

An Inside Job

The hidden gem in Baltimore's Little Italy





BY ELISSA SARD POLLACK

There aren't many homes in Baltimore's Little Italy neighborhood with indoor swimming pools. Anyone familiar with urban living in Baltimore knows that typical homes there are long, narrow row houses. Even the street where pool builder Bob Spero first met his client John Guerriero is dominated by domiciles no more than 15 feet wide.

The building where Spero, co-owner and vice president of Maryland Pools in Columbia, Md., first met his client had wooden drive-in doors that themselves were as wide as most of the neighboring homes. The former construction equipment warehouse had a worn-out antique-red brick exterior, which quite possibly dated back seven decades or so



Wish you were here: A postcard produced by the realtor charged with selling the Baltimore residence shows the home's facade and highlights the pool.

to when John's wife, Angie, was born in the house next door.

The Guerrieros had purchased the 100-year-old warehouse and were making plans to convert it to about

6,500 square feet of living space — complete with an indoor pool, fitness room, large dining and kitchen space, living room with wet bar, three bedrooms (two of which have windows

into the pool room), a rooftop terrace, and a refurbished tan brick exterior.

Warehouse: Their House

Guerriero led Spero into the dark, dusty space, flipped a switch that slowly brought up 1930s-era lights, and pointed out the areas that would be the dining room, living room, and marble-floored hallway leading to the pool room. What was then a storage area for classic cars separated by the warehouse's single interior wall would become the Guerrieros' six-car garage, running the length of the building from front to back. The swimming pool, Guerriero specified, was to run along the remaining width at the back of the house, parallel to the street, where the loading dock then stood.

"I was pretty perplexed," Spero recalls, "so I just asked John what he planned to do." Guerriero, a successful Baltimore-area developer, knew exactly what he wanted and had the resources to make it happen.

Guerriero told Spero that the pool

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room would be 20 by 60 feet, and the pool itself needed to have a diving board, ample seating space on the deck and a shape conducive to lap swimming.

The pool would be built first because it was at the back of the building, and the access doors were at the front. "Those huge doors were a real blessing," Spero recalls. As the space was previously used to store dump trucks, bulldozers, Bobcats and the like, bringing in pool crew trucks and equipment would be a cinch.

In fact, the job had very few setbacks or unusual challenges — aside from the setting. Even as a Master Pools Guild member, most of Spero's experience with indoor pool construction is typical; the pool is usually part of a new home construction or addition. Thus, pool contractors have to coordinate access with other builders. In this case, though, the pool simply went in first, and the exterior walls had been in place for nearly a century.

Aside from dismantling the loading dock and removing the 12-by-12 tim-



Statuary acquired while traveling overseas and relief sculptures with water themes extend the home's Italian villa decor into the pool room.

bers that were on it, the setting presented only one challenge. Because the house steps up from grade at the entry, the shallow end of the pool rests on the floor of the old warehouse.

Only the deep end was excavated to any extent, and forms had to be built for the entire perimeter.

"Typically, when we excavate, we can use the earth to form the pool, but

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indoor pools

here there was no [usable] earth to excavate," Spero explains. The warehouse floor, though dirt, was dry and hard, so the excavation did not produce usable material for constructing the pool walls. Rather, wood forms were built, and the steel-reinforced walls are thicker than usual residential pool walls to maintain their structural integrity.

The end result is a heated 40-foot-

long pool that's about 10 feet wide at the shallow end and a few feet wider at the deep end to meet the size requirements for a diving pool. Skylights allow natural light in, and the room is elegantly appointed with spotlit artwork, including wall plaques and statues with a distinctly Greco-Roman aquatic theme. It all fits the Italian villa look that dominates the home's decor.

Big Names and Games

A few years after building the pool, Spero received a call from a producer of NBC's then-hit show *Homicide*. One of the show's trademarks was on-location shots in Baltimore, and they needed a home with an indoor pool. Immediately, Spero thought of the Guerrieros.

Less famous and far more frequent users of the pool are John and Angie's teenage grandchildren. "I always have suits and towels ready for the kids and their friends," says Angie, who herself doesn't use the pool at all. "I'm not much of a water person," she says, although she does enjoy visiting with people who come to swim.

John, on the other hand, has used the pool frequently to keep in shape, swimming laps three or four times a week, and also challenging himself to hold his breath for longer and longer lengths underwater. One of his favorite aquatic activities, though, is pulling flips off the diving board. "It doesn't have much spring, you know, because of the ceiling, but it's still good exercise," he says. He even has a wet suit, which he wears to lessen the sting of the water when his entry isn't clean.

In the years since building the pool, the Guerrieros have updated the in-floor cleaning system, added a salt-based chlorine generator and replaced the dehumidification system. The original TurboClean in-floor cleaning system was one of the amenities Spero suggested back in the original design phase, but at the time, the system's cleaning heads did not retract flush with the pool floor. Replacing the original heads with fully retracting ones was a worthwhile job, Guerriero says, although the pool's new chlorine generator made a bigger difference to him. "I love that there's no odor in the pool or on me and my suit when I get out," he adds.

He also has high praise for Maryland Pools. And although Guerriero may be a man of few words, the fact that Spero has also built a pool for the Guerrieros' daughter and son-in-law is evidence of a job well done. ~

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