and crystal candlesticks and decorative pieces. The floor is a black and white marble diamond pattern. Two petite half round Italian tables sit on each end of a pink satin settee.

Your eye is drawn upward and around to the art collection displayed on the foyer walls. According to Wilkins, each piece tells a personal story. Wilkins spent time studying design at the Musee des Arts Decoratifs at the Louvre in Paris. Each day she studied architect-

ture on foot gathering influence and ideas from the antique exteriors and interiors of decorative arts. "I soaked it up like a sponge," said Wilkins.

She has returned to Paris many times since. The artwork in the foyer includes pieces gleaned from those trips including many originals, French posters, a framed piece of sheet music from a song she wrote and a 14-karat gold framed Erte's entire theatre collection. As a stark contrast to the traditional pieces in the foyer, the stairs leading to the second story of the foyer have a very contemporary wool black and white oval pattern on a Stark carpet runner.

Just behind the foyer is an enormous 40 foot wide living room painted in a chromatically deep fuschia pink. Wilkins has designed the room to have three





distinct but fluid seating areas. The formal dining area includes a wrought iron dining table base with a glass top and white wood chairs with pink, green, black and yellow striped fabric. A black Sisal rug under the table is over a black diamond marble floor extending throughout the room. A vintage pub sign turned into a Trumeau mirror hangs on the wall.

This area is lively and fun but also contains an abundance of silver and crystal and an old world rubbed black painted china cabinet displaying Czechoslovakian china. A pair of handmade silver finished display cabinets with glass shelving on each side of the bay window contain commissioned hand blown pink vases by Kenny Peiper as well as pieces of all ages and sizes from artists around the world. The vast array of art retains the classic elegance of the dining area.

The center area of the room includes an oversized picture window with a view of the pool and courtyard. In front of the window sits Wilkins' baby grand

piano with various upholstered stools and tables inviting guests to gather around the piano to hear her, her talented husband Howard, or their guests play or sing along. A custom wool dyed and hand stitched rug in black and fuschia pink, designed by Wilkins, contrasts beautifully with the fuschia walls.

The far end of the room is set with furniture around a new French fireplace for a quiet conversation area. Drapery panels from gufrage patterned velvet bring warmth to the large room. The original house ended at this point with no openings, and it is here that the new addition begins.

If only we had a family salon for friends with a wonderful spot for games and watching television...

Morgan and Wilkins designed the new addition to have a less formal family room beyond the living area. They used a two-sided fireplace, and in this room, used a less formal but beautiful carved wood English mantle. Wall to wall bookshelves from the same

carved wood create display, TV and storage space for many more art and memorabilia pieces. A casual greige couch, two black leather chairs, and a gold coffee table create a comfortable place to gather. Above the couch is an intriguing painting depicting adults during the 30s and 40s era in colorful clothing socializing and celebrating. "This painting denotes who we are," said Wilkins. "We love to have friends in, enjoy each other, sing, dance and have interesting conversation. The colors, the dress, the elegance; it all brings joy to my heart. They are having a glorious time," she said. A marble top round table and chairs provide a place for Wilkins and her husband to sit, eat and play a hand of cards or backgammon.

A vestibule with an elegant powder room and a bar kitchen leads from the family room to the pool and courtyard area. The kitchen has black custom cabinetry for crystal glassware, a hammered steel sink, black granite countertops, a wine bar and an ice maker to ease entertaining by the pool.



If only we could get the luggage out of the shower . . . If only we had bigger closets . . . If only we had a guestroom in the house . . .

A rear vestibule off the family room contains storage rooms for entertaining supplies and household items, a large coat closet and a staircase leading to the second story of the addition. "A second family room, with seven closets (one that contains a treadmill), a desk, table, chairs and seating, is a room we desperately needed," said Wilkins. Two additional bedrooms and the master suite

complete the new space.

According to Morgan, this project was beautiful, extreme and full of emotion because it was her personal home. "It was slightly easier because Wilkins is visual and understands our business. Gail and Howard have both been wonderful examples and role models for me as a young person, and ours is a really important friendship," he said. For Wilkins, the decision to stay in her home and add on, instead of moving to a condo or townhome where she couldn't entertain, made all the difference in the quality of

her life. Gail and her husband are involved in many non-profit organizations and much of their entertaining includes using their home to give back to the community. To enrich the lives of others is now an essential part of "the list."

Wilkins beamed, "I dreamed it ten years ago, wrote it down, and now my husband and I are living the dream with our family and friends, surrounded by all of our favorite memories and pieces in our peaceful home. *Here's to life! We are grateful indeed,*" concluded Wilkins. *