



The clutter-free foyer (opposite) opens to the living room (pictured here), which Santalla grounded with an Odegard rug, Donghia armchairs and a custom cocktail table made from salvaged timber.



# SUITE LIFE

Ernesto Santalla designs a multi-tasking  
McLean addition as a mother's chic retreat

By JENNIFER SERGENT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEOFFREY HODGDON



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ou can't see it until you swing around the driveway of this well-appointed stone house in McLean, but once a guest arrives at the milky-white paneled door surrounded by a transom and side-lights, there's no mistaking it for a mudroom or side entrance.

Rather, it's the front door to a two-story pied-à-terre that the owner built for her mother, whose husband died a few years ago. "I just wanted my mom around—and it's someone to have a glass of wine with at the end of the day," says the homeowner, who has three sons. "It worked well for me and the kids."

A well-traveled New York native with a taste for modern elegance, the owner hired DC architect and designer Ernesto Santalla once the addition had been framed; she told him she was worried that her mother's new home would look like a boxy afterthought that was attached to the main house.

"When I arrived, it was a bunch of boxes," recalls Santalla, referring to the structure's layout. His instructions were not only to give the space both architectural and aesthetic interest, but also to make it versatile—appropriate for an older person now, and equally appropriate later as a relaxing retreat for family and friends.

INTERIOR DESIGN: ERNESTO SANTALLA, AIA, LEED AP, Studio Santalla, Washington, DC. CONTRACTOR: WINTHROP CUSTOM BUILDERS, McLean, Virginia.



Oversized Mei pendants by Bover crown the living room (opposite); the adjacent kitchen features custom cabinets by Christiana. Donghia chairs surround a custom table in the dining area (opposite, bottom). Millwork cleverly hides air intake and supply vents (this page). The Manila barstools are by Andreu World.

The TV room doubles as a bedroom when a Murphy bed is lowered from the built-in cabinets. The sisal rug by Merida complements the texture of an abstract oil by Ralph Turturro. Santalla paired a sectional by B&B Italia with an Ebanista wing chair and a Holly Hunt bench, which acts as a space-saving cocktail table.

Santalla designed the first floor with uncluttered, open spaces for ease of flow. He arranged the living area with four plush armchairs because, as he notes, "It's easier for an older person to get out of a chair than a sofa." Same with the dining table and chairs: He originally considered having a banquette built along the wall, "but we decided it was going to be harder to scoot down a bench."

Santalla altered the kitchen so the island was not attached to the wall, as had originally been designed. "It created strange corners where it would be hard to clean," he says. He then had custom cabinetry installed up to the ceiling, further eliminating surfaces that would have to be dusted or cleaned.

To reconcile the boxy layout, Santalla defined specific areas with architectural detail on the ceilings. In the living room, for instance, he ran a long, narrow panel across the ceiling and down to the floor to call attention to the large, shaded pendant lights and to frame the sleek, concrete fireplace surround. In the kitchen, he designed a lower tray ceiling to create a sense of intimacy off the large living and dining area.

Ever sensitive to the needs of his client's mother, Santalla arranged furnishings to avoid tripping hazards. He also allowed for plenty of light. "Light was a really important consideration," he explains. "Any time there is a window covering, it always clears the window entirely."

Likewise, Santalla ran sconces all the way up the stairs at chest level, instead of suspending a chandelier from the tall ceiling. "Stairs are really dangerous, so we wanted to focus the source of light," he explains. The resulting parade of sconces not only illuminates each step, but their sculptural design is an artistic plus.

The owner's mother preferred her suite to have stairs because they give her daily exercise, but the addition was designed so that she could live on one level if necessary. She currently uses the room adjacent to the living area for watching TV, but the custom teak built-ins cleverly enclose a Murphy bed behind their doors. The first-floor bathroom, too, is a full bath—and the showers on both levels are large enough for a walker or even a wheelchair, should that time ever come.

The homeowner is one of six siblings, many of whom still live in the New York area, so their mother also spends time up north. But the addition does not sit empty when the mother is away and the intent is that it will someday be used for entertaining. Two large pendant lights in the living area are situated so a large serving table could be placed under them. The windows overlooking the main home's patio and pool are actually retractable, so a party could easily spill outside. Upstairs, an extra room off the loft area lies in wait to become a game room, where a door connects it to the main house.

But even if the family never changes a thing, the spaces Santalla created are beautifully timeless. Along with sumptuous furnishings and rugs, he selected modern art that makes the interiors look more like a downtown loft than a grandmother's retreat. Indeed,

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—ERNESTO SANTALLA





Natural and artificial light flood the upstairs loft (opposite), which is filled with comfortable seating by Donghia atop an Odegard rug. The adjacent master bedroom (left, top and bottom) is furnished by Baker with a built-in dresser by Potomac Woodworking. Bedding and linens are from Timothy Paul Bedding + Home. The airy master bath (below) features an oversized shower for ease of use.



after 18 months of construction and interior design, the homeowner says, her crew at Winthrop Custom Builders referred to it as “the little jewel box.”

What’s notable about contemporary design for any age, Santalla reflects, is its simplicity: crisp, uncluttered interiors with an abundance of light. “There’s a lot to be said for visual simplicity and how we react to it,” he says. “You’re designing for an older person, but you don’t want to make them feel like they’re elderly and no longer independent. You want them to feel like this is their new home and to feel good about it—that this is a positive change in their life.” ❖

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