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Inside economist Anirban Basu's Indian-inspired home



Economist Anirban Basu lives with his wife, Debita, and their daughters, Kimaya, 17, and Kohena, 10, in a former carriage house at Devon Hill. The home, circa 1920, has been updated for modern living and decorated with a blend of Eastern and Western cultural influences.

By **Christianna McCausland**

For Baltimore at Home

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Where many families would see problems, economist **Anirban Basu** and his wife, Debita, saw promise.

In 2012, the couple was only informally looking for a new home for their family of four when Debita happened upon an open house at Devon Hill's former carriage house. While the house had a lot of charm — exposed stone walls and wood beams, several fireplaces and repurposed barn doors — it had a quirky layout and needed updates. Perhaps the home was just waiting for owners who could see the beauty in its idiosyncrasies.

Anirban is the chairman and CEO of Sage Policy Group Inc., an economic and policy consulting firm, though many know him as the charismatic host of WYPR-FM's "Morning Economic Report." Debita

is an assistant principal at Thomas Johnson Elementary Middle School. They have a busy home life with two daughters, Kimaya, 17, and Kohena, 10, and had been debating moving from Baltimore's Homeland neighborhood to Baltimore County. It was overhearing daughter Kimaya apologizing to a school friend about their former house being "too small" that inspired Anirban to give the carriage house a serious look once Debita had fallen for it.

"I loved the open spaces, I loved the high ceilings and I loved the fact that it is nontraditional — there is no basement; none of the rooms are the same size or shape," says Debita. "Every space was so unique."

The house also met three of Debita's most important criteria: It had a pool, it had space for a prayer room and it had room for her collection of Indian clothing.

Challenges that might discourage other buyers didn't faze the Basus. The house is close to Lake Avenue, for example, but after growing up in busy Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), India, Debita was not swayed by traffic noise. And the home's unconventional layout only made it more alluring.

The structure is built into a hillside, so the entry foyer opens onto formal and informal living rooms and a library, with the kitchen and dining room on the floor below. It seems you need to climb or descend a set of stairs to get to any room, and you never seem to move through the house the same way twice.

"It's such an unusual house," says Kimaya. "When my friends come over for the first time, they never know what's behind any of the doors, and they can never predict where we're going."

The house was originally part of the Windy Gates estate, a glamorous home created in the 1880s by railroad magnate Joseph Jenkins, complete with gardens designed by the firm of Frederick Law Olmsted, a landscape architect who helped create New York's Central Park. The estate's main house was converted to condominiums in the 1980s, and the carriage house was remodeled by an architect who created the home's distinctive interior. But at the time the house was for sale, the entire home needed a refresh.

"Today's buyer is really very particular," Anirban says. "They want a turnkey operation — which we find to be odd because aspects of a house that are imperfect or even highly deficient offer opportunities to put one's stamp on one's home."

Debita explains that the family's style is a reflection of their combined Eastern and Western cultural heritages. Many of the furnishings come from India, including a set of handpainted metal chairs and a table from the Indian state of Rajasthan and a chair and footstool inlaid with mother-of-pearl, all in the formal living room. A bright, airy sunroom off the kitchen features painted carved-wood furniture

(also from Rajasthan), including a swing — called a jhula — that was a wedding gift from Debita's parents. The Basus tapped Ellen Duncan and Tracy Boule, owners of the Columbia-based Organizers on Call, to not only put the house to rights, but also to help with many design details. It was they who suggested brightening the stair risers with paper that looks like an Indian-inspired tile, for example.

The kitchen was completely remodeled with the help of Westminster-based interior designer Susan Underwood Leahy. Accessible from the driveway, the kitchen is the transitional space, where the girls dump their things, mail is sorted, school permission slips are signed and snacks are eaten while watching TV.

The family tends to share a similar taste, most notably when it comes to color. When the pool pavilion — the family's hangout on weekends — was recently renovated, they painted it a brilliant purple in what Anirban calls, "an expression of unadulterated love for the Ravens." The master bedroom features hues of pumpkin and eggplant.

"We like bold colors," says Anirban. "We're not scared of color."

"And we're not scared to experiment with color," Debita adds. "Just because we have a burgundy accent wall doesn't mean we have to live with it for the rest of our lives."

Everyone in the house has a room of their own that reflects their personality. Anirban has a man cave where he can work in peace. Each of the girls chose their room color — lime green for Kohena (with special cubbyhole storage for her dolls) and turquoise and silver for Kimaya.

"I wanted a swing in my bedroom, so I have a chair that swings, and I wanted a really large, four-poster canopy bed that makes me feel like a princess, which it totally does," says Kimaya. Organizers on Call suggested repurposing her bunk bed's old stairs to gain access to high window seats where Kimaya says she likes to sit and read.

For Debita, the prayer room is a special place. Though she'd always made a little space for her Hindu deities, this was the first time she could have a room to mark important celebrations and for personal prayer. The room was remodeled with a marble floor, white walls and touches of brilliant green, in keeping with the tradition that the room be mostly unadorned so the focus can be on prayer.

"So many of my happy memories from childhood were conducted in the prayer room, so I wanted to create that for my family as well," Debita says.

She was also thrilled that they could remodel an outbuilding, which they believe was once used as a tack room, into an "Indian closet." The room is a riot of color, with the walls lined with color-coded Indian clothing for the entire family. It is a place where Debita, her daughters and her sisters-in-law

frequently hang out.

If there is one thing the carriage house has given the Basus, it is space. Outside, they have more than an acre of land, where Olmsted's gardens provided a backdrop for a resplendent party.

"We never had the room to celebrate the Festival of the Colors, Holi, at our old house," says Debita, "but this past year we were able to celebrate outside with Kohena's entire class."

For the Basus, a house of unusual contours and unique details is fitting. In each unconventional space, they have room to express their individual personalities, to pursue prayer and to celebrate their cultural heritage through fashion and design, yet it is also a beautiful backdrop to express shared family values and a genuine love of home.

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