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# back to Nature

*From its leafy wallpapers and prints to the indoor aviary, Rob Morris' Franklin Park home celebrates Arts and Crafts style*

*By Barbara Karth  
Photography by Lydia Cutter*



*Architecture and Interior Design: Rob Morris, Morris-Day Designers and Builders, Arlington, Virginia*





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uilding and remodeling dozens of homes in suburban developments that date back to the early 20th century has led designer Rob Morris to distill his own interpretation of Arts and Crafts style. The Arts and Crafts movement, which

emerged in late-19th-century England, elevated the importance of fine workmanship, expressly as craftsmen pursued artistic endeavors derived from nature. The movement surfaced as a protest denouncing the proliferation of cheap, effusive ornamentation emanating from the industrial revolution. The resulting style became a springboard for many architects who followed in Britain as well as in the U.S.

*Designer Rob Morris (pictured in his family room, previous page) recently completed his Arts and Crafts-style home in Virginia. He designed the mosaic tile "rug" in the foyer (above), where the ceiling soars to his aviary (opposite). A Gothic Revival element salvaged from a church in England screens the space.*

Last year, Morris completed his own new Arts and Crafts home in the heavily forested, rolling hills of Franklin Park in Northern Virginia. Throughout the home that he shares with his partner Andrew Travers, Rob Morris makes frequent use of wallpaper and fabric designs by William Morris (no relation), the 19th-century philosopher, poet and designer who fathered the Arts and Crafts movement. Busy by today's standards, the motifs convey order in rhythmic arabesques of leaves and rows of stylized flowers. Occasionally, birds bedeck the patterns, reflecting upon and interpreting nature's creations. "It's an organic growth of compatible scales, textures and col-





ors; and it is fascinating to be able to put these seemingly competing elements together in a way that in the end seems natural and comfortable, even though it is cluttered," Morris says. He finds the look compatible with day-to-day mayhem. "We like to leave our shoes by the sofa when we go to bed, and we like to have the dog over in the corner—and the dog toys—we don't live in a scripted way."

*Morris says his goal is not to pay homage to William Morris, but to integrate the work of the 19th-century designer into a 21st-century home, "giving new life to old blood."*

Still, Morris says his goal is not to pay homage to William Morris but to integrate the work of the 19th-century designer into a 21st-century home, "giving new life to old blood," he explains.

The couple's rooms are large, but not overly so. Morris uses ebony-stained oak paneling, wallpaper and comfortable furnishings to create a sense of intimacy. A circular floorplan ensures that one space opens into the next—there are no long hallways.

The foyer conveys the drama of the Gothic period, especially pronounced in the focal point above the

*William Morris fabrics embellish the home, from the living room upholstery and drapes (above) to the dining room chairs and wallcovering (opposite). Busy by today's standards, the motifs convey order in rhythmic arabesques of leaves and flowers.*

stairway: Morris' aviary. The staircase and the height of the foyer, contrasting with the compression of the adjacent vestibule, draw the eye upward—"not to mention the sound," adds Morris.

Bird song fills the house with the music of parrots, parakeets, cockatiels, finches and lovebirds. The façade of the room-size birdcage is a 100-year-old Gothic Revival architectural element salvaged from a church in England. "I bought it in part because it is incredibly crafted and beautiful, but also, based on a current man-hour labor rate, it would cost 10 to 20 times more to build it today." This Gothic element meshes with the Arts and Crafts style and the work of William Morris, drawing from his early years in the employment of Gothic Revival architect G. E. Street.





Typically, Morris and Travers spend most of their time in the family room located to the right of the foyer. This leads to the breakfast room (where more birds make their home in a large cage)—and then to the kitchen, with one space opening to the next. Here they frequently entertain family and friends in a casual setting. Over the range in the kitchen, Morris installed a backsplash of English tile purchased from a company that has been in business since the emergence of the Arts and Crafts movement. Not surprisingly, birds are incorporated into the motif. A spacious butler's pantry doubles as a prep kitchen, storage space and clean-up area, keeping the main kitchen neat and tidy during dinner parties.

The house is filled with treasures both personal and interesting. There is the heavily worn oak china cabinet that Morris had remade to house a plasma television in the family room; the century-old chandelier with crystal, metal and acorn globes in the dining room, a Victorian piece that Morris describes as "somewhat brutal but it goes well with the Gothic sensibility of the house;" and a mosaic tile "rug" in the foyer that he designed.

Then there is the powder room, a Rob Morris

*In the kitchen, a backsplash of English tile brings in more birds (above). Leading to the kitchen, a rear staircase (opposite) alludes to "clandestine meetings, or eating leftovers at midnight."*

interpretation of an early 20th-century train car bathroom, "on the first-class trains that used to exist—wood grained, tightly scripted and detailed more like a yacht," he explains.

Upstairs in the master bedroom, the wallpaper alludes to the deep green of the forest. "If you go back to William Morris' original concept, the paper itself on a wall is [meant] to diminish the wall by creating a reference to what is beyond the wall: the forest and nature. In the summertime, it is absolutely convincing, looking through these windows at the greenery and the trees beyond, because it speaks to the wallpaper and the wallpaper speaks to the trees, so it almost feels like you are in a forest," Morris explains. He selected fabrics for the bed, chairs and draperies in a light, contrasting color.

A second staircase leads from the bedrooms directly to the kitchen. "The back staircase has always been a compelling feature in a house, and the larger the house the more compelling it is," says Morris. To him,



a rear staircase alludes to “clandestine meetings, or eating leftovers at midnight. If you have a back staircase that goes to the kitchen, you can go down the staircase half dressed and have leftover pizza. It is a different kind of space because you are not going through the most public space in the house, so the notion of sliding down the staircase at two o’clock in the morning to get chocolate milk is so much more appropriate.”

Morris found the William Morris wallpapers and fabrics that embellish almost every room of his home at J. Lambeth in The Washington Design Center. J. Lambeth represents Sanderson, the British company that acquired the original, carved wood blocks of William Morris designs in addition to the archives from Morris and Co.—his original drawings and colorations. From these, reproductions are produced transcending their late-19th-century origins.

Rob Morris likens William Morris patterns to a forest with tall trees and saplings, shrubs and leaves of different sizes, shapes and colors—from dark green and yellow green to red and purple berries—all blending into a miraculous, awesome whole. “The furnishings and the colors have all been selected so

that I can move things from one room to the other and nothing looks out of place.” He has repeated the “Rose” pattern of the living room draperies on the dining room chairs, while the “Sunflower” pattern on the living room sofa appears above the wainscoting in the dining room. “Chairs that are in the living room could sit in the family room. The dining room chairs could be moved to the foyer. Each room is obviously different, but the underlying palette and scale of fabrics and papers are compatible room to room.”

The prevalence of deep colors, patterns and ebony stain combined with the heavy tree canopy outside ensures darkness, a contrast to today’s popular trend toward light and airy interiors. Colors are deeper and “a little more overpowering than I would typically encourage or be inclined to use, but I think that is born of the nature of the ebony stain; anything less intense would look washed out and anemic,” he explains. “During summertime we don’t get a lot of direct light into the house, but what I also recognized is that I spend most of my time in the house after the sun sets.” Morris offset the darkness with warm colors: corals, yellows and golds. “At night it becomes a very nurturing environment, which is one of the keys.”





*Wallpaper in the master bedroom (left) alludes to the deep green of the forest. A lighter William Morris pattern adds contrast in the master bath (above).*

Last Thanksgiving, about 30 guests joined Morris and Travers for a formal dinner, with more arriving later. Three guest bedrooms are at the ready to accommodate the couple's family and friends. They also support a few charities and think nothing of opening their home to several hundred guests for fundraisers or special events.

Morris' home represents Arts and Crafts architecture and William Morris interiors adapted to today's living—never stuffy and stodgy, but as busy and colorful as the designs they embody. ♦

*Contributing editor Barbara Kerth resides in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Photographer Lydia Cutter is based in Arlington, Virginia.*