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THE **DAILY RECORD**

MARCH 2008



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Marylanders rediscover taste for midcentury

Popularity rises as homeowners look to simplify





Rob Degenhard and Nini Sarmiento, owners of Home Anthology in Catonsville, turned a weekend hobby of shopping for vintage furniture and home accents into a full-fledged business.

“In my opinion, the architecture and interior furniture design of this period were the most creative in American history.”

Lorin Neiderer

BY MARY MEDLAND

Special to The Daily Record

Photography by Rich Dennison

Almost 14 years ago, when Rob Degenhard and Nini Sarmiento were married, their lack of money to purchase new furniture made it necessary to furnish their home with what they could pick up at yard sales, flea markets, estate sales or thrift stores.

Little did they know this weekend hobby would evolve into a full-time business as they bought and resold what is now referred to as “midcentury modern” furniture and accessories — vintage pieces that were made between 1945 and 1970, approximately.

“After we finished our apartment, our friends started asking us to hunt for pieces for them,” says Degenhard, who now owns Home Anthology in Catonsville along with his wife. “We’d go out on weekends, and one day we just decided to rent space at the antique co-op in Cockeysville.”

Subsequently they rented 5,000 square feet of space in a move to the Oella Mill before opening their current shop in 2005. “Taking that Oella space was risky,” admits Degenhard. “But the mill was a great incubator for many people ... it had short-term leases and low rents.”

Today, Home Anthology focuses its business on vintage midcentury modern pieces. With their store open only on weekends, the couple spends the rest of the week scouting out more items. “Home Anthology is a great secret,” says Leslie Tunney, a space planner and interior designer. “It’s hard to find vintage pieces, but Rob and Nini have them.”

They aren’t the only ones.

Lorin Neiderer and Edward Whitely own Oakenshaw 1021 in Hampden. “As we learned more about midcentury modern, we got more interested in it,” says Neiderer. “People are really into this, it’s very accessible and it sells very well.

“In my opinion, the architecture and interior furniture design of this period were the most creative in American history.”

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Generally speaking, midcentury modern translates into an aesthetic that began with the German Bauhaus School designers who flourished from about 1918 to 1933. “Much of their inspiration came from the Scandinavian designers who focused on function and clean, good-looking lines, but with an edgy feel,” says Tunney. “This furniture tended to be low profile and often smaller in size.

“Midcentury modern furniture is really in demand now as people are trying to simplify their lives.”

And with that demand comes higher prices. “The high-end vintage pieces are those that were prototypes that people are buying as investments ... depending on the item, the price can be \$20,000 to \$40,000,” says Degenhard.

“Any vintage furniture by Herman Miller, Charles and Ray Eames, Hans Wegner, Knoll or Finn Juhl is in great demand, but the majority of this market is furniture that was done by anonymous designers. Some of the best works comes from New Hope, Pa. ... items made by George Nakashima and Paul Evans are bringing in crazy prices. It used to be that auctioneers couldn’t have cared about this furniture, but that is changing.”

In addition to furniture, Home Anthology offers vintage accessories like artwork, vases and paperweights.



“This style capitalized on technology that was developed during World War II and the demand for furniture after the war ended,” says Degenhard.

“During the war effort, bent wood and fiberglass had been perfected — the Eameses even participated by designing wooden splints for soldiers — and later furniture designers began taking note.”

While some see clean, sleek lines as “cold,” Tunney disagrees. “The key to achieving a warmer feeling when using modern pieces is to mix them with some traditional pieces,” says Tunney. “Furthermore, a lack of clutter can be very relaxing.”

It is just this characteristic that makes

midcentury modern the perfect style for furnishing offices. “Many of the pieces are lightweight, functional and stackable,” says Tunney. “This style appeals to people, such as architects or graphic designers, who really have a good feel for design.”

And its appeal isn’t limited to the young and hip. Degenhard reports that his clients range from young newlyweds to those who are in their 70s.

The trend is definitely picking up steam. However, according to Degenhard, Baltimore still retains its conservative tradition as a mahogany and cherry town, while Scandinavian furniture — think Scan and Ikea — tend to use teak, rosewood or walnut.

With that in mind, don’t expect to see Degenhard and Sarmiento sticking with midcentury modern forever. “We purposely named our business Home Anthology because we see this evolving as the market changes,” he says. “We are not necessarily going to focus on this style forever ... you have to follow where the market takes you.”



Some of the more prominent designers of the midcentury era include Herman Miller, Charles and Ray Eames and Hans Wegner.

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Jay Brown, AIA, and Mark Levin, AIA, combined their talents to form Levin/Brown and Associates — an architecture firm with 10 architects on staff that specializes in high-end residential and synagogue design.

Levin/Brown designs religious to residential

BY KAREN NITKIN

Special to *The Daily Record*

In the 22 years since Jay Brown and Mark Levin joined forces to create the architecture firm of Levin/Brown and Associates, they have designed more than 100 synagogues around the country and some of the most sumptuous homes in Maryland.

The firm, based in Owings Mills on Greenspring Valley Road, was the first to create a national marketing campaign based on its niche of building or renovating synagogues, according to Brown. And

it has paid off. “At this point, we’re recognized as one of the leading synagogue architecture firms in the U.S.,” he said.

Although synagogues are the “focus of the practice,” in Brown’s words, the firm also designs multimillion dollar houses and brings its expertise in high-end design to commercial landmarks such as Lighthouse Point, the luxury retail-residential-office development on the Canton waterfront.

The firm’s two principals, Brown and Levin, met back in the 1980s when they lived across the street from each other in Mount Washington, Brown said. “We

MAXIMILIAN FRANZ

were all young, with young families,” he said. At the time, each had his own architecture practice. Brown specialized in high-end residential design, while Levin focused on the creation of medical laboratories.

“We started talking about merging the two firms,” Brown said, and in 1986, Levin/Brown was created. “It’s been a great relationship,” said Brown.

The firm started out on Warren Road in Baltimore and moved to Owings Mills about 10 years ago. It now has 10 architects on staff, as well as a structural engineer, three interior designers and two support staffers. And it’s still growing, Brown noted.

Before the merge, Levin had created a chapel for Beth Tfiloh and an addition to Beth Israel, both in the Baltimore area. “We used that background as a stepping stone” to create a national campaign advertising the firm’s strengths in synagogue design, Brown said.

Since both Levin and Brown are Jewish, they feel particularly close to these projects, Brown said. Their goal is to create buildings with timeless architecture that are spiritually fulfilling as well as functional.

“We don’t have a signature style,” Brown said. Rather, he looks to the local building styles and to the members of the synagogue’s building committee for guidance. “A building in Savannah would be different than one in Maine,” he noted.

One recent project was the construction of Temple Beth El, a 500-family conservative synagogue in Allentown, Pa. Rance Block, the head of the temple’s steering committee for the project, said the \$8.5 million structure includes a 300-seat sanctuary, six classrooms, a social hall and library.

Block said Levin/Brown had worked with temple leadership about 15 years earlier on a master plan, determining if the congregation should update its synagogue at the time or build a new one. “We decided, as a result of the work they did for us, that it was in our best interest to relocate,” Block said. A new site was found, and the existing temple was eventually sold and demolished.

However, certain objects from the previous temple, including some “absolutely magnificent stained-glass” windows, were kept, Block said.

“The challenge was for Jay to design [the temple] around the very important

objects that we wanted to relocate. And he did, in a spectacular way,” Block said. “When you walk in, you’re just blown away by the beauty of the design of the sanctuary,” he said.

The project was finished in January 2006, and Levin/Brown is already working on an expansion, Block said. The plans call for adding a youth lounge, more classrooms and a multipurpose room. “We are just very, very pleased with Levin/Brown,” he said.

Though Levin/Brown designs synagogues around the country, most of the residential work is in the Baltimore area. These clients, Brown said, “have an interest in creating exceptional living environments for themselves and they have budgets that are equal to the task.” The homes, which can cost millions of dollars and be as large as 15,000 square feet, might include wine vaults, indoor theaters or even driving ranges, he said.

For these projects, Brown said, “we put together a team with a landscape architect and interior designer.” Levin/Brown typically hires a builder, too, instead of putting the job out to bid, he said. Though each project is different, depending on the wishes of the client, “they all have a richness of design and detail, and use quality materials,” Brown said.

One recent project designed by Levin/Brown was Steve Russel’s 6,300-square-foot five-bedroom home in Owings Mills. Russel said he hired Jay Brown for the project because “I’d seen examples of his work. I knew he could design a home that was unique.”

Building the house took three years, Russel said. By the time he moved in, about a year ago, he had gone from needing a house for himself and his three dogs to needing a place for himself, his new wife and four dogs. “It’s proved to be very adaptable to our scenario,” he said of the home.

Russel, head of the Russel Automotive Group, described his new residence, which sits on 11 acres, as sleek and contemporary, with stone floors and plenty of space for entertaining. He recently hosted a party for 150 people and didn’t feel squeezed, he said.

Another local client, Susan Levy, said Levin/Brown is currently putting the finishing touches on a Baltimore County home that is 11,000 square feet, including a finished basement. The two main floors are about 7,500 square feet, she said.

Levy, an interior designer, said she and her husband, a developer, interviewed four architects before choosing Levin/Brown. “Jay sort of caught my attention ... we thought he was attentive, we thought he was a good listener and we’d seen other work he’d done,” she said.

The house is designed in a U shape around a courtyard, Levy said, with French doors creating an easy flow between indoor and outdoor space. The

“[Our clients] have an interest in creating exceptional living environments for themselves and they have budgets that are equal to the task.”

Jay Brown

exterior, she said, “is the most gorgeous stone you’ve ever seen,” with a cedar shake roof and copper piping.

“It’s very authentic to an old farmhouse, which is what we were going for,” she said. “It looks like it has been sitting up on that hill for a couple of hundred years.” She described the interior as “refined and elegant,” but with “a farmhouse feel.” Rustic elements include a fireplace with the same stone as the exterior, as well as wide-planked hickory wood floors, she said.

Levy praised Brown for following her template while putting his own stamp on the project. “We knew what we wanted as far as the floor plan and the layout, and he pulled it all together for us,” she said. “I knew the feel that I wanted, but I credit Jay for creating this timeless, informal, open-floor-plan house that just has a great feel to it. The proportions of the rooms are perfect. I don’t know how else to describe it,” she said.

“He listened to every one of my wishes and he pulled it off in a big, big way.”

Bringing the beauty of the indoors out

Exterior artwork spruces up backyards

By **CARRIE OLEJNIK**

Special to The Daily Record

There's no place like home. And with the right exterior art, there is no home like yours. Whether you want to dress up a huge, empty wall or spruce up an outdoor space with color, exterior art may be an increasingly popular alternative worth exploring.

Elemental Digital Art provides custom-made décor with a plethora of imagery including surf, aerial, black and white, portrait, animal and Italian collections, among others. Performing the fabrication process entirely by hand, Sean Ruttkay, owner and photographer of Elemental Digital Art, wraps the images he captures around a metal substrate so the final piece looks like a gallery-wrapped stretched canvas.

According to Ruttkay, his Tuscan door and window collection is the most popular among buyers in the area.

"There is rising popularity in the Tuscan region, and a lot of people in Baltimore and D.C. have vacationed there and can identify with its richness and art," Ruttkay explained. "The door and window pieces also look really cool when they are enlarged. They provide almost another dimension to the room."

Ruttkay's most popular collection overall goes hand-in-hand with one of his favorite pastimes — surfing.

"Because I am a fanatic surfer, I tend to spend most of my year on the coast, where I gather the majority of my imagery from surfing, and more generally, the coastal lifestyle," he said. "I think people want to experience the laidback vibe that living at the beach provides, when they are relaxing in their own backyard."

The average piece of artwork will cost approximately \$250



PHOTO COURTESY OF OPEN AIR DESIGNS

to \$500. However, as is true in every genre of art, prices can vary dramatically. The budget-conscious can buy a standard 8-by-12-inch print for a mere \$35, while high rollers can purchase a 46-by-96-inch print for \$2,000. And if that isn't big enough, Ruttkay can combine panels to make an even larger piece.

Exterior lighting is bought separately to illuminate each piece. Because the sun provides natural lighting throughout the day, Ruttkay uses UV-proof inks to protect the print from sun damage and fading.

Open Air Designs also sells exterior art and offers a five-year guarantee against sun damage for all products within its WeatherPrint line.

Like Elemental Digital Art, Open Air Designs is able to create an image of any size. WeatherPrints can be found in mail-order catalogs and retail locations including patio stores and garden centers all over the world. Offering thousands of works of art licensed for reproduction, WeatherPrints have an aluminum base despite appearing like the stretch canvas found on most home wall interiors.

"Exterior art is a huge movement," explained Jason Kubach, vice president of Open Air Designs. "Everything is moving outside, including kitchens, umbrellas, furniture, TVs, nearly everything you can buy for the indoors."

"This is a product that we feel strongly about," Kubach said. "Everyone who sees it says that they can't believe the art isn't on canvas. The concept of outdoor art is still very new. You could ask 10 people on the street and they probably haven't heard of it."

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