

HOME & DESIGN

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The newly renovated, 200-year-old farmhouse looks completely at home nestled into the countryside.

BELGIAN HOLIDAY

Designer Natascha Folens transforms a dilapidated farmhouse into an inviting vacation retreat

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About halfway between the historic Belgian cities of Ghent and Bruges, a forested area flanks a bucolic, six-acre slice of pastureland. For 200 years, a narrow farmhouse occupied this isolated spot; by the time Natascha Folens and her boyfriend, Luc Dejager, first glimpsed it, it had been empty for so long that trees were literally growing through the roof.

Folens and Dejager, who live in Great Falls, Virginia, were looking to buy a vacation home in their native country. They fell in love with the picturesque scenery surrounding the farmhouse, and their first thought was to tear the ramshackle structure down and build a new home on the site. However, it turned out the land was protected, which meant they couldn't get permission to build on it. They took a deep breath and bought the property anyway.

"We loved the land so much," Folens recalls. "We decided to fix the [existing] house up. Since we live in the States we didn't need anything bigger than this for a vacation home."

This was fortunate because as it turned out, the authorities would only allow them to redo the house if they didn't alter the exterior—in other words, no additions. The couple was also prohibited from moving any of the interior walls, so the configuration of the rooms had to stay the same.

However, authorities did give the owners some leeway, allowing them to create a second floor within the single-story home's existing roofline and also permitting them to add windows and doors around the perimeter of the structure.

Over the next year, the designer supervised a massive overhaul—much of the time from Virginia, where her kids attend school—that took the house down to its bare brick walls. New exterior siding, popular in Europe, is made of "a cement paste like stucco that has the color in it so you never have to paint," Folens says. The new roof is European terracotta tile.

The project was fraught with challenges, beginning with the Herculean task of getting power and running water out to the property, which sits at the end of a long dirt road and, not surprisingly, had no modern amenities when Folens and Dejager bought it.



In the family room, the fireplace is the focal point and a mirror to its left makes the space feel bigger.



Chairs covered in a bright Missoni Home fabric surround a custom table in the dining area.



Clean-lined, semi-custom cabinetry in the kitchen is paired with Caesarstone countertops.



The living room showcases paintings by Bolivian artist Pastor Berrios Herrera.



In the living room, Folens brought the outdoors in by installing a 16-foot wide window.



Folens kept the upstairs open and bright with glass walls between master bedroom and bath.



Folens (right) and boyfriend Luc Dejager (left) entertain guests in the pastoral backyard.

Building the upstairs level, which now houses a master bedroom suite and two other bedrooms, also presented a major challenge. “The house has a saddle roof that’s steeply angled on both sides,” Folens explains. Because the structure is only 26 feet wide, it was difficult to fit everything beneath the saddle roof and still have the ceilings at a functional height.

Downstairs, the foyer encompasses an airy, open stairway leading up to the second floor. Off to the right lies the family room, where a limestone fireplace creates a focal point and the family gathers to watch TV. The rest of the house opens up to the left: living room, home office, kitchen and adjoining dining area. The third challenge: “Working with these rooms that were already here since we weren’t allowed to modify them,” Folens comments.

She chose unfinished, wide-plank European oak floors throughout, framed the glass-paneled doors in metal and imparted a cozy, welcoming vibe through a careful lighting plan. Beyond that, however, she tried “to create a different atmosphere for different rooms so that there isn’t one specific style to the whole house. It’s not a typical Belgian interior because they tend to be sober and neutral,” she says. “But it’s also not American with formal extras like crown moldings. I wanted to respect the feel of a country house but give it my personal touch.”

In the family room, which faces north and gets no sunlight, Folens emphasized coziness. However, the kitchen/dining area gets plenty of sun, so she went sleek and contemporary there, choosing a bright, floral Missoni Home fabric for the dining chairs that surround the custom table to evoke sunlight and blooming. The living room looks directly out into the woods, so the designer, wanting to capitalize on the immediacy of the view, selected a 16-foot-wide window. Challenge number four: getting it installed.

Both Folens and Dejager travel frequently, so Folens focused on filling the house with objects collected on their trips: Paintings from Argentina adorn the living room wall and a coffee table made from a door found in Mali is a centerpiece. In the family room, Folens embellished the old fireplace with a limestone mantel that she got through a dealer who salvages them from French and Belgian castles. In a nod to Belgium’s history in the Congo, the rooms are punctuated with African artifacts.

“I try to get clients to think about what they really want instead of buying everything off the shelf,” Folens says. “I think it’s important to put some thought and soul into your house to make it a home.”

Photographer Priscilla Bistoën lives in Ghent, Belgium.

RENOVATION & INTERIOR DESIGN: NATASCHA FOLENS, NF Interiors, Great Falls, Virginia.

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