

Dream home: Couple tickled pink by green life in the city

Move from Montgomery County to Baltimore is thrill for retirees



Rich and Susan Walther in their Charles Village home, which includes solar panels for room and water heating. (Baltimore Sun photo by Lloyd Fox / May 27, 2010)

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When thinking ahead to retirement, some couples choose a house in the mountains or at the beach, while others prefer a retirement community. Rich and Susan Walther didn't take either. Instead, the couple, who spent nearly four decades living all around the country and in Korea, decided they would spend retirement in Baltimore.

"We both knew we wanted to live in the city," said Susan Walther, a 63-year-old retiree from the Smithsonian's Museum of American History, who along with her husband relocated to Baltimore from their home in Montgomery County.

Her husband, 64-year-old Rich Walther, a human resources director at Food Pro Corp. and soon-to-be retiree, said their urban dream home would "give us the most precious resource — time — to explore the social, artistic, educational, spiritual, cultural and political life of Baltimore."

In May 2005, after visiting the website Live Baltimore, which confirmed their desire to live in a central Baltimore neighborhood, they bought a \$285,000 solid brick, two-story "daylight" rowhouse in Charles Village.

After renting out the house for almost three years, the couple made the next monumental decision on their way to retirement living. They chose to deconstruct and then reconstruct their circa 1920s house on a quiet, tree-lined Charles Village side street.

In what would end up being a completely new, custom-built house — and "as 'green' as we could afford," said Susan Walther — the couple would call Second Chance Inc. to donate the property's interior structure to that organization.

"The workers salvaged not only the appliances, cabinets, windows and doors, but also the framing timbers and studs and even the bricks from the old back wall — all of which were taken to their warehouses behind Ravens stadium and sold for reuse in other building projects, rather than just going to landfill," said Rich Walther.

In July 2009, the Walthers moved into their state-of-the-art, contemporary, open-design home, appreciating the trust they had placed in Alexander Design Studio and Baltimore Green Construction to provide a job well done.

"The old [house] had four small bedrooms and one bathroom," said Susan Walther. "The new house has three large rooms with full baths, plus a powder room."

The first and second levels are 22 feet wide by 45 feet long. The house's back wall was pushed out 8 feet to increase living space on the first and second floors, yet still allow room for an 8-foot-wide exterior deck.

An open staircase, constructed of steel beams and wiring and reclaimed oak stair treads, separates the front of the first floor — used as an office — from the rest of the first floor. Two doors and one large picture window open onto the backyard and a compact view of houses across the alley. That same urban view, one level up, is found in the couple's second-floor master bedroom.

Floors throughout the home are of white oak, while cabinets in the galley kitchen are maple.

Most dramatic in the home's interior is an open staircase to the second level where interior walls, painted white, curve and swerve to the second-story ceiling where light splashes from more large windows at ceiling height.

Rich and Susan Walther enjoy sharing information with friends and family about their

"green" house, which includes solar panels for space heating and to heat water, concrete HardiePanels on the exterior back of the home, and Energy Star-rated appliances.

More than just the home's proximity to the pleasures of city living, though, the couple says that their home helps reduce their carbon footprint on the planet.

Making the dream

Dream element: The Walthers' all-brick home is in the Baltimore neighborhood of Charles Village, where old trees line the streets of the main thoroughfares of Guilford, Calvert, St. Paul, Charles and side streets numbered in the 20s and 30s. Here, many of the renovated properties with their brightly painted and detailed exterior trims have earned the homes the nickname "Painted Ladies." More than a standard renovation, however, Rich and Susan Walther chose a total de-construction of the home's interior followed by the building of a custom home as "green" as they could afford it.

Design inspiration: The interior, once an old "daylight rowhouse," is now open and "green," featuring curved walls that soar to an open second story, all painted white. "A light monitor or shed that extends through the roof, with windows on the south and west walls, allows natural sunlight to penetrate the center of the rowhouse all the way to the basement," said Rich Walther. "Three interior windows help distribute sunlight to almost every room of the house."

With a minimalistic approach to interior decor, the couple's choice of sleek leather furniture in the living area highlights such treasures as a midcentury modern Eero Saarinen grasshopper chair and a beautifully detailed Korean chest.

Personal touch: The couple has chosen favorite pieces of artwork to enhance the openness of their space. Stand-out pieces include a pair of painted totem-like poles resting on the floor and separating the front office area from the open living space at the rear of the home. Some choice cityscape paintings by artist friend Joe Jacobs, as well as the contemporary works of Susan Walther herself, fill a gallery wall on the home's second floor.

Surprise feature: Attractive and contemporary floor-to-ceiling maple cabinets line the living area, near the galley kitchen. These cabinets open to a refrigerator and pantry. Their placement allows more room for kitchen workspace but keeps the large appliances hidden from view.