



Best of All Worlds

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A home in the Dutch Neck neighborhood of West Windsor combines the charm of the old with the comfort of the new

The best houses are the ones that absorb and reflect the stories of their occupants, past and present. There may be vestiges of their wanderings, be it in Krakow, Poland, or Queens, N.Y.

The Dutch Neck home of Renata Adamska and Witold Szewczyk relates such stories. And even though it's not a Victorian, it exudes the charms of that turn-of-the-century architecture, with so many details to dazzle the senses.

In a neighborhood of Victorians, this house has the best of all worlds: the strong bones of masonry construction, architectural details of pre-War New York City apartment buildings and the comforts of suburbia — a large front porch, arbor-covered patio and a garden that butts up against an open field.

You feel the glow the first time you visit, and you want to come back and get to know these people, to have another look at all the stained glass windows and the warmly painted rooms, to drink a glass of wine under the rack from where their stainless steel pots hang — heck, to eat something cooked in those pots.

Hiram A. Cook, whose name is engraved in the stone foundation, built the house for himself in 1907.

As their names suggest, Renata Adamska and Witold Szewczyk (pronounced "Sheftig," but let's just call them Renata and Witold) were born in Poland. They met in college in Krakow, although there was nothing romantic at first. He emigrated to the United States 22 years ago, and she came five years later. Witold was the only person she knew in the States, so she followed him to Long Island City, N.Y.

A year later they married, although there was no engagement. "I gave him an ultimatum," Renata says. "I told him 'Marry me or I'm going back to Poland.'" They have been happily wed for 16 years. ➤➤



Witold Szewczyk and Renata Adamska





October was a special month for the couple. It is the month Witold arrived in the United States. They just celebrated the 1-year birthday of their daughter, Alexandra, and October is also the month they bought their house 11 years ago.

Renata works as accounting manager at the Westin Hotel in Plainsboro, and Witold is a property manager in New York. Her mother, Zofia Adamska, has come to stay and take care of the baby.

In his work, Witold often salvages treasures from tenants who abandon them. He has taken a large stained glass panel and built a door around it that connects the living room to the sunroom.

Renata's sister runs a stained glass business in Poland, and has made many windows for this house that Witold and Renata brought back on the plane — in three trips.

In addition to his great finds from New York buildings, Witold is also talented in making things. When Renata saw a table in a catalog, he scoffed at the expense and built one himself. When she wanted mosaic tile work around the kitchen, he went to the tile store, bought inexpensive tile, broke it up and made his own mosaic.

"I'm cheap," is how he explains his inventiveness. ➤➤



The house was bought for a bargain price because it was in bad shape. The previous owner was in her late 80s, and when she moved out she left behind many belongings. Renata and Witold bought some furnishings — two rugs, two sideboards and a wash stand — but there were rooms full of junk that had to be hauled away.

When the house was built, recounts Witold, it had a heating system, but in the 1940s a fireplace was added. The fireplace mantel was salvaged from a building in Queens. Renata stripped six coats of paint, using a toothpick to clean out the finely carved woodwork. A Vermont Casting stove insert with fans that blow out the hot air has been added, and the entire first floor is heated with it. There are also turn-of-the-century radiators that carry hot water heat throughout the house.

The family likes to entertain large groups, and so the dining room table seats 10 for Christmas and other holidays. When Witold's family came for Christmas last year, his mother borrowed a sewing machine from her daughter in Yardley, Pa., and made curtains for the house.

There is a separate barn building, ➤➤





designed by West Windsor architect Heidi Kleinman, for entertaining larger parties, such as one they had in 2007, inviting all the neighbors for the 100-year anniversary of their house.

There had been an old barn in the center of their yard that they'd hoped to restore, but it was too derelict, so they tore it down and built a new one, which also serves as a garage. The floor of the garage is covered with pristine ceramic tile.

"In Poland, everyone puts tile in their garage," Witold says.

All the home's walls are filled with artwork, including a painting of a Polish forest in late summer by their brother-in-law. Renata plays flute and piano, and the piano in the living room was bought on eBay for \$1.

The living room is painted a rich red, making the room as soothing as the womb. "I always wanted red, and it took six coats of paint," Renata says. "It looks best at night." The windows are small, making the house dark, so the bright colors give the house warmth. The dining room is painted salmon, the library pea green.

The original woodwork has been sanded and restored. "There are 52 windows and 27 doors in this house," says Witold, who refinished them all. Pocket doors separate the central hall from the living room and library.

The carved balustrade and stairs also had to be sanded and refinished.

Bookshelves were built in ➤➤





the library to match the woodwork by a carpenter in Brooklyn. "It was cheaper," says Witold, who took the measurements and installed the cabinets.

There is a desk and file cabinets from Pottery Barn, made to look vintage 1940s, and a leather chair, where Renata reclines during long phone conversations with relatives in Poland.

Before moving to West Windsor, the couple lived in Queens. "I always loved Princeton — it's very European — but we couldn't afford it so we started looking in Cranbury, which was also expensive, and then this house came up," Renata says. "We were looking for a long time, and he decided this house was it. At that point I would have fallen for anything."

There is a wine cellar/cold storage in the basement, which has been finished with a tin ceiling — salvaged from an old New York apartment, of course — and even includes a painting of wine and grapes. It can accommodate up to 700 bottles. Witold used hinges from his grandparents' farm in Poland on a special wood door that leads to the wine cellar.

Even the basement is pristine and ➤


organized. Tucked in a corner is Witold's workshop. There's a white pegboard on one wall, from where all his tools, perfectly clean and shiny, neatly hang. There are tiny drawers filled with nails and screws, and nothing is out of order. There isn't even any dust or half-finished projects.

A visitor finds herself drunk on the orderliness, and he has the audacity to apologize for the mess.

(Upstairs, it's the same with Renata. They have sealed off the second staircase and turned it into a pantry, and the former stairs have been sanded and scrubbed and refinished and turned into shelves for spices and other staples of the larder. It is so orderly it could be mapped on graph

paper, but she apologizes for the mess.)

The basement seems to go on forever, and in addition to that incredibly organized workshop, there is a room where all the vegetables of summer have been canned and lined up in rows: tomato sauce and tomato juice, peaches, zucchini. "It's the Polish genes," Renata says of all this productivity.

In another area, there are shelves and shelves of LPs: Doris Day, Engelbert Humperdinck, Barbra Streisand, John Lennon, Judy Collins, Billy Joel, even some Polish music — all left behind in apartments and rescued by Witold. Renata bought him a turntable and he likes to 





listen to Frank Sinatra.

Tenants also leave behind crystal chandeliers — Witold can't stand to see these go to waste. If he can't use it, he'll put it out on the street so someone else can take it.

Last summer, the house was on the GroWW (Greening of West Windsor) Garden Tour. There is a large brick patio, with stone steps leading to another patio and more stone steps until you reach a grate from a New York sidewalk. "We like to be outside, and we can be out here April

through October," Renata says, sitting under the expansive arbor.

The vegetable garden held 70 tomato plants, as well as beets, cukes, squash, carrots, basil, peppers, horseradish and rhubarb. Witold likes his rhubarb raw.

When they bought the house, did they have any idea how long it would take? "I thought it would take two years," Witold says. "It took five years. I would never do it again and we're not moving." PM