



Square Roots

A Philadelphia townhouse reclaims its Victorian heritage.

PROJECT: RESIDENCE, PHILADELPHIA, PA

ARCHITECT: VOITH & MACTAVISH ARCHITECTS LLP, PHILADELPHIA, PA; DANIELA HOLT VOITH, AIA, LEEP AP, PRINCIPAL IN CHARGE

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: JAMCOR, INC., FLOURTOWN, PA

In addition to luxury high-rises, cultural institutions, bars and restaurants, the Rittenhouse Square neighborhood is home to some of Philadelphia's finest residences. Many date from the mid-to late-19th century, when the area was a magnet for Victorian aristocracy and the city experienced a building boom. Among the prime examples from this period is a ca. 1850s townhouse with a storied history. Burned at the turn of the century, and chopped up in the 1930s, it has come full circle thanks to a painstaking restoration and renovation by Voith & Mactavish Architects.

The project spanned the greater part of 12 years and was completed in two phases: 2004 saw the addition of new mechanical and electrical systems, as well as completion of the sub-basement, ground floor, new garden, garage and the restoration of the south elevation; the second through fourth floors and street façade were completed in 2009.

As a result of the fire, much of the interior detailing dated from a later time period. However, the architects did not have to look far for inspiration. "It was built in a time period with a number of other houses, so it wasn't a stand-alone," says Daniela Voith, principal in charge at Voith & Mactavish. "This house dates back to significantly early in Rittenhouse Square and we have worked on others of the same vintage. So between our direct experience and our research we had a lexicon of detail to draw upon."

The configuration of the house had been dramatically altered with the conversion of the first floor into doctors' offices in the 1930s. While the upper floors had remained residential, original material was lost. "The first

Top: This 1850s townhouse in the Rittenhouse Square area of Philadelphia was restored and renovated by Voith and Mactavish Architects in two phases over 12 years. The architects completely reworked the house from the ground up, added new mechanical and electrical systems and created interiors that complement the clients' furniture, abstract expressionist artwork and platinum print photography. All photos: Jeffrey Totaro unless otherwise noted



Above: The house is one of several on Rittenhouse Square that were built during Philadelphia's mid- to late-19th-century building boom. Having worked on other homes in the area from this period, the architects had much experience and knowledge to draw upon.



Right: The garden, which was once a barren outdoor space, was recognized with a Palladio Award in 2005. Today it contains a walkway surrounded by seven species of flowers, as well as a pergola, water-lily pond and wall fountain.

floor had been totally ruined," says Voith. "It had been made into a series of small rooms, and in the course of that, much of the upstairs was lost. Only the staircase and the rear two rooms on the second floor were original."

The first order of business was to rework the entire plan from the bottom up. On the first floor, the front grand parlor was rebuilt and restored based on remaining evidence of original moldings, doors and windows. A new 50-ft. library, in place of the original kitchen and service rooms, opens to views of the new garden, which is accessed via a new side entrance.

Here, what was once a barren outdoor space is now a walkway surrounded by seven species of flowers, as well as a pergola, water-lily pond and a

wall fountain. The transformation was so dramatic that Voith & Mactavish Architects and Victoria Steiger Garden Design were recognized with a Palladio Award in 2005 (see *Period Homes*, July 2005, page 25).

In an unusual move, the clients decided to keep the kitchen on the second level and retain only a small service kitchen, mainly for breakfast and entertaining, on the first floor. "We believe that the original kitchens were on the first level in the rear of the house," says Voith. "But after having the opportunity to rethink that, the clients decided that they liked having the kitchen on the second floor, and that they wanted to pull the flow of the house up onto that floor where the dining and music rooms are. They eat at a little table at the end of the library every morning, but supper is had in the second-floor dining room."

Upstairs, the dining room was made slightly smaller to place the mantel squarely in its center. This extra space was absorbed by



Prior to the two-phase project, the house was missing original details and had fallen into disrepair. The conversion of the first floor into doctors' offices had completely altered the configuration of the house. Photos: courtesy of Voith & Mactavish Architects



the reworked kitchen, where every square inch was needed to accommodate the clients' extensive culinary interests and their collections of china, glassware, cookware and silver. A whole upper level of cabinetry is reachable only by using a library ladder. "It runs around the kitchen on a rail, just as you would find in a historic British library," says Voith. "We designed it with wheels from rollerblades. We had never made anything like that before, but it seemed like a good solution."

Along with storage space, the restaurant-quality kitchen contains warming, roasting and convection ovens, and a spit for roasting in the fireplace. In fact it is so impressive that building inspectors almost shut the project down. "Their rationale was that there was no permit for a restaurant on the block," says Voith. "The kitchen is so big – there are 12 linear ft. of cooking surfaces – that they assumed there was no way it could be for a residential purpose. We assured them that it was, but it took some convincing."

As the functions of the music room and rear parlor had never been altered, a substantial amount of original material remained. The firm rebuilt the windows, stripped and re-oiled the woodwork, and faux painted the mantelpiece. Leaded glass

Right: The hall features original paneling and moldings. The lighting and picture rail were added to allow for the hanging – and easy alteration – of the clients' photography collection.

Below: In the footprint of the original kitchen and service rooms, a new 50-ft. library opens to views of the garden. *Photo: Tom Bernard*



The clients' personal style leaned more towards Adamesque than Victorian. Balancing the clients' aesthetic with architectural detailing authentic to the house was therefore a challenge.

in the living room's curved bay window was removed, cleaned and re-installed, along with new complementary glass. "The view isn't so great," says Voith. "One would be looking at the other wall of the next house, so leaded glass is a fairly typical response to gain light without being distracted by a compromised view."

One of the most impressive pieces in the house is the imposing fireplace and mantel in the music room. It was cleaned, faux painted and gilded, while the rest of the room was restored. A new marble fireplace was added in the adjoining sitting room.

While Voith & Mactavish helped to develop the color scheme, the fabrics and furniture were selected by interior designer Sue Binswanger of Executive Interiors, Inc. "I have to give huge compliments to the designer," says Voith. "She has wonderful taste and worked with the owners' existing pieces and helped establish the themes of each room."

Though they were fascinated by the history of the house, the clients' personal style leaned more towards Adamesque than Victorian. Balancing the clients' aesthetic with architectural detailing authentic to the house was therefore a challenge. "Their taste was a little more ornate and delicately wrought than that of the original Victorian house," says Voith. "They purchased mantels and other decorative elements that then needed to be brought together with the original interior."

New moldings, particularly in the first-floor parlor and second-floor dining room, helped provide context for the clients' furniture and art. Voith took cues from original material discovered behind dropped ceilings and from previously completed projects within the area. "We know what the typical moldings were from our own research and experience," she says. "There are always challenges on every project, but ultimately, having a client that is so involved and so interested made things easier in many ways. They knew what they were looking for and what they liked. And so I had a very clear direction of where we were going with the house."

The fireplace and overmantel in the music room was cleaned, faux painted and gilded.

At every stage of the project, Voith was mindful of the clients' interest in abstract expressionist artwork and platinum print photography. Besides making room for the pieces, and incorporating ways in which to hang and change them, the artwork also gives the house a fluid quality. "The way that we were able to keep the house from being a static set piece or a re-creation of a particular time period was really inspirational," says Voith. "It's a living, breathing house that really reflects them, their interests and their lifestyle. For me, that's what makes the house exciting." — *Lynne Lavelle*

WEB EXTRA: For additional photos of this project, go to www.period-homes.com/extras/November11Voith.htm.

