

Preserving the old while hiding the new

- Robert Behre
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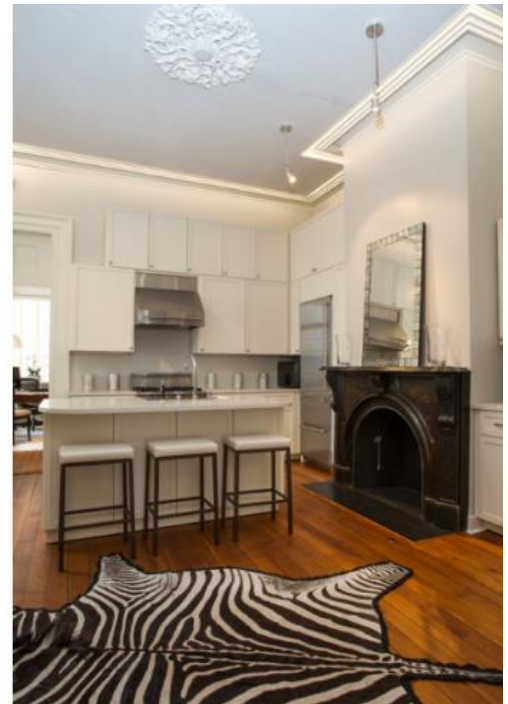


The greatest challenge facing the architect working on the restoration of the grand home at 8 Vanderhorst St. was making it feel roomy and historic while dividing it into two units with all the modern conveniences expected in a luxury home.

Architect Robert "Buz" Morris says he began by ruling out a wholesale demolition of much of the interior.

While that decision ensured the house's interior preservation, it posed other challenges for fitting in kitchen space, bathrooms and closets -- the kinds of spaces that weren't there when a King Street hat merchant first built it around 1855.

Morris says he used the same approach that he did in the earlier restoration of the two-story slave quarters in the rear: keep as much original fabric as



possible while making the new additions modern and simple.

This is most clearly seen in the partitions Morris created for new bathrooms and closets, as well as in the additional second-floor sleeping space, which is a bed and vanity that fold up into the wall when not in use.



Morris left the house's rear piazza enclosed but did expose the original columns, rail and balusters that were covered up, apparently during its original enclosure.

Inside, the space can be understood as a former piazza

because Morris leaves the piazza ceiling in place and stops the new partition walls well beneath it.

"Why not celebrate the ceiling of the piazza?" he asks.

While the new windows in the enclosed piazza are contemporary, their black shade makes them fade into the background. The eye notices the columns and railings surrounding them.

Likewise, the only piazza lights visible from the street are the gas lanterns, but each piazza has a series of 35-watt lights that are hidden.

"The idea is to make the modern subordinate to the historic," Morris says.

Perhaps the neatest trick is the way Morris recycles what likely would have been unused or wasted space in a more conventional renovation.

The house was built with a masonry cistern underneath that measured about 10 feet by 12 feet.

Morris' design turns this underground space into two wine cellars by adding a new wall that splits this space into two -- one accessed from the second floor by a small elevator; the other by a hole in the floor that opens onto a wooden ship ladder.



The renovation actually included the addition of a new 4,000-gallon cistern outside, but it's not likely to be as useful as the old one.

Morris says the hurdles behind getting government permission to reuse that collected water -- even to irrigate the landscaping -- were too onerous.

As a result, the new cistern will be used only as a sort of catch basin, to help keep the property from flooding during a heavy rain.

At least until the year 2150, when someone might renovate it as a place to keep beer.

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