

East Meets West

With help from Studio Nuovo,
a typical Alexandria home is
transformed into a Zenlike
Japanese retreat

By Alice Leccese Powers

color is used sparingly and for dramatic effect

Industrial materials are offset by the warmth of hardwood custom cabinetry in every room. Seventeen years ago, Harada and Nakayama purchased their first solid walnut chest from Hardwood Artisans, and were so impressed with its craftsmanship and durability that they dreamed of a house filled with their work. Many of the custom pieces they planned for their renovation required tight tolerances; Harada wanted many through-joints—the hardware-free joints found in traditional Japanese furniture. Mike Wolniewicz of Hardwood Artisans, who Harada described as “passionate and a perfectionist,” even made the cabinet pulls for the bedroom furniture himself.

Completing the team of Harada, Ramos, Friedman and Wolniewicz was construction manager Sam Thompson. In a renovation with few standard design details, Thompson was essential in scheduling the various subcontractors and solving construction and installation problems.

The kitchen is now the heart of the home. Unlike the previous kitchen with its awkward island blocking the fireplace, the new kitchen is open, divided into preparation and reading/dining areas. Low shelves near the kitchen table are stocked with an inviting display of children's books. Shelves that display Asian-influenced pottery from local artists top the reborn gas fireplace with its granite and glass tile surround. Over the table is a glass and metal lantern fixture that Harada found online. Additional pantry space is hidden behind shoji screens in the adjacent hallway.

Three bedrooms and two baths are to the right of the center hallway and the living room and dining room are to the left. In the main bath the old tub with its sliding glass door was replaced by a new tub and curtain, making children's baths easier. Harada pointed out the granite countertop and tiles that echo those in the kitchen. “Ricardo and Sheree taught me to use the same materials in different

rooms to give a sense of consistency and space.”

The original master bath was a tight, uninviting room. Borrowing footage from the bedroom, Friedman and Ramos created a new bath spacious enough for a window seat and plenty of storage. Again, the tile and granite of the kitchen were repeated.

The master bedroom is a contemplative space. A new walk-in closet created space in the bedroom for the purely aesthetic. Hardwood Artisans made all the furniture including an unusual, graduated entertainment unit modeled after the Japanese *tansu* chest. Harada explained that fire was so prevalent in Japan that people kept valuables in a *tansu* chest that doubled as a storage unit and a moveable trunk. A panel of variegated light from a display of small freestanding lamps provides a visual counterpoint to the sliding door during the day and a wall of light after dark.

Color is used sparingly and for dramatic effect throughout the house: a single red cushion in a monochromatic bathroom, an orange glazed pot on a granite counter in the kitchen and a yellow wall-mounted screen (another eBay purchase) that offsets the window in the bedroom.

The living room exemplifies the power of discreetly used color. An off-white leather sofa rests on a neutral carpet. The coffee table, also by Hardwood Artisans, is another variation on the *tansu* theme. A *shokudai*, a candleholder made of iron, hangs in one corner; a stack of red pillows in another. A black lacquer baby grand piano dominates one side of the room. Looming over the piano like a bird in flight is an *uchicake*, Harada's dramatic red wedding kimono, mounted on a kimono stand. Next to the kimono is a large photograph of Harada and Nakayama on their wedding day.

Perhaps Harada and Studio Nuovo's most radical decision was to eliminate the formal dining room in favor of a multi-purpose room for chess, computer work and reading. Shoji screens hide storage and the computer equipment. Instead of the traditional rice paper, Xorel, an almost indestructible fabric, child-proofs the sliding doors. On the walls are two large paintings by the Hawaiian artist James Hoyle. A small x-table, flanked by two reproduction chairs by Frank Lloyd Wright, is always ready for a game of chess, one of Grant Nakayama's passions. Harada said she does not miss having a formal dining room, but is considering a low table with floor cushions for her children to do their homework and for casual entertaining.

Harada and Studio Nuovo have come close to cre-

In the kitchen (opposite), industrial materials are offset by the warmth of hardwood cabinetry. A granite and glass tile surround gives the fireplace an updated look.





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eventeen years ago when newlyweds Larrene Harada and Grant Nakayama bought their home in Alexandria, Virginia, they logically itemized its pluses: location on a cul de sac, a large private backyard, lots of space and an easy commute to their jobs in Washington, DC.

But its drawbacks were many. Architecturally undistinguished, the house was a veritable 1960s décor museum. Harada and Nakayama bought it from the original owners who had such a fondness for green wall-to-wall carpeting that they installed it in every room. The young couple spent years purging the house of its mid-20th-century interior, but always thought that they would eventually trade up and move into something more suitable.

Over the years Harada and Nakayama had two children, now five and nine, and Harada quit her job as a physicist. The assets of the house started to outweigh its deficits as the family nested into its convenient Alexandria neighborhood. When her youngest child started school, Harada put her energy into creating a Japanese-influenced home, geared to her young family. She turned to Sheree Friedman and Ricardo A. Ramos and the three worked in tandem to transform the home from a compromise to a promise fulfilled.

Harada, Ramos and Friedman form an



international trio. Of Japanese ancestry, Harada was raised in Hawaii. Ramos, an architect, is the child of Venezuelan diplomats and grew up in Europe and the United States. Friedman, a medical technician in her first career, was born in Las Vegas and raised in the Washington area. Three years ago she and Ramos formed Studio Nuovo. Before working on this project, neither had experience with Japanese furniture or architecture. "It was a wonderful learning experience," said Ramos. "And it was wonderful to work with a client who is involved."

And Larrene Harada was involved. She had very definite ideas about what she wanted and was proficient in acquiring materials and even furniture on the Internet. She is devoted to eBay, her source for Japanese antiques, paintings and screens. Most impressive was Harada's ability to put her plans in PowerPoint presentations that illustrated exactly what the finished space would look like. The proposed room is not only visualized to scale, but also animated. With a click of her mouse, shoji screens open to reveal the contents of a closet or zoom onto a close-up of intricately constructed cabinet joints.

Harada and Nakayama's renovation involved the entire top floor of their home—kitchen, dining room, living room, two baths and three bedrooms. For a year the family moved to the lower level, camping out as contractors, carpenters, plumbers and electricians worked above. From the start, Harada made it plain that she had two priorities: her children and an environment that reflected, but did not mimic, their ancestral home.

"The house is set up for children," said Harada. Many decisions considered both aesthetics and durability. Harada tolerated a hardwood floor in her previous kitchen, but found it looked worn from constant mopping; this time she opted for practical vinyl. Olefin area rugs take rugged wear, and commercial fabric on upholstered furniture repels liquids. Even the mirror in the bathroom tilts to accommodate the reflection of a growing child. Art supplies are stored in an antique *tansu* chest and low-hung kitchen cabinets keep children's plates and cups easily accessible.

Interior Design: Sheree Friedman and Ricardo A. Ramos, Studio Nuovo, Potomac, Maryland
Custom Furniture Design: Mike Wolniewicz, Hardwood Artisans, Alexandria, Virginia
Photography: Bob Narod, Sterling, Virginia

Sliding shoji screens conceal storage space in the converted dining room, where the table is always set for a game of chess (previous spread). In the living room, inventive screens and a custom table based on a tansu chest create an Asian ambience (opposite). In the hallway, the owners display antique Japanese tea ceremony implements on an antique Japanese cabinet (left).



The master bedroom is a contemplative space, with its panel of variegated light (right). The designers carried the sleek granite countertops and glass tiles into the bathrooms (above).

ating a perfect, Asian-influenced environment within an intrinsically imperfect structure. The owners have made peace with their compromise house, creating 21st-century harmony out of mid-20th-century architectural chaos. The result is not a replication of a Japanese home, but the best of many cultures—the dual sensibilities of Friedman and Ramos, the craftsmanship of Wolniewicz, and the perseverance of Harada, who saw the potential of her unprepossessing suburban home.

But Friedman, Ramos and Harada have plans. The large, above-ground basement, which includes a family room and fireplace, office space and guest quarters, looks like the “before” pictures of the upstairs. There are a few remnants of ‘60s décor, boxes are stacked in one corner and the furniture is “early marriage.” Ramos and Friedman looked around the space and then reassured their client, “We’re going to send you drawings next week.” ♦

Based in Washington, DC, Alice Leccese Powers is the editor of *France in Mind*, a Vintage/Random House book published in 2003.



RESOURCES

Electrical Work: Tinkham Electric Company, Inc., Hughesville, MD. **Hardwood Refinishing:** Harris Hardwood Floors, Clinton, MD. **Art Framing:** Miller Fine Arts, Alexandria, VA.

DINING ROOM

Wall Unit: Mike Wolniewicz, Hardwood Artisans, Alexandria, VA. **Wall Unit Shoji Screen Fabric:** Carnegie/Xorel. **Original Art Work:** James Hoyle. **Frank Lloyd Wright Reproduction Barrel Chairs:** italydesign.com.

LIVING ROOM

Sofa: Mitchell Gold, Storehouse Furniture, Alexandria, VA. **Tansu Coffee Table:** Hardwood Artisans, Alexandria, VA. **Red Zabuton Pillows:** Exclusive Draperies, Chantilly, VA. **Area Rug:** Royal Dutch, Expo Design Center, Fairfax, VA. **Standing Shoji Screens:** Mike Wolniewicz, Hardwood Artisans, Alexandria, VA. **Standing Shoji Screen Fabric:** Carnegie/Xorel. **Japanese Scroll:** eBay. **Lacquer Nesting Tables:** Kikuimports.com. **Orchid:** The Virginia Florist, Alexandria, VA.

KITCHEN

Cabinetry: Brookhaven Cabinets. **Granite:** R. Bratti Associates, Alexandria, VA. **Range:** JennAir, Bray & Scarff, Alexandria, VA. **Range Hood:** Sirius, cstorestuff.com. **Custom Millwork:** Mike Wolniewicz, Hardwood Artisans, Alexandria, VA. **Glass Tiles:** Oceanside, Glasstile, Expo Design Center, Fairfax, VA. **Flooring:** Centiva, Harris Hardwood Floors, Clinton, MD. **Red Vase:** Elizabeth Lescault, Grey House Potters, Arlington, VA. **Red & Blue Stripped Vase:** Elizabeth Lescault, The Torpedo Factory Art Center, Alexandria, VA. **Coffee Set:** Arne Jacobsen, Unicahome.com. **Raku Pot:** Heidi Schramm, Grey House Potters, Arlington, VA. **Turned Wood Bowl:** Alan Becker, Gallery West, Alexandria, VA.

CHILDREN'S BATHROOM

Cabinetry: Brookhaven Cabinets. **Granite:** R. Bratti Associates, Alexandria, VA. **Alcove Insert:** Mike Wolniewicz, Hardwood Artisans, Alexandria, VA. **Floor/Wall Tiles:** Artistic Tiles, Washington, DC. **Glass Wall Tiles:** Oceanside, Glasstiles, Artistic Tiles, Washington, DC. **Sink:** Kohler, Ferguson, Springfield, VA. **Faucet:** Jado, Expo Design Center, VA. **Towel Bars:** Ginger, Toohome.com. **Wall Scones:** Ginger, Smaat

Lumber Co., Alexandria, VA. **Pivoting Mirror:** Toohome.com. **Rock Vase:** Michel Harvey, Gallerie Michele, Alexandria, VA.

BEDROOM HALLWAY

Japanese Antique Furniture: Owners' Collection. **Granite:** R. Bratti Associates, Alexandria, VA. **Woodblock Print:** Katsuyuki Nishijima. **Antique Tea Ceremony Furo & Kama—Iron Pot:** Kikuimports.com. **Hishaku—Tea Ladle:** Owners' Collection. **Chashaku—Tea Scoop:** Owners' Collection. **Chasen—Bamboo Brush:** Owners' Collection. **Natsume—Container:** Owners' Collection. **Nakayama (left) & Harada (right) Woodblocks:** Owners' Collection. **Doors:** T.W. Perry, Chevy Chase, MD. **Door Handles:** Omnia, Hamedick.com.

MASTER BEDROOM

Nightstands: Mike Wolniewicz, Hardwood Artisans, Alexandria, VA. **Bed:** Mike Wolniewicz, Hardwood Artisans, Alexandria, VA. **Wall Light Sculpture:** Michael Jennings, Creative Classics, Alexandria, VA. **Table Lamps:** Cherry Tree Design, Cherytreedesign.com. **Red Zabuton Pillows:** Exclusive Draperies, Chantilly, VA. **Art & Accessories:** Owners' Collection.