

Remodeling

A Capella

by Robert L. Miller, FAIA

HGTV came to look at the kitchen, exquisite in oak and granite and stainless steel, and compact in less than 8 by 15 feet. And then they noticed the living-dining room's 30-foot-plus ceiling—actually, over 45 feet where the floor suddenly drops away where the altar had been. The producers worried for a time over the shallow niche of the apse, and how some viewers might feel about the Warhol portrait in the place where once had hung, probably, a crucifix. In the end, however, the Vermeer light, shifting and reflecting through the day as it comes through the panes of tall, narrow, pointed-arch windows, decided everything. It's a space you have to come back to.

U.S. General Service Administration preservation director Rolando Rivas-Camp, AIA—the architect in charge of historic buildings for the country's largest landlord and no pushover when it comes to adaptively reused courthouses and post offices and the occasional desanctified chapel—couldn't get it off his mind. Having missed one chance to buy the apartment in the Bishop's Gate condominium on 15th Street, NW, near S, Rivas-Camp and his partner settled for renovating a Capitol Hill rowhouse. But soon afterwards, Rivas-Camp happened to meet someone who



Boris Feulhyum Photography

Washington's oldest Catholic parish school for African-Americans was expanded to become Bishop's Gate condominiums in the 1980s. Rolando Rivas-Camp, AIA, and his partner live in the former chapel.

knew the owner of the ex-chapel. He made a deal and prepared to move again, planning a six-week renovation.

It took five months. Rivas-Camp is convincing when he says the difference was mostly intentional. "We did things in stages. I travel a lot, and since I was my own general contractor, each stage needed time. The advantage is that your preconceived ideas change; you come back and see things you missed, new possibilities."

Scheduling and other problems led the architect to tackle some renovating on his own. Rivas-Camp braved ladders and scaffolds to paint, and repaint, the vertigo-inducing ceiling white. He recalls, "The previous owner had a blue ceiling, yellow walls, and Mission furniture," meant to complement the original inlaid oak floors, decorative iron radiator grates, leaded and stained glass, and marble and granite wainscoting. Rivas-Camp characterizes his own approach as more European: preserve the original building fabric carefully, but make any new elements clearly modern and, preferably, minimal.

The new owners inherited an already somewhat stripped-down version of the circa 1930 chapel. It had been built to serve students and nuns of Washington's oldest Catholic parish school for African-Americans, chartered in 1865. In the 1980s, the small

From the exquisite kitchen to the light-filled living area, the apartment is a captivating space.

campus of brick and limestone English Gothic buildings was adapted and expanded to become Bishop's Gate condominiums. The basement of a large, never-finished church on the site became underground parking topped with a brick courtyard. After considering the chapel for a community room, the developers finally marketed it as an apartment, adding steel spiral stairs to the basement (now main bedroom) and choir loft (second bedroom) plus a basic kitchen, baths, and a tiny but charming entrance courtyard.

Beginning with lots of white paint, plus the gilding and indirect lighting of the deep cornice at the top of the former sanctuary, Rivas-Camp's interventions add both order and drama.

The all-new, doughnut-plan kitchen is custom-made oak with black and gray stone and metal accents and scarcely a door-pull in sight. Like an elegant hotel bar, one long counter opens to the dining area through a granite-trimmed opening. The ceiling drops to form a lighting cove, with a small stainless steel and mirror vault above. Italian chrome and black leather upholstery, and a second, on-axis Warhol, finish the main living space with unobtrusive richness.

Downstairs, the surprisingly high-ceilinged, column-free, 900-square-foot crypt—a former student lunchroom—really felt too big for a bed, says Rivas-Camp. His solution is a set of central dividing elements in white gypsum board: a television kiosk that separates the soaring sitting area from the low sleeping space; a headboard wall with subtly



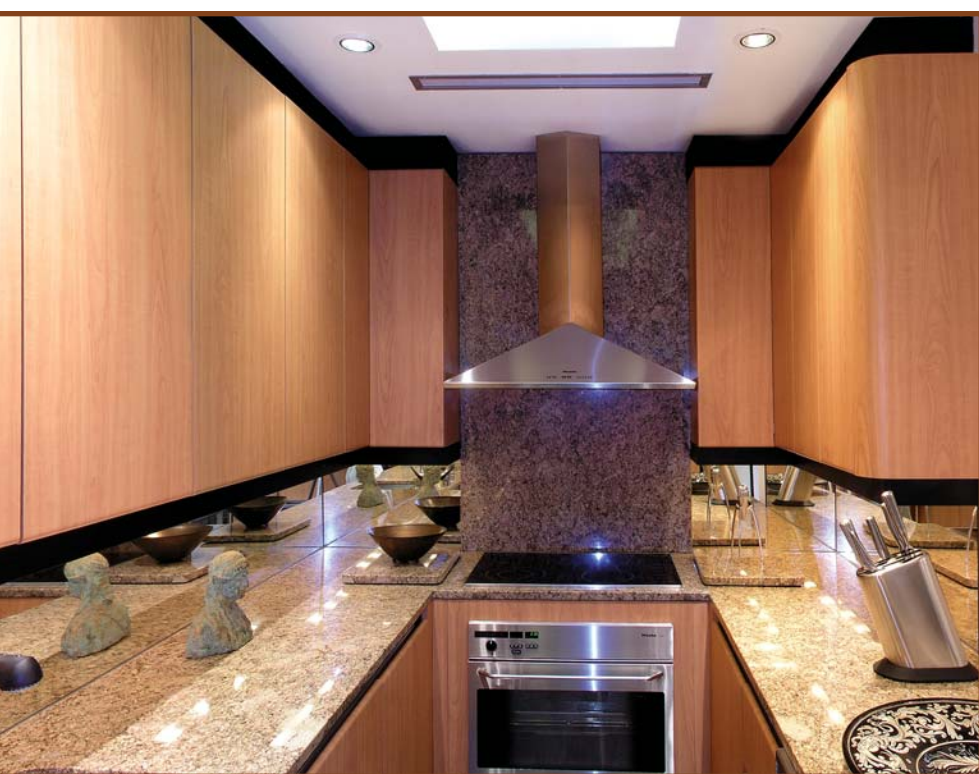
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Rivas-Camp used dividing elements in white gypsum board to set off certain areas, such as the sleeping space, in the former student lunchroom on the lower level.

protective wing walls and a pair of vertical bedside light tubes; and, behind that, a compact office and a twin system of closets, dressing areas, and sinks going back to a shared tub, stall shower, and toilet compartment—all in crisp charcoal and white. Two large pastel copies of Sistine Chapel ceiling figures that Rivas-Camp commissioned in Rome (where he studied preservation after stints at the University of London, the University of Florida, and a childhood interrupted by a wrenching escape from Cuba in 1962) flank the bed and warm the room's center.

The choir loft, finally, with its little gothic-arched, oak-shuttered interior windows still in place, is in transition from weight room to occasional guest room with the addition of a Murphy bed, out of sight (like the front coat closet) behind vertical blinds.

One more addition is Tosca, an American Staffordshire Terrier. She is not, as Rivas-Camp explains with a historian's patience, the pit bull she is sometimes mistaken for, but the same breed as the Our Gang Comedy dog and Nipper, the "His Master's Voice" Victrola fan. Tosca at first needed a trainer to learn how to go down the spiral stairs. She now roams happily in the changing, almost outdoor light. And she fits perfectly: an all-American dog who could have stepped right out of Depression-era Washington, but always chic in black and white. 🐕



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