



COURTESY RENAISSANCE CONSERVATORIES

Three conservatories at diverse compass points encircle this family room in McLean that was built by Renaissance Conservatories in Leola, Pa. One drenches the seating area with light. A second segues to an English garden, and the third has a stairwell with unique glass-block steps leading to a gym below.

ANICE HOACHLANDER, COURTESY BARNES VANZE ARCHITECTS INC.

A kitchen conservatory in The District, designed by Barnes Vanze Architects of D.C., adds light and brightness to a stately but heavy and dark 1920s Tudor home. Instead of cabinets, open-glass shelving on wrought-iron brackets enhances the sense of open space and lightness.

Glass act: Conservatories reborn as luminous living spaces

By Susan Wittman
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

Conservatories can add a touch of elegance and even a hint of the tropics while bringing the outdoors inside the home.

They date back to 18th and 19th century Europe, when well-heeled landowners built translucent glass houses as trophy rooms for palms, orange trees and tropical fruits.

By the 19th century, homeowners welcomed visitors to these sunny parlors, which they called conservatories, orangeries or palm houses. Though elaborately graceful, chilly winter air seeped through the glass, requiring smoky, coal-fired heat or limiting use to warmer months.

As insulated glass technology developed in the 1970s, conservatories gradually became year-round spaces. Some are free-standing, but most are extensions of informal living areas where guests and owners gravitate any time of the year.

"They feel like they're out in the garden even if there's a foot of snow outside," said Mark Barocco, president of Renaissance Conservatories in Leola, Pa.

They can be adapted to most architectural styles and uses, including art studios, music rooms, bedrooms, pool enclosures or working greenhouses.

"You can turn it into a tropical

rain forest if you want," said Alan Stein, president of Tanglewood Conservatories in Denton. "Some people have lizards and tropical birds flying around."

A client of Oak Leaf Conservatories in Atlanta ordered an enclosure where his turtles could catch the rays, recalled Amy Magner, the company's U.S. director. Magner began as a client, ordering a conservatory from the British company to shelter her Meyer lemon trees and orchid collection.

"I liked the product so much that I bought the company in 1992," she said.

Conservatories were popular during the Carter administration, when tax credits were available at the federal and county level, particularly in Maryland.

"The structures capture passive solar heat and send it to the house. When [President] Reagan eliminated the tax credits for renewable energy, by then people recognized them as beautiful living spaces," Barocco said. "As tax credits disappeared, conservatories morphed into upscale sunrooms that recall the elegant conservatories of Europe."

What works in Britain's milder climate, however, does not suit the mid-Atlantic, where harsh winters and steamy summers require high-performance, insulated glass and thermally sealed doors, Stein said.



COURTESY TANGLEWOOD CONSERVATORIES

Tanglewood Conservatories created an airy, luminescent space with a soaring glass roof for a Leesburg greenhouse.

For Washington's winter climate, Magner suggested a gutter drainage system that prevents ice damming. "If untreated, the water could melt and refreeze, causing the glass to crack," she said.

Snowdrifts influence a conservatory's sidewall design. "Glass all the way to the floor could get unsightly," Magner added.

Likewise, a south or southwest orientation can become a hothouse

Resources

- » **Tanglewood Conservatories:** 800-229-2925, tanglewood-conservatories.com
- » **Renaissance Conservatories:** 800-882-4657, renaissance-conservatories.com
- » **Oak Leaf Conservatories:** 800-360-6283, oakleafconservatories.com
- » **Barnes Vanze Architects:** 202-337-0609, barnesvanze.com

in the summer. Barocco recommends shades to soften light and sound. In place of an all-glass roof, a cupola controls excessive heat and offers light and ventilation.

Conservatory design considers the orientation, whether northeast or southwest, along with shade trees, landscaping and the client's lifestyle and intended use. These and other factors determine which glass and glazing technologies to use.

"Re-creating the great conservatories of 100 years ago requires a blend of art and technology," Stein said.

And, sometimes, some creativity. One client asked Anthony "Ankie" Barnes of Barnes Vanze Architects in Washington to build a conservatory kitchen.

"The idea sounds lovely with

glass everywhere and no walls, but a few practical challenges arose," he said. "There was a structural need for a wall on one side because of strong winds and close neighbors."

Barnes designed a partial wall with clerestory windows around and above it. He placed the heavy stove hood on that wall. Refrigerator and freezer drawers went below the long antique chestnut table, and glass shelves took the place of cabinets.

Conservatories are increasingly high-tech, but Stein said they really are the "antithesis of mass production." Stock designs are available, but luxury glass houses are one of a kind.

"We don't use standardized parts," Stein said. "Each component is designed and handcrafted in fine metals, wood or glass. It's beautiful, but of course you pay for that."

Conservatories can be two to four times more expensive than conventional stick-built construction, he said.

Renaissance charges \$500 to \$700 a square foot. "A grape-arbor motif with leaded glass in every transom can easily add \$40,000 to \$50,000," Barocco said.

For Stein and his wife and business partner, Nancy Virts, conservatories always have been more than a business. "It's an artistic venture. We're in it as much for the art as for anything else," he said.