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The Country Club Downstairs

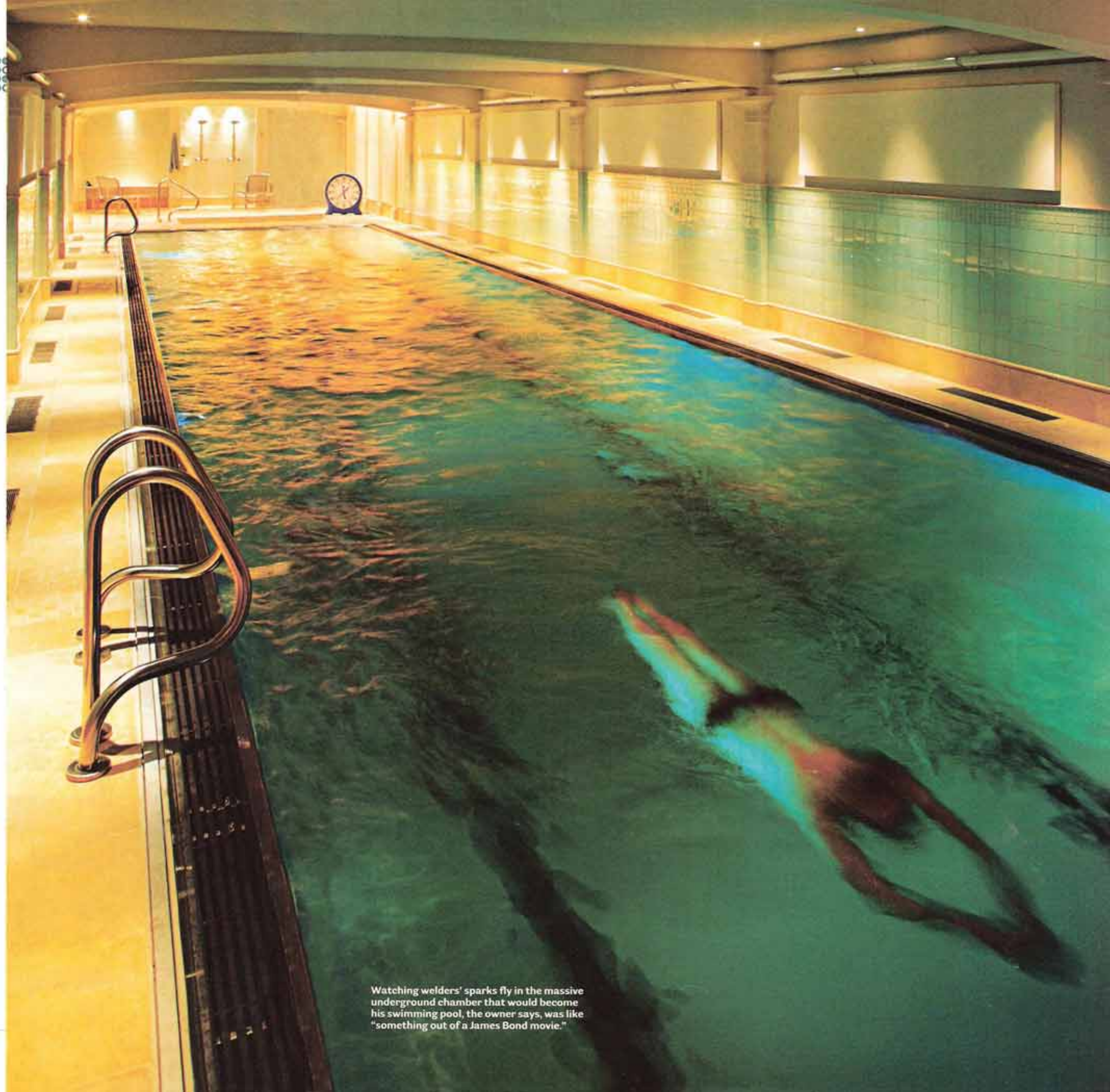
All it took was a little ingenuity (and a 2,400-square-foot hole under the garage) for one Newton couple to make a serious splash in their 1920s home. **By Pamela de Oliveira-Smith**

It may not happen very often around here, but, yes—every now and again—a big dig gets completed.

The pool had been a fantasy for years. It was only when the Newton couple, a physician and a scientist, decided to completely gut their 1920s Mediterranean Revival that they mustered the courage to jump off the deep end and invest in a private swimming hole. “Fundamentally, the pool was my wife’s idea,” says the husband. Not much of a swimmer herself, the lady of the house did have a fitness regimen in mind—for him. “She wanted to keep me around longer,” he says.

It took some serious commitment just to excavate as far down as required, especially given that the couple wanted to swim their laps indoors. Ultimately, in 2007 they dug 24 feet below the garage, giving contractor Marc Kaplan of Sanford Custom Builders enough room to build both the 2,400-square-foot natatorium and concrete roof to support the house above.

“The structural implications were daunting,” says architect John MacDonald, a principal of Morehouse MacDonald in Lexington. Landscape architect **CONTINUED ON PAGE 131**



Watching welders' sparks fly in the massive underground chamber that would become his swimming pool, the owner says, was like “something out of a James Bond movie.”



SWIMMING POOL

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Gregory Lombardi, principal of Gregory Lombardi Design in Cambridge, concurs: "It was an unusual depth for a residential site," even in New England, a region where ambitious backyard excavations are often required for septic tank conversions and the like. (During the dig, the owner says, he would peer into the abyss to watch welding sparks fly through the darkness "like something out of a James Bond movie.")

To balance the room's acoustics and break up the bowling-lane regularity of the space, MacDonald designed a series of arches running above the pool, illuminated by warm fluorescent cove lights. The color scheme—creams, blues, and dusky whites—reinforces the watery-paradise aesthetic and contributes to the soothing ambiance. Large, warm Jerusalem limestone tiles cover the floors, accented by glass tile wainscoting. Although underground pools can hardly be considered environment-friendly, this one is insulated by the climate-controlling properties of the surrounding earth's thermal mass.

Thanks to the enormous scale, the project brought its fair share of logistical headaches, the owner admits. "I could write a Tracy Kidder-type book," he laughs, referring to the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Soul of a New Machine* and *House*. But he and his wife have no regrets, he says, adding, "We had fabulous relationships with all the people who worked on the project, and from that perspective, our experience was great."

According to the project architect, the more intimately a homeowner becomes involved in the project, the more successful the results. "Their level of understanding helped open us up to options that we might not otherwise have considered," MacDonald says. "Design is not an abstraction for them. This was truly a labor of love."

The pool alone cost about \$250,000, says the owner, acknowledging that others might find investing in such a grand space a bit extreme. But, he says, "I've swum at the YMCA over the years, and I've loved that. But nothing beats rolling out of bed and coming downstairs for a swim whenever I want." ■



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