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Living Above the Store

BY ANDY LEON HARNEY



THE MIXED-USE buildings on Laurel's Main Street, above right, have the look of old Victorians; below, the interior of one of the loft apartments.

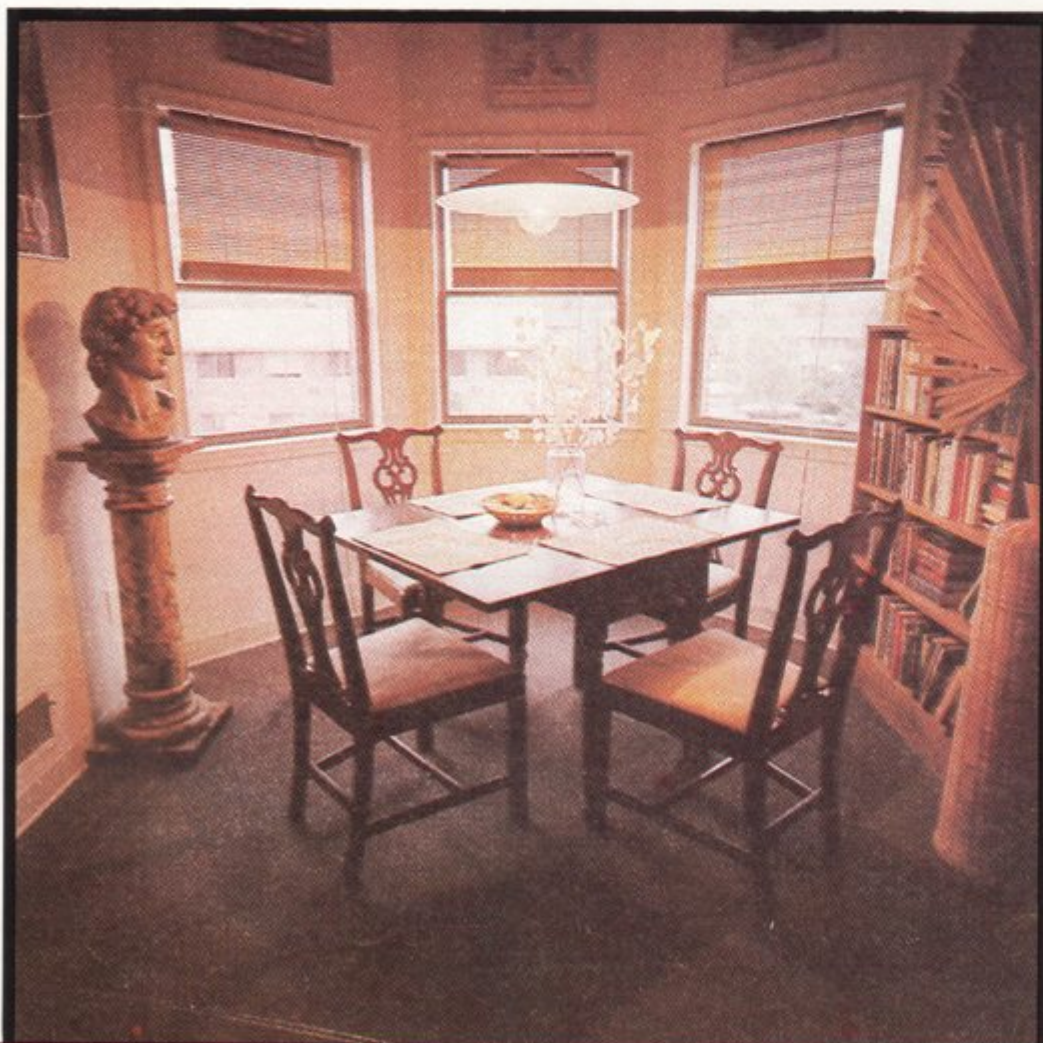
WHEN LAUREL developers Jerry Cooper and Dave Cummings first renovated an old house and turned it into commercial office space on Rte. 1 in Laurel, they had no idea that the project would lead to a whole new series of ventures. Just around the corner, on Main Street in the historic district of what was once a sleepy Maryland town, no new development had

taken place in almost 40 years. So their next venture was to plan new construction that would bring offices and residences to Rte. 1 but would still be in keeping with the look of Old Laurel. They hired architect Michael Finn, who designed four Victorian "homes" to be used as both residences and offices. Finn's plan included four four-level buildings (two with turrets) that had a lower level commercial space, street-level shops and restaurants, second-floor offices and third-floor walk-up loft efficiency apartments.

Each building has four apartments, each with separate entrances. All are condominiums, but most are leased rather than owner-occupied. The second-floor offices also have their own separate entrances reached from outdoor stairs—there are no elevators in any of the buildings.

Why did Cummings and Cooper decide on four low-level buildings when they could have designed one larger, higher structure? Both men have been developing property in the Laurel area since the mid-1960s and both believed that the streetscape wouldn't support a single building. "We wanted it to look small-scale," says Cummings. The result is a charming, upbeat focal point for a commercial strip that had seen better days.

What do Finn, Cummings and Cooper have in mind next? They plan to construct another smaller building across the street—continuing the line of new Victorians and the new atmosphere in Old Laurel. ■



ANDY LEON HARNEY contributes regularly to The Magazine on design.