

The Philadelphia Inquirer

A home built on art

Architect and artist Ed Bronstein shapes a forlorn Fitler Square garage into an ultramodern sanctuary, stuffed with creativity.

November 11, 2011 | By Sally Friedman, For The Inquirer

Art is everywhere - on walls, on easels, stacked on the floor - in the Center City home of Ed Bronstein and his wife, Sophie. There is so much art stored on the first level of the house that the line between home and studio is blurred, with studio winning out handily.

"I definitely spend a lot of time and take up a lot of space down here," Bronstein says. An architect with a master's degree in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania, he veered off into art at age 44, and now, at 67, is a fully committed painter.

This self-described "recovering architect" still let his passion for space and how to utilize it come to the fore when he moved from one urban home to another, settling for a forlorn garage in Fitler Square that became the foundation, literally and figuratively, of the contemporary house that grew up around it.

The first floor is, by design, an artist's sanctuary. It faces south and has views of the garden Bronstein created, with outdoor art he has collected or made.

Sophie Bronstein, a psychotherapist, was her husband's enabler on the road to his career change. It all began when his daughter, Carrie, was taking a painting and drawing class at Central High School. Her father fell hard for art, at first struggling to teach himself, then signing on to art classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.



The family moved into their Fitler Square house in 1997, a time when the architect was already moving off in his new direction. By 2001, Bronstein, who had been on the cutting edge of architecture for leading firms, including those headed by Louis Kahn and Robert Venturi, was happily painting in his downstairs studio.

The architectural world lives vibrantly in this home, which was featured on the recent Center City Residents' Association Fall House Tour. There's a design surprise around every corner.

The open stairway is an example of how unexpected spaces can become dramatic and central. The broad staircase with ultramodern railing leads to a second-floor landing; there, a monumental painting with energy, movement, and color

is flanked by unlikely companions: a carved wooden gorilla, a self-portrait of Bronstein, and accessories that create their own synergy.



In that second-floor space the focal point beckons: A fireplace with a concrete hearth decked out in pillows is the natural center for conversation. Comfy chairs on casters with a coffee table, also on casters, allow for movable feasts, and fireside chats.

It takes time to absorb the whimsical, original accessories scattered throughout.

An old jigsaw powered by foot pedals was a found treasure left outside as urban trash, and now occupies a place of honor in the living room.

In another area, a farm implement that removes corn from its cob finds a home. Then there are the chairs, constructed of logs and twigs, that might have come out of a fairy tale.

Where others might ask "Why?" about unusual furniture pieces and accessories, the Bronsteins ask "Why not?"

The kitchen, with an extended stainless steel rounded counter, offers plenty of space for food preparation. It was designed by Ed, who used his space-planning background. His early specialty was designing Philadelphia restaurants; some of them began the city's culinary renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s, including Steve Poses' Frog and Commissary, City Bites, and Absolutely Gloria's.

Despite their intriguing interiors, Ed and Sophie celebrate their urban garden as their sanctuary. The pull is hard to resist. Its charms are more visually accessible thanks to a

second-level outdoor deck just above the garden.

"We have a country place in Hamburg, Pa., and I loved puttering there," says Ed, who transferred that puttering to his Philadelphia garden as soon as it began to take shape. Once again, whimsy defines the aesthetic.

Visitors need time to spot little surprises: A funky Bugs Bunny likeness coexists with the outdoor sculptural piece created by Philadelphia mosaic/mural artist Isaiah Zagar. A goldfish pond, brick walls, mosaics, and the last two letters, "E" and "R," salvaged from Klinghoffer's, the Philadelphia carpet landmark, late of South Street, hang from a garden wall. They serve as a reminder of Ed Bronstein's ancestors who owned and operated that well-known store.

Both Sophie and Ed are passionate about their own Center City neighborhood, Fitler Square. "This is community for us," Sophie says. "People here truly connect."

So devoted is artist Ed Bronstein that for years, he has been painting its homes, businesses, and people. A one-man show of those paintings will run from Friday to Dec. 4.

And after he has roamed around on his bicycle, pausing to paint whatever strikes his fancy, Bronstein loves to come back to the house and garden he designed.

"I can't imagine any place I'd rather be," he says, "than right here."

"At Home in the Neighborhood," Ed Bronstein's one-man show of his neighborhood oil paintings, will be on view at Twenty-Two Gallery, 236 S. 22d St [until Dec. 4th]. The opening reception is Friday from 6 to 9 p.m.

Half of the proceeds from all sales will go to Greenfield School at 22d and Chestnut to help promote its arts program.

For information, call 215-772-1911 or www.twenty-twogallery.com.

