

THE RADAR HOME

BY SCOTT SOWERS

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MASTER OF THE HOUSE: Residential developer Jim Abdo and his wife, Mai, took over the Republic of Ghana's embassy, transforming it into the one home they'll never sell.

DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS *Follow in the footsteps of a few Washingtonians who've turned embassies into their own party headquarters*

Just as Prince Albert of Monaco snapped up a private manse in Kalorama last year for his principality's first embassy, you can pull down a pad fit for a king—or at least an ambassador—just for yourself. The former Italian Embassy, a 45,000-square-foot palace, is up for grabs and a spacious 15-bedroom expanse on 16th Street, which once housed the Persian Legation, is now on the market for a cool \$7.5 million. With major vision, and a mortgage to match, you can join the crew of elite Washingtonians who've made homes for themselves in some of the area's grandest properties.

A few years ago, real estate guru, Jim Abdo (of Abdo Development in the District) took an intriguing call about the Ghanaian embassy for sale near Rock Creek Park. He drove out for a look in a driving rainstorm and made a major decision on the spot. "I had to have a cashier's check for \$137,000 that day, made out to a firm from Ghana, because the owner was flying to Rome that night," he says. If he chose not to make the purchase, the house had two contracts pending, one from Senator John Edwards.

What Abdo saw was a 1930s-era Colonial Revival, seven-bedroom, four-bath mansion that had originally belonged to Colonel Robert R. McCormick, the one-time editor and publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*. Water was pouring into the house, which was covered in wall-to-wall, terrifically tacky carpeting. Raccoons were living in the chimney, two windows in the living room had been bricked over and the basement had been converted into a discothèque, complete with a mirror ball.

Abdo drove straight to the bank. After it stopped raining he

showed his new investment to the future Mrs. Abdo, who responded by doing a cartwheel on the front yard and twisting her ankle upon landing. "I was on crutches for two weeks," says Mai Abdo.

Despite the warnings from the real estate gods, the Abdos pushed forward with the purchase and then spent months renovating while they moved from Jim's bachelor pad to various other residences in his inventory. Crews rotated between Abdo's contracted jobs and his new home. Plus, a baby was on the way. "I was pregnant when we bought the house and I delivered shortly after we moved in," says Mai.

The good news is that if you have an old building and it needs a rescue, Abdo is the guy to call. The bad news was how the house was originally built. "There are no wood joists," says Abdo. "Every floor and wall is made of concrete and block. It was made to be fireproof and bomb proof. You could land a helicopter on the roof."

The bones of the home were not the issue as the Abdos went to work updating the space. The couple pulled in design help from Darryl Carter, who happens to live in the former chancellery of Oman. The Abdos also moved a fountain in the backyard that had been plumbed directly to a city water line and installed a pool. Adding an outdoor kitchenette and a full bathroom turned the backyard into an urban oasis.

The bricks were removed from the living room windows, the varmints were evicted and original plaster moldings were restored. Furnishings were kept simple with classic lines, a perfect choice for two



AMBASSADOR CHIC *From far left:* Lilac velvet sweeps through interior designer Patrick Baglino's condo, formerly the Embassy of New Guinea. The designer, shown seated in his drawing room, loves his home's curvilinear geometry and rotunda-like living room ceiling. *Below:* The dining room of Jim and Mai Abdo's home in the former Embassy of Ghana could easily seat a state dinner for 16 dignitaries.



self-professed neat freaks. Neutral color schemes help show off the architecture. "There are a thousand shades of white and we love all of them," says Mai with a laugh.

The public spaces in the home are configured on a grand scale, with a dining room that comfortably seats 16. The family room features oversized French doors that open into the garden. The eat-in area of the kitchen was fashioned from the original butler's pantry and lined with beadboard. The kitchen is a tasteful, understated mix of stainless steel, white cabinetry, pickled hardwood flooring and stone countertops.

Despite his reputation as a flipper, Jim Abdo claims that his house is not now, nor will it ever be, on the market. "We use the house for entertaining. My wife and I each sit on a lot of boards, and invariably after a board meeting I'll be approached by a real estate agent and be told they have an unsolicited offer to buy the house." The official word is that this Abdo development is not for sale. "I can walk to Dupont Circle in ten minutes, and I have red-tailed hawks in my back yard," says Jim. "It's a very special place for me."

Embassy-linked expanses are aplenty in DC, at least for those with a keen eye for the sublime. Three years ago, interior designer Patrick J. Baglino, Jr. was living in a one-bedroom duplex on Q Street and looking for a permanent home. A list of prospects had been assembled, including a penthouse condo that had belonged to the Embassy of New Guinea.

The building, on the corner of Corcoran and 18th, had been sold to a realty company that gutted and reconfigured it as a mixed-use building. Corporate offices were carved into the lower floors and private residences were ensconced above. Baglino's mother happened to be in town during the selection process and together they toured what the city had to offer. The embassy space was saved for last.

"As soon as she walked in, my mom said, 'if ever there were a condo that was you—it's this,'" says Baglino. Even painted in a nondescript "builder's white," the space was dramatic, with the round, turret-based great room serving as a jaw-dropping focal point. With mum's approval, the designer made his intentions known to the seller, but price was an issue. Baglino stuck to his guns, countering counteroffers until the developers caved in and sold out.

Over the next eight months Baglino began pulling together the colors, fabrics and furnishings that would make the space sing. A combination of hardwood and stone floors was already in place and walls wouldn't be moved on this job. The designer concentrated on bringing his vision of

"urban sophistication" to life in his own space by focusing on finishes.

The living area was swathed in grey lilac and window treatments were deferred. "I don't like clutter so I decided to keep it open and light," says Baglino. An eclectic mix of furniture, including an essential curved back couch, makes the space an excellent place to watch the setting sun as it streams through the room's eleven windows. A balcony winds around the outside, offering views of the Washington Monument and Dupont Circle. The work space, where he churns out his designs, is nestled nearby.

The master bedroom is simple and understated, with alternating walls finished in a deep chocolate brown and shades of sea glass. The master bath is outfitted with a sturdy, naturally finished vanity and vessel sink combination bordered by a strong navy accent wall. A galley-style kitchen captures more space than expected by angling the fridge wall in toward the living area. Cabinets are simple white, updated by stainless steel bar pulls, a glass cooktop hood and neutral granite countertops.

Although Baglino has stopped designing in his own space to devote more time to clients, he has reserved the right to switch things up. "My style evolves, so I wouldn't mind changing it," he says. But one thing will always stay the same. "That ceiling in the living room is just amazing," he says. "We call it the rotunda."

Because all politics is local, even the smallest nations need a DC showplace. Why not yours? ■

To nab your own embassy, check out the properties currently on the market at 1720 16th St., NW, www.wjfb.com and 2700 16th St., NW, www.cassidyipinkard.com.