

The Washington Post

Magazine

Looking to unplug in your own house?
Here's some inspiration



The fireplace, warm colors and gently curving patterns make Eva and Brett Esber's living room inviting. The Arlington, Va., couple wanted to use it for family gatherings and reading. (Goran Kosanovic/For The Washington Post)

By Scott Sowers
July 2016

In today's frenetic society, the rooms of our houses multitask as well. People are answering email in the kitchen, watching TV while in the bathtub, turning dining rooms into homework stations and family rooms into home theaters. Sometimes, even at home, you want to get away. If you're seeking inspiration for spaces that encourage closeness and serenity rather than commotion and screens, take a look at rooms designed to be enjoyed with a book, some conversation and maybe a box of matches.

A church-Like feel

Janet Berls has always been a lover of books, but she didn't have a space in which to enjoy them. The living room in her 1970s-era townhouse in the Chevy Chase neighborhood of Washington "was fake Colonial with no authenticity," says Berls. "It was a very dark and gloomy room, very depressing to be in."



A warm wall of wood faces the basalt fireplace surround (top photo) in Janet Berls's Washington living room. (Goran Kosanovic/For The Washington Post)

About 10 years ago, Berls, who is 79 and a former chief policy analyst with the Department of Agriculture, saw a project designed by architect Reena Racki and asked her to redo the living room. "We wanted a quiet room for readers," says Racki.

Racki, who is based in Chevy Chase, D.C., started with a piece Berls already owned — a Saarinen "womb chair" — and the memory of a visit to the famed Notre Dame du Haut. The Roman Catholic chapel in Ronchamp, France, was designed by Le Corbusier and is known for its sculptural qualities and use of light.

Mimicking the chapel's walls, Racki built a wall inside a wall to create deep-set windows that reflect light off the wells. She punctured the interior walls

to channel more light from an existing skylight. The ceiling was lowered, providing space to hide cove lighting and illuminate a barn wood accent wall. More lights hide inside floor-mounted egglike fixtures. A Saarinen table complements the vintage chair.

Open-faced cherry cabinets along the walls provide storage. The fireplace was surrounded by chiseled gray basalt. Challenges included getting the builder onboard with some of the unconventional elements, but everybody loves the result. Berls's book club meets there, a sacred space for the printed word.

“It has the religious feel of a church,” says Berls. “At night it is especially spiritual.”

A warm focal point

In 2013, when Eva and Brett Esber decided to update the living room in the front of their Arlington, Va., house, they also decided they could use a working fireplace, after all.



Eva and Brett Esber's inviting living room in Arlington, Va., now has a working fireplace. (Goran Kosanovic/For The Washington Post)

The couple had bought the brick Colonial in 1994 from a builder who had included a fireplace they didn't want. A deal was struck, and the fireplace

stayed — a non-vented focal point that functioned as decor rather than as a heat source.

The Esbers tapped interior designer Andrea Houck of Arlington to lead them to a family-friendly, quiet space, which would include upgrading the fireplace.

“We didn’t want it to be overly formal,” says Eva, who is 56 and a retired partner at the law firm Williams & Connolly. Her husband, Brett, is 57 and a partner at Blank Rome; their children are now 22 and 25.

“We wanted something the kids could be comfortable in, someplace we could do Christmas or just read by the fireplace,” she says. That’s when things went horribly wrong.

The contractor discovered that the builder had filled the chimney with concrete and other debris. The firebox and flue hadn’t been properly finished, and the chimney was partially clogged. Houck says, “We had a couple of people look at it and say, ‘This can’t be done.’ ”

Undeterred, the design team kept pressing for a solution. Jim Cooper, a mason working out of Springfield, Va., rebuilt the firebox, and M.R. Stride Plumbing, Heating and Cooling of Vienna, Va., installed a steel insert into the flue, making it good to go. The family chose natural gas as a fuel source.

With the fireplace providing a warm gathering place, Houck went transitional, softening the room’s edges and calming the mood by bringing in a curvaceous Eton sofa, chairs with gently sloping arms from Hickory Chair and a geometric rug with a soft, arcing pattern from Kravet Couture Rugs. The glass-topped oval-shaped “Crawford” coffee table came from Michael James, who also provided the fireplace screen. Elegant window treatments including the sheers were sourced from Zoffany. The walls were painted with warm whites and butter creams.

“We wanted a living room that would be a quiet getaway,” says Eva Esber, who adds that the family uses it for sitting, talking and, yes, reading by the fire.

Open to nature

Steven Butler and Rose Lee, who are both in their 60s, lived in Japan for 10 years and brought back some Eastern design sensibility to a Northwest Washington split-level they purchased in 2000. “We were interested in a Japanese-style kitchen and a Western lifestyle,” says Lee.



Steven Butler and Rose Lee's D.C. kitchen has a large space open to nature. (Goran Kosanovic/For The Washington Post)

The house had an awkward addition and an undersize kitchen that was half a level up from the back yard. While searching for answers, the couple won a free design consultation with D.C. architect Reena Racki at a silent auction. She advised demolishing the addition. "It was like a blob, stuck on the back of the house," says Racki. She proposed using the space to move the kitchen to the ground level and expand it.

Racki took note of the couple's lifestyle and built a model that checked all the boxes. "They're both big readers, they're into cooking and do everything from scratch. I proposed a warm wall, facing west with the fireplace and the cooktop. The east side is open to nature."

The family gave the project a green light and moved to a rental for eight months of construction. The kitchen and dining room moved downstairs, and a master suite was added above.

Custom steel framework supports the wall of windows in the garden room off of the kitchen, offering unobstructed views of the landscaped yard. Butler has his morning coffee in a curved Veneto chair from BoConcept in front of the gas fireplace, which functions as the room's heat source.

The couple enjoys views of three cherry trees they planted representing the home's three inhabitants: mother, father and daughter. The connection to nature is close to the space.

“There’s a life of fireflies that nobody knows anything about,” says Lee. “Every year it’s an amazing show.”

Careful curation

When Barbara Freedman and Craig Lussi downsized to an 1,800-square-foot condominium, they needed help making the living room “a place where we could lie on the sofa and read a book or have a cocktail party,” says Freedman, 73 and a retired educator.



“Polished prep” is the designer’s term for the relaxing and entertaining space in Barbara Freedman and Craig Lussi’s Chevy Chase, Md., condo. (Goran Kosanovic/For The Washington Post)

“We don’t really watch a lot of TV,” says Lussi, who is 80 and retired from commercial real estate. “I think new technology is all positive, but I’d rather do something than watch something.”

Interior designer Kelly Proxmire says the owners of the Chevy Chase, Md., condo “wanted to reconfigure the living area and incorporate as much of their existing furniture as possible.”

Proxmire, who is based in Bethesda, Md., widened the doorway to the kitchen and curated a lifetime's worth of furniture and art. Lussi participated in the 1960 Winter Olympics in the Nordic combined event, and his father coached Olympic skaters. An oil painting of a Norwegian fiord took center stage.

A sofa, antique buffet, bachelor's chest, two side chairs from Charles Stewart and two lounge chairs made the cut. Proxmire also salvaged a glass dining room table and cut it to fit the new space. The table can be used as a sideboard for parties or pulled into the middle of the room for seating. Furniture was chosen for comfort but also for size; rooms in the condo are smaller than in the couple's former five-bedroom home up the street.

The lounge chairs were re-covered with a floral pattern from Vervain, and the side chairs were livened with a wheat-colored fabric from Thibaut. Proxmire also plucked vintage Vanity Fair "Spy" prints from the pile of the couple's art collection.

Proxmire describes the feel and theme of the room with her design catchphrase "polished prep." Freedman says, "Sometimes designers will try to impose their will on a space. This room is cozy and serene and relates to us."