BY MARTHA THOMAS. PHOTOGRAPHY BY CORY DONOVAN.

SMALL AND SMART

IT'S A NEW AGE, WHEN CUSTOM HOMES ARE ACHIEVING MORE WITH LESS.

Recently, architect Charles Alexander of Alexander Design Studio worked on an 1,100-square-foot house that two Howard Community College professors purchased in 1999 in Daniels, north of Ellicott City, and which is thought to have been a sharecropper's cottage. Most likely built in the mid-19th century, it had undergone some renovations—the expansion of the second floor and the addition of a kitchen, for example. The owners, Philip Vilardo and Lisa Wilde, say they once met a woman who'd lived there as a child. She told them that before her father installed plumbing and a tiny bathroom in the late 1940s, the family of 10 had used an outhouse in the backyard. ■ The encounter gave Wilde new perspective on the space: Sure, it's small, she reasoned, "but we're only two people living here, so why do we need more space?"

A casual comment by homeowners Wilde and Vilardo about their hundreds of books became the inspiration for architect Charles Alexander's design, *opposite page.*


POMPEII
BIRDS
WINDS
ISLAM
TURKEY
Leon Uris
Armageddon
Empire

People are realizing it's better to invest in high-quality spaces: **To build smaller, and build better.**

VILARDO AND WILDE BOUGHT THE HOUSE because they loved its two-acre plot, which keeps the surrounding sameness of tract houses at bay. But they also appreciated its simplicity. So when they decided to expand the house—which coincided with the arrival of their son, Gabriel—"We wanted to keep it small," says Vilardo. "We didn't want to build the house that ate the house."

They chose Alexander Design Studio after looking at the firm's work, which "meets people's needs without the standard utilitarian construction you see all over the landscape," Vilardo says.

When they sat down with the architect, Wilde and Vilardo didn't talk so much about room sizes, but told him what they like to do and how they live. The couple mentioned boxes and boxes of books they had in storage, and this casual comment became the inspiration for Alexander's design.

A wide bookcase, with space for books on both sides, rises from the ground floor all the way to the new third-floor master bedroom, ending in a loft area half a story above. The stairs wrap around the shelves, stopping at various landings: a small study a few steps above the ground floor, the original second floor of the house (with its two bedrooms and bath); a few steps up to their son's room; the master bath; and, finally, the master bedroom. Along the way are plenty of windows, and from the outside, the new addition appears to be a tower, at a cockeyed angle from the simple cottage.

The couple plans to stay in their home for a long time.

"We often sit around and say we love our house," says Vilardo. "As the real estate market crashes and burns and we see people stuck in their houses, we feel lucky to say we love our house."

VILARDO AND WILDE MAY BE ONTO something with their notion that less can be more: The design community, and homebuilders as well, are recognizing that, too.

When the Baltimore chapter of the American Institute of Architects held its 2010 awards ceremony in the fall, the group chose a particularly appropriate venue: the so-called "2640" building on St. Paul Street, a former Methodist church with a distressed plaster interior and scuffed wooden floors that is now a collectively run community space. The low-key place, which the Charles Village locals use to flaunt their radical politics and grassroots culture, was a perfect location for the event, which itself was modest, honoring works that reflect a new austerity in design and scale.

Awards went to such projects as a Charles Village row house renovation, a fishing camp on the Eastern Shore, and the energy-efficient houses at the Overlook in Clipper Mill.

"The common thread through the awards," says Charles Alexander (his firm, Alexander Design Studio, won six), "is they were all small." And obviously, if they won an award, then the designs were smart, too.

Houses are shrinking. According to the U.S. Census, the median square footage of new homes in the U.S. has declined from a high of 2,277 square feet in 2007. In 2009, the median size was 2,135 square feet—though still substantially grander of scale than the 1973 figure of 1,525.

The trend is partly driven by the economy, but Alexander notes that "a lot of the projects were in the works before the financial collapse." Sarah Susanka's influential book *The Not So Big House* was published in 1998, and soon after, *Dwell* magazine, with its compact modern and modular homes, began edging out *Architectural Digest* as the aspirational shelter magazine among fans of good design—especially those concerned about their carbon footprint.

But in the world of architecture, Alexander says, small doesn't necessarily mean cheap. In fact, in some cases, the opposite may be true. "The trend in homebuilding has been to build bigger and bigger homes for decades," he says, with costs per square foot often going down.

With the trend moving toward small, says Jonas Risén, an architect with Ziger/Snead who has a master's degree in sustainable design from Carnegie Mellon, "People are realizing it's better to invest in high-quality spaces: To build smaller, and build better."

CHARLES ALEXANDER LIKES TO POINT to the professors' house as an example of good design on a budget. Architects, he says, "want to communicate the notion that you don't have to break the bank to do something interesting." At the same time, an architect-designed house can take into consideration the way its residents actually live. These days, he says, "People have a more casual way of interacting. The kitchen is no longer a closed space, it's the center of the house. And do you really need both a living room and a family room?"

Today's architecture students are asking the same questions. At the University of Maryland, students are preparing to enter the 2011 Solar Decathlon, an international design competition sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy and the National Renewable Energy Lab. (Entries will be displayed on the National Mall next fall.) The contest calls for a house that is small, energy-efficient, and affordable. This year's UM project, designed and executed by nearly 300 students from architecture, engineering, plant sciences, and landscape architecture, is called WaterShed. The less than 1,000-square foot space, says Brittany Williams, a lecturer at the School of Architecture and a faculty adviser for the undertaking, "creates its own ecosystem." The two living spaces, connected by a bathroom, incorporate mini-wetlands on the exterior to process rainwater and graywater. A photovoltaic system provides electric power for the house while hot water comes from a

In the professors' house in Daniels, *left*, a wide bookcase, with space for books on both sides, rises from the ground floor all the way to the new third-floor master bedroom, ending in a loft area half a story above. *Below*, at the University of Maryland, nearly 300 students—from architecture, engineering, plant sciences, and landscape architecture—are entering the 2011 Solar Decathlon design competition with their design for a small, energy-efficient, and affordable house that has less than 1,000 square feet of space.

solar thermal system. There's also promise of an "edible wall," but Williams is short on details. "We're still working things out," she says.

The living spaces, says Williams, can be used for different functions: A bedroom on one side can double as an office by concealing a Murphy bed, while the kitchen and living room share the other 450-square-foot space.

Williams, 27, was a graduate student and team leader when the University of Maryland entered the 2007 Solar Decathlon with a project called LEAFhouse. It came in second place overall, as well as win-

LOWER RIGHT: COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

ning a People's Choice award. The 800-square-foot structure, now the headquarters of the Potomac Chapter of the AIA, has moving panels that create two rooms, or, when moved aside, create one large open space. There are plenty of concealed cabinets and clever configurations of space—like shelves for spices built along the end of one wall. She admits that keeping clutter under control is a challenge, and small-scale living requires a certain discipline.

"You live differently in a one-bedroom apartment than you do in a five-bedroom home," she says. "As things get smaller, you have to make decisions about how much stuff you have."

A smaller house, she points out, means "a lighter touch on the environment." But having less, she says, can also be smart: "It's a chance to have value rather than quantity."

SOMETIMES, IF SMALL IS YOUR ONLY option, you're *forced* to get smart about space.

When architect Rebecca Swanston talks to clients about renovations, her advice is almost always, "Use what you have." She doesn't automatically recommend additions, believing "there's often no reason to add space." Instead, she likes to work with proportions and light, maybe moving walls out of the way, or turning them into windows to bring the outdoors in.

But when her brother, Bruce Boswell, asked her for help with an 1,100-square-foot brick house on a cobbled street in Federal Hill that he had purchased at auction, she wasn't able to do any of these things.

Her brother was determined to restore the house in accordance with the Maryland Historical Trust, so it had to remain true to its period—inside and out. A former building inspector and now the chair of the Baltimore County Landmarks Preservation Commission, Boswell was enchanted by the house, built sometime between 1800 and 1805. "It was an appealing wreck" that had escaped major remodeling over the years, leaving many of the original features intact.

The siblings created what they describe as a "modern" house within the walls of an old house—literally. Phone and Internet, electricity, new plumbing, and even a central vacuum cleaner live behind the restored plaster. European-style Runtal radiators were custom-sized to fit flush against walls beneath window sills. And downstairs, in what was once a shallow dirt cellar, they had a proper basement dug, where Swanston installed a wall of cupboards and a commodious bathroom.

The only point of contention involved historic preservation rules: While Boswell wanted a good stove and plenty of counter space, the people from the Historical Trust at first insisted that he keep the original hearth, along with a set of stairs—presumably used by servants—along one wall. The Trust eventually agreed to the removal of the stairway, while Swanston found a solution to installing the stove within the original footprint of the house by setting it on the brick hearth and raising the lintel above to accommodate the vent.

The rest of the kitchen appliances are clad in white paneling, hid-

MAKING IT *SEEM* LESS SMALL

Occasionally, one space can do a better job than four. Take the diminutive project in a waterfront apartment in Canton, undertaken by Douglas Bothner, an architect with Ziger/Snead.

The owners asked the firm, which had designed a weekend house for them, to build a better—and smarter—bath.

Bothner transformed two cramped and dark closet-lined hallways and a prosaic bathroom with a tiled tub and shower stall into a master bath and dressing room befitting the airy proportions of this apartment home, with its spectacular views of the harbor. The entire footprint—when empty of closets and fixtures—measures about 8 x 20 feet. Now, a sliding door (with hooks for robes and workout gear) separates the room from the master bedroom. Simple leather-colored porcelain tiles lead to a large rain shower with glazed ceramic mosaic tiles and a double vanity.

There's a bench that serves as a storage box for linens, and the frameless white oak closets with concealed hardware are organized for easy access to shoes and clothing.

The materials and fixtures are not extravagant, says Bothner. "It's just a matter of being clean and efficient."

In the renovation of the 200-year-old row house in Federal Hill, done by architect Rebecca Swanston, the only point of contention involved historic preservation rules: The Historical Trust wanted the hearth preserved, so owner Boswell set the kitchen stove into it, *left*. *Upper right*, European-style Runtal heaters (the slats behind the bath towels) were installed. *Lower right*, a few carefully concealed closets don't interfere with the home's period look and, at the same time, help to minimize visual clutter.

ing among the cabinets and maintaining the uncluttered feel of the space. Storage, Boswell says, is a theme throughout the house. A few carefully concealed closets don't interfere with the home's period look and, at the same time, help to minimize visual clutter.

On the second floor, Swanston repurposed the space without changing the size of the rooms, which she believes "are in perfect proportion" to the style of the house. A front bedroom has two generous, original double-hung windows overlooking the street below, and a central sitting area is enhanced by a working fireplace. Two steps down, there's a hallway with a closet (somewhat larger than the bedroom's, which is essentially a few hooks behind the door). This dressing area leads to a large bathroom with an oversized tiled shower stall and a view of the southern magnolia in the backyard—a feature that Boswell says drew him to the house in the first place. (His mother loved magnolia trees.)

Though Swanston, with her more modern tastes, and her brother disagreed on a few details, she nevertheless feels that the results of the renovation fit with her philosophy as an architect. "I've always worked with the new juxtaposed on an old framework," she says. "With this little house, we managed to create a place with the comforts of modern life while preserving the old."