

Trailer Made

A vintage motor home gets a hip, eco-sensitive makeover

By Karin Horgan Sullivan

Published Oct. 6, 2008



Father and daughter, ready to roll. [Photo Gallery:::](#)

Sometimes I feel like a crazy person, my motor home means so much to me,” Rachel Carlson says, referring to the 1977 GMC Motorhome that her parents bought secondhand in 1984. “I thought it was awful and embarrassing, as a typical 14-year-old girl would,” recalls the Oak Park resident. “My parents would drive to the Pocono Mountains near our home in Allentown, Pennsylvania, cook a great steak dinner in the wilderness, eat off of china, the whole deal. They loved ‘playing house’ without their teenage daughters.”

Eventually, though, Carlson came to love “the bus,” and when her father died unexpectedly six years ago, she and her husband, Rick Boultinghouse, gladly took it off her mother’s hands. For years, Carlson couldn’t bring herself to change anything about her dad’s beloved camper, but her desire to replace the aged, dirty-looking countertops ultimately led to a complete overhaul of the interior.

On a quest for bamboo countertops, Carlson called the Oak Park–based kitchen design firm Prairie Plus and ended up hiring designer Mandi Maurer, whom she asked to create a “cross between a Zen garden and a martini lounge.” Maurer, who’s working on her Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) accreditation, came up with a plan incorporating eco-friendly materials fore-and-aft.

Durable floor tiles made of cork, harvested from the bark of trees that quickly regrow, replaced the orange shag carpeting, providing an earthy-looking, sound-absorbent surface that can take the wear and tear of the family, which includes a three-year-old daughter and a rottweiler named Ashland. To create more space in the dining area, they tore out the old, cramped banquette seating (shipping it off for reuse in a Minnesotan’s restored motor home) and covered new, lower-profile benches in sable-color mohair panne velvet.

“That’s when I realized we’d lost our minds,” Carlson says, only half-joking about the \$120-a-yard price tag. But both she and Maurer had fallen in love with the lush fabric and thought it created the perfect nightclub vibe. And its subtly striated pattern echoes the slats of the bus’s original cabinets. Carlson, an expert seamstress who makes soft goods for theatre sets and museums, did most of the upholstering herself and created pillows using bamboo fabric from the Holly Hunt Zen Garden line of textiles.



The motor home as it looked when Carlson and her husband inherited it. [Photo Gallery:::](#)



Boultinghouse, an experienced do-it-yourselfer, fabricated bamboo countertops from unfinished panels, and also built a removable cocktail-size table that can be stored when the expandable dining table is in use.

Heightening the Zen garden element are softly glowing Jelly Bean Rocks—tumbled pebbles mounted on mesh panels that Boultinghouse adhered to the walls of the galley kitchen, grouted, and sealed with a satin finish. To make a backsplash and side splash, Boultinghouse used 3form panels of ecoresin, a nontoxic material made from 40 percent post-industrial reclaimed material. Carlson found herself obsessively checking 3form’s online Reclaim program, where customers can buy leftover or reusable product at a deep discount. Her diligence paid off when she bought the pattern they wanted for just a couple of hundred dollars, versus the thousand they would have spent on new material.

This 1977 GMC Motorhome has been in Rachel Carlson’s family for many years. Its makeover included lowering the stove and undermounting the original sink to accommodate drop-in bamboo panels that double the counter space. [Photo Gallery:::](#)

The irony of an eco-makeover on a vehicle that gets the same gas mileage as a Hummer isn’t lost on Carlson and Boultinghouse. But as they point out, air travel has a high environmental cost as well; with family and friends scattered from Texas to New England, they’re going to burn fuel one way or another.

And stopping in state parks, throwing some Cornish game hens in a little smoker, then kicking back with a glass of wine sure beats waiting in line at O’Hare. “This way,” Carlson says, “the traveling is fun.”

For more photos of Rick and Rachel Boltinghouse's renovation, see:

<http://www.gmcmhphotos.com/photos/g4942-new-interior-renovation-photos.html>