

The Washington Post

MAY 3, 1992

Magazine

SWEET  
SUBURBIA

*The New Face of the Good Life*



SPRING HOME & DESIGN ISSUE

# LET THERE BE LIGHT

*Because Michael and Rose Bartlett* live at the same Bethesda address where they rented for years, their story would seem to be a case of blooming where you're planted. And that certainly sounds appropriate for a landscape architect and his flower-savvy wife. But upon further investigation, it becomes clear that the Bartletts picked where to be planted very, very carefully.

It was Rose who found the little asbestos-shingled frame house, down a street just over the District line that seems almost rural. And it was so modest that the couple were able to buy it for less than \$100,000 in 1984. Its location met most of Michael's criteria, some of them no doubt inherited from the first four generations of gardening Bartletts ("The earlier ones were rich; I'm the first one to make a profession of it," Michael says). The criteria: "First, find a corner lot. That gives you only two neighbors. Then, pick a ridge. That gives you light an hour before and after places farther down. Also, get a house that runs from east to west, so you have a natural morning room and what we call a sunset room."

The existing house took advantage of none of these features. The little house had small windows, and its land fell off abruptly, down to the street.



THE BARTLETT HOUSE, ABOVE, LOOKS OLD BUT ISN'T. IT WAS DESIGNED TO ACCOMMODATE THE MODERN INSISTENCE ON LIGHT. ANTIQUE GARDENING BOOKS, GUATEMALAN GOURDS AND AN IRON HITCHING POST FILL A CORNER OF THE LIVING ROOM, OPPOSITE PAGE. MANY

OF THE FRENCH DOORS ARE ACTUALLY POCKET DOORS, OPENING THE WHOLE GROUND FLOOR. THE STAIRS TO THE BEDROOMS, RIGHT, ARE AT THE BACK OF THE HOUSE TO KEEP THE FRONT LIGHT. THE LITTLE WOOD "HOUSE" IS A GUATEMALAN BREAD SAFE.







That's where Bartlett the landscaper began to shine. "I don't decorate with flowers," he says. "I'm more inclined to bring in truckloads of soil." And so, indeed, came truckload after truckload of topsoil, building up the corner of the property to house level so the owners and their little boy, not the neighborhood dogs, could have the use of it. Then came the dirt that created a berm, or a small ridge of earth, in front of the house to close in the front garden and "turn it into a new room." This was not meant to be what Michael calls the standard "'50s show-me house" sur-

rounded by lawn and completely on view.

Meanwhile, with the help of architect friends Outerbridge Horsey and Merle Thorpe, the house and its adjacent, decrepit two-car garage went from a narrow vertical to a broad pavilion 60 feet long, drenched in all the light the site could offer. The house, with its white clapboard siding and tin roof, looks like nothing grander than a wonderful old well-preserved farmhouse set in a broad lawn and garden. "Most people fuss things up," says Michael. "I like good-backbone stuff."

The trick to building a well-lit house, he

AN ANTIQUE GREYHOUND-AND-HARE (MINUS THE HARE) WEATHERVANE, ABOVE LEFT, DOMINATES THE SITTING ROOM AT THE WESTERN END OF THE HOUSE. THE PLANTERS ON THE MANTLEPIECE ARE OLD PIG TROUGHS. UPSTAIRS, ABOVE RIGHT, BED-



to bargain! Anybody can spend money. The trick is to keep a narrow budget." The siding was milled outside of Baltimore "for a third the price I could find here." The workers came in from Hagerstown for about half the local rate. The handsome moldings are, in fact, standard-size boards beveled on-site to look custom. The windows and doors are all ready-made, but used in innovative ways. Upstairs, an impressive bump-out on the south wall of the master bedroom is made of three tiers of factory-made windows stacked ingeniously, one atop the next, by Horsey and Thorpe. Rose uses the sunny space to jump-start flower and vegetable seedlings.

And, yes, there are Bartlett friends who sort of sniff at the suburban-ness of their homestead, but, as Rose points out, the sight of "the little kids biking to school" reinforces the Bartletts' decision every morning.



**ROOMS AND STUDIES OPEN ONTO A LONG, TAPERED HALLWAY, WHICH DEAD-ENDS AT THE MASTER BEDROOM. THE BARTLETTS BOUGHT THEIR COUNTRY QUEEN ANNE DINING CHAIRS, RIGHT, AT AUCTION; THE GUATEMALAN BIRD IS A GIFT FROM MICHAEL'S MOTHER.**

adds, is to keep the structure one room deep, connected by long hallways. "And you want to put the hallways on the north side, so they don't steal light away from the rooms." Because of strong summer sun, though, the hallway upstairs runs along the south wall. Downstairs, the hallway is pierced with windows that look like French doors, and, Rose points out, some of them are pocket doors that slide into the walls, opening up the whole house.

Now, anything can be accomplished with money. But, Michael declares proudly, "I love