



A Delicate BALANCE

Bringing an 1895 home into the 21st century requires time, patience and a light touch.

By KRISTINE HANSEN

Photos by RYAN HAINEY PHOTOGRAPHY

PERCHED ABOVE Lake Michigan on Milwaukee's East Side, a High Victorian Gothic home wrapped in limestone and designed by John A. Moller (who also designed the B.M. Goldberg Mansion on East Newberry Boulevard) yearned to translate to modern living.

Dubbed the Jackson Kemper House and, more informally, "The House on the Hill," it was built in 1895 for Jackson Bloodgood Kemper, a local lawyer. Kemper was the grandson of the Episcopal Church's first missionary bishop, also named Jackson Kemper,

who established Wisconsin's first Episcopal diocese and founded Nashotah House, a seminary that still enrolls students today.

According to the North Point South Historic District's application for National Historic Register status in 1979, many homes in the neighborhood, including this one, were inspired by English architecture.





In the kitchen, drawer pulls and faucets are akin to the home's era, and the round table "is a great place to read the morning newspapers or to keep each other company while dinner is being made," says one of the homeowners.

A new mudroom solves the "no back-hall identity" problem, says Blavat. Emerald-green armchairs jazz up the formal dining room, while the lower-level bar honors the homeowner's passion for sampling (and serving) craft beer.

The previous owners hired Deep River Partners, an architectural and interior design firm, to reimagine the second and third floors (including the main bedroom suite). In 2019, when the current owners moved in, they decided to continue and expand the work. This included adding a garage rooftop terrace and mud room, plus updates to the living room and dining room, and a full kitchen makeover.

"We were really trying to be a steward to keep the features of the house intact. There's so many fun little puzzles that we put together here," says Nicholas Blavat, an architect with Deep River.

With the house on the National Register of Historic Places, the extensive restoration had to be done carefully. One example: the new terrace above the garage, which required special city approval. "Our whole argument was that they have no yard," says Blavat. "The city was all on board with that."

As the kitchen was original to the home, this became an important piece of the puzzle. "We blew out the whole back of the house to create a nice kitchen that's in the same spirit of what was done for a historic house, but has all the modernizations," says Blavat. The new floorplan includes a pantry, banquette seating and a butler's pantry, as well as Sub-Zero appliances hidden beneath panels, and a beverage center. They also added lead-glass transom windows and a popped-up ceiling. An artisan woodworker relocated the door to the dining room and added a second cabinet to flank it, the Gothic millwork and ornate paneling so true to the first that it looks like it's always been there. "We're always charged, as architects, to modernize for the living we're doing now, not back in the day," Blavat says.

Just as keeping dark, stained-wood features was

important upstairs, so was "enhancing a Cream City aesthetic" in the lower level, says Blavat, to build a bridge between old and new. "It was your normal East Side scary basement with spiders," he says. "We tried to create an old German Milwaukee bar [using] traditional materials." Low ceilings and uneven flooring, common in older homes, made it a "challenging space," says Blavat, but now, after adding an adjacent media room and exercise room with a full bath (including preserved Cream City brick arches framing a shower and the bar), it's a favorite hangout space.

Active in numerous Milwaukee nonprofit organizations, the homeowners said they "wanted a spacious and open floor plan for entertaining and fundraising via intimate dinners or large receptions." After completing the project, the homeowner says, "The remodeled kitchen and dining room, as well as the creation of the expansive lower-level pub, have been perfect for these activities."

The pièce de résistance is the rooftop terrace above the garage, a true "labor of love," says Blavat. Hanging Gardens – whose clients include The Journeyman Hotel's rooftop lounge – transformed it into a green roof. A decorative roof railing extends to the kitchen, from which the space can be accessed, for deeper symmetry.

"We love the rooftop terrace for casual coffee in the morning or a cool-down conversation in the evening," says one of the homeowners. "It's our own special treehouse." ■

