

Style The Perfect Bachelor's Pad

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A young developer transforms tired office space into a sharp modern apartment.

BY ROB LAYTON

Alon Barzilay begins describing his bachelor pad from half a block away, as he strides among the more starched properties of Chancellor Street.

How this neighborhood has come back? Oh, it never sank very far, he says — this is Rittenhouse Square, after all. But it certainly did rebound from a design energy that had grown a little, well, stale.

Barzilay ticks off the street's renovations as he walks, renovations that have made sparking new homes out of offices, hotels, apartment remodelings. Finally, he arrives at his own contribution to Rittenhouse: a two-story carriage house on the 2000 block of Chancellor.

His house. Very much his house. Its old stable doors now enclose a garage, its odd side alley now forms his front door. And its concept came straight out of his eclectic imagination.

"I wanted to prove that contemporary can be warm and fun," he says. "And I wanted an environment where, after I'm done traveling around, I feel welcomed."

An eclectic house, yes — externally very true to the enforced sobriety of the historic district. But inside, it is open and airy and light, glinting with stainless steel, filled with keyboards, including a grand piano, and bearing everywhere the stamp of a man determined to fix his ideas in stone and steel.

The architecture firm JK Roller Architects LLC helped him get the required permits. Designer Nikki Losse consulted on accessorization. But the ideas came from Barzilay, who, as a partner in the small development firm The Klein Company, had no shortage of them.



Originally a carriage house, this property just off Rittenhouse Square had been used as a landscape architect's office before Alon Barzilay purchased it in 2003. Barzilay gutted the interior, knocked out part of a floor, and styled the interior to create a chic retreat in the heart of the city.

Barzilay paid \$425,000 for the house in 2003, when it had recently been a landscape architect's office. He spent another \$200,000 on the rehab, though the number is hard to figure — he did a lot of the work himself. Now he puts its value somewhere around \$1.4 million.

Renovation began last year and finished early this year, with pauses along the way to find the right vases, kitchen storage and patio furniture. But Barzilay's concepts were present from the beginning.

Take the laundry chutes. At several places in the house, the master needs only to throw his clothing into what looks like a cupboard. The clothes slip down a chute and collect in a cabinet in the front foyer, where the launderer, entering through the front door, can collect and later return them. The foyer's interior doors restrict further access to the house. This lets dry cleaners, grocery deliverers and others pick up and deliver without intruding.

Then there's the invisible office. A glance at the main room on the ground

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ALON BARZILAY

floor shows basic living room amenities — couch, chairs, coffee table, flat-screen TV. But the TV doubles as a computer monitor, and the computer remains unseen. Barzilay can surf to his heart's content sitting on the couch using a keyboard that, when not in use, sticks magnetically to a wall panel, where it won't add clutter or get lost. The TV remote sticks there too. The entertainment system stays out of sight also: The speakers on the patio look like rocks.

Wired into the TV/computer also is the security system, so that when Barzilay tires of TV he can change channels and watch the street in front of his house. The house's security system is well hidden.

The dining room is invisible. The space you'd expect to contain a dining table and chairs instead contains a Yamaha grand piano, tapping into the side of Barzilay that has been playing piano and studying music composition since he was five. (He also occasionally plays with hands using electric keyboards and synthesizers in styles ranging from jazz, orchestra ensembles, and rock.) When there's dining to be done, a fold-out table emerges from beside the granite fireplace and opens to seat 12.

Quirky design elements make an appearance, such as antique doors on the bathroom and laundry room imprinted as "Hall of Chemistry" and "Department of Art and Papermaking." The house contains a light fixture from a now-demolished building at Cornell University. Oh yes, and a large gum-ball machine.

This is Barzilay's first house.

"You know what it is," he says, "you never set out to make a reflection of yourself, it just comes out of the process. But this house tells the story of who I am."

Barzilay is the son of Dale and Zvi Barzilay, she an interior designer and antiques dealer, he an architect and current president of Toll Brothers luxury home builders. This

means that, as a child, Alon Barzilay spent lots of time hearing about the building and decoration of luxury homes.

As an undergrad at Cornell he put aside the idea of building houses for a living, but then with a friend he won a business plan contest for a business doing exactly that. Job offers followed, but Barzilay stuck to the entrepreneurial dream he had always nourished. A master's degree from Harvard in housing and real estate development confirmed his direction.

Prior to his current job, he helped launch the multifamily apartment division for Toll Brothers. Now, as a partner with Klein, he oversees all phases of luxury multi-family housing development, from finding the land





to handing over the keys.

His current projects include a 233-unit neo-traditional apartment community in Cherry Hill, a 137-unit high-rise at 18th and Vine streets in Philadelphia, and projects in Florida.

"The irony is that I think of fictional people for the model homes we build — give them hobbies and occupations and activities," Barzilay says. "And with this house the fictional person I created was myself."

Barzilay originally intended to build a 1,200-square-foot apartment for himself on the second floor, and maintain existing office space on the first to pay the mortgage. However, with real estate values rising so much, a single-family house eventually seemed like the better plan.

The work of refurbishing began, as it often does, by ripping out just about everything, including in this case most of the second floor, the actual floor itself. Who needs all that floor when in its place you can have soaring open space with huge windows looking out on a landscaped terrace in back?

The work required approval from the Philadelphia Historical Commission, the Center City Residents Association and the Philadelphia Zoning Board.

Barzilay considers it the perfect house for a young, single professional — in other words: Himself.

"As a developer I create and sell lifestyle, and every house I build says something about the person who will live there: Where do they go to work, where do they buy a bottle of milk, who are they?"

"The same is true of this house," he says. "It's not a question of sticks and bricks: it's about creating a social experience." ■

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