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A ballroom dance

An 1890s mansion recaptures its former — but not formal — glory

BY WENDY DONAHUE
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An 1890s Tudor mansion with an interior decorator for an owner isn't the first place you'd picture a Ms. Pac-Man arcade game blinking in the living room and kids whizzing through the oak-paneled foyer on skateboards.

"We have a very casual lifestyle, and we have a lot of kids here constantly," said Jodi Morton. "It's organized chaos, and I kind of like it that way."

To just about anyone, the Space

Invaders arcade game (next to Ms. Pac-Man) and the drum kit (next to the grand piano) would be an improvement over what preceded them: Pigeons roosting in the fireplace and mice scampering throughout the dark interior.

"The house was in very sad disrepair when we bought it," Morton said. "There were no electrical outlets, and the entire first floor was covered by pea-green shag carpeting. Millions of animals were residing in the house because it had been vacant

for over a year and a half. It would have been a teardown if it wasn't in a historic preservation district."

Her husband, David Morton, co-owner of DMK Restaurants, saw past the water damage on the first floor and the fire damage on the second, where the four bedrooms had been fitted with locks for boarders at some point.

He admired the lead-glass windows, the open vistas from dining room to foyer to living room, and the second-floor library with beamed ceiling, a hallmark of architect Ernest



Jodi Morton designed her living room, above, around this giant fireplace. Its mantle is layered, personal and casual. The library, top right, doubles as a favorite spot for weekend sleepovers, while in the sunroom a wall coated in chalkboard paint, right, allows guests to scrawl messages.



children; a still life painted by her mother; and a painting that hung behind the bar at the original Morton's restaurant in Hyde Park, "so it has this great smoked patina on it," Morton said.

"It's been a slow process of collecting, adding — not much subtracting!"

A sunroom on the back side of the living room functions as her office and the kids' art room, with a long table and a wall coated in chalkboard paint, which still holds messages guests scrawled during their daughter's bat mitzvah a couple of years ago. "It's like a living work of art," Morton said, one that will soon be reworked by her son's bar mitzvah.

Back in the living room, the Ms. Pac-Man game, she said, was a gift from her husband for her 40th birthday. "I do hold the house high score."

She gave him the drum kit for his 30th.

"My husband and I have been dating since we were 16," she said. "We were in a rock band in high school. I was the singer, and he was the drummer."

Jam sessions have been known to break out when a friend who is a professor of contemporary composition sits down at the grand piano.

"It's a good entertaining house and a good family house," she said. "Nothing is too precious here; it's all well-used."

But their son now takes his skateboards and friends upstairs to the third floor, where they've given new meaning to the word ballroom, playing catch across its expanse.

Morton will call timeout on that activity when the entire third story is painted in December, the first step in its transformation to a kids headquarters appointed with couches, TV, video games and more.

"The other day my husband said, 'Do you think we can give it to the kids as their Hanukkah present?'" Morton said. "I said, 'Do you not remember that we gave it to them last year as their Hanukkah present? Let's just get it done!'"

"But that's how you have to tackle a project like this," she said, "room by room, little by little."

Mayo, who designed many homes in Evanston, Ill., north of Chicago.

For years, the Mortons had been designing their own restaurant interiors and buying and fixing up homes, a hobby that launched their business, 2to5design.

This edifice presented unprecedented challenges.

They bought it anyway.

Selling their Northfield home, they moved into an Evanston hotel with their three children, ages 9 months to 5 years. They spent the next six months there

while crews stripped out asbestos, brought the wiring up to code, laid new wood floors and made the 8,000-square-foot house partially habitable.

Their baby (their youngest daughter, not the home) now is a 9-year-old girl whose weekend craft project sits to the left of the crackling fireplace, next to the oversize coffee table where the family often eats dinner and plays board games during the colder months. There is no separate family room.

"There aren't so many rooms in

this house, but the scale is very generous," Morton said. "You need pieces that are very generously proportioned to have any kind of impact. This living room tends to swallow things."

Morton started with 42-inch-deep sofas.

"It isn't very common in a living room to have sofas you sink into," she said. "That was a personal choice. When we are together as a family, it all happens on these sofas."

She only recently found the right rug to anchor the sitting

area, an 8-by-13 Turkish suzani from Oscar Iberian in Chicago. She moved its smaller predecessor to the library.

"I'd rather wait a decade to find something I love than buy something at Pottery Barn to throw on the floor," she said. "When I saw this rug, I felt like it belonged nowhere else."

Other layers in the room make it personal. The mantel holds a portrait of her husband's father, who fought in World War II; a drawing his sister brought back from India; two artworks by their

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