

AT HOME

An abandoned house is reborn into a Zenlike retreat

By Merlisa Lawrence Corbett
Special to *The Examiner*

Once considered the neighborhood haunted house, the home of Don and Lynne Komai now evokes a serene spirit.

"Little girls used to be scared to walk by it," said Lynne Komai of her Zenlike retreat in the Rosemont community in Alexandria.

Formerly owned by a prominent Alexandria family, the home was abandoned and left vacant for seven years. "The grass was really high and neighbors said they could see frozen water all over the roof where pipes had burst," said Komai.

In 1996 the Komais settled on this center-hall colonial. It was dilapidated, but located on a hill with views across the Potomac River. The problem? The home was not for sale. Scott Mitchell, a local developer, had purchased the place and was working with architect Gaver Nichols on creating a craftsman show house. Mitchell agreed to sell the property on the condition that the Komais continue to work with Nichols.

The result is a three-level shingle-style Dutch colonial exterior and modern, yet tranquil interior.

From the street the home looks like your standard 1920s Sears catalog cottage. Even the foyer and living room retain the original wide-planked pine floors. The pine floors climb, uncovered, to the top of the stairs and to what used to be the back of the house.

The rest of the home shows like a modern art museum. In the kitchen the Komais modernized standard white Wood-Mode cabinets with maple-trimmed frosted glass doors.



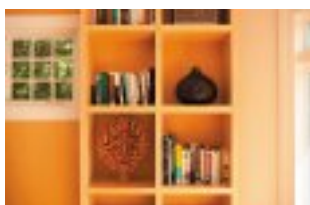
The maple trim adds warmth to an ultra-contemporary kitchen finished with sleek black granite countertops, stainless steel appliances and chrome fixtures.

Maple is the most prominent wood featured in the home. Both graphic artists, the Komais love clean lines and geometric symmetry. They hired Bob Adams, a local woodworker, to build custom paneling and bookcases from floor to ceiling in the living room and dining room using maple plywood. Doors on the base cabinets were stained black offering strong contrast with the light-stained maple. Adams' most creative use of maple can be seen in a tiny powder room where bent plywood forms the base of a pedestal sink and serves as wall paneling.

The Komais loved Adams' work so much that they had him construct built-in dressers in the master bedroom. "We seem to repeat this maple and black look throughout the house," Komai said.

The same black and maple is repeated in a massive headboard designed by Mr. Komai for their daughter who is married and lives less than five miles away. "She's never actually lived in the house, but we keep it as her room," Komai said. The headboard features three black squares aligned on the same brilliant maple.

Furnishings are sparse, yet carefully selected. Each piece seems to have meaning. The couple's prized possessions are eight Conoid chairs designed by George Nakashima, the Japanese-American woodworker, architect and furniture maker considered one of the fathers of the



PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Don and Lynne Komai's tranquil home shows like a modern art museum.

American craft movement. The Komais met Nakashima in 1989, a year before his death, and he signed a copy of his book "The Soul of a Tree: A Master Woodworker's Reflections." "We purchased the chairs two at a time, each year, until we had eight,"

Komai said. The Conoid chairs are hand-crafted using American black walnut with sap streak in the seat and hickory spindles. The Komais also have a signed reproduction of a chair designed by Mr. Komai's uncle, Ray



Komai, a Japanese-American furniture designer. The chair, model 939, made of walnut and chrome-plated steel, is part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In the living room is a tiny original Stickleby rocker handed down to Mrs. Komai by her uncle.

Rocks collected on hikes in Utah can be found arranged throughout the house. Pebbles are found in the master bath. An arrangement of larger stones is grouped in the upstairs hallway.

With sunlight bathing through windows, warm woods abundant and lush landscapes, it's hard to believe this calm cottage ever frightened anyone.



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