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SAVING GRACE

A West Village colonial, once home to a noted Detroit sculptor, is being restored to its former beauty

BY REBECCA POWERS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN MACONCHIE

Doug McIntosh was at a house party in Detroit's stately Indian Village when a refined-looking woman asked the question: "What street do you live on?"

Seyburn, was the reply.

"Oh," she said, "you're an edge dweller."

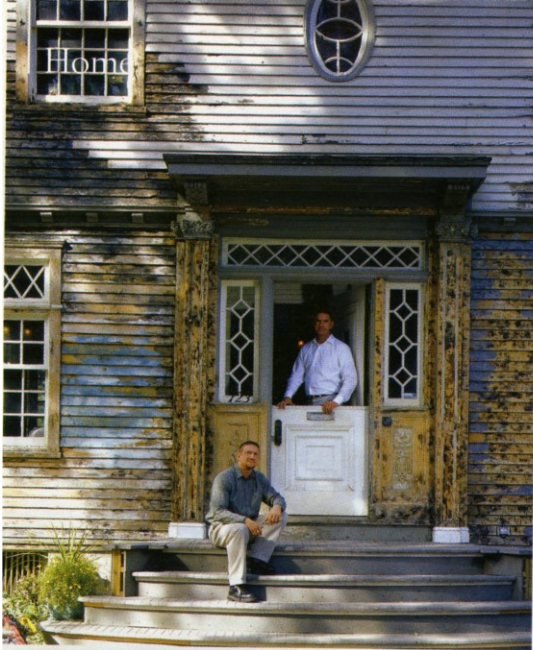
His new home indeed is on the western-most street of the adjacent neighborhood, West Village. But he'd never heard it put quite that way. Of course, not long after he and Scotty James purchased the Seyburn Street house and took on their Herculean restoration project, mutual friends also might have described them as living on the edge — of sanity.

"When we first moved, all we got was, 'You're out of your mind, you're nuts,'" McIntosh says. "Now the response is, 'What an opportunity.'"

GOOD BONES: The task of returning the Melchers home to its former state, as pictured in this archival photo, has taken on aspects of an archeological dig. Craftspeople stripped 20 coats of paint from the siding and gently chiseled layers of latex and oil base from wooden carvings on the interior and exterior of the home (opposite and this page).



HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY DOUG MCINTOSH



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"I got lost inside the house because nothing lines up. The house is kind of magical. When I walked through, I had the best feeling." — SCOTTY JAMES

McIntosh, an architect with McIntosh Poris and Associates in Birmingham, and James, who holds a degree in historic preservation, are in the throes of a yearlong project, returning their home to its original state — with a few modern-day architectural twists.

Once the home is restored, they expect it will be named officially as one of 17 artists' homes listed as part of the National Trust's Historic Artists Homes and Studios program. If it wins that designation, Preservation Wayne will oversee its status and help organize four home tours each year.

Their residence was built in 1896 as the home of Julius Melchers, a Detroit sculptor whose work adorned Detroit's Old City Hall and the original Detroit Opera House. Melchers' son, Gari, a painter whose work is part of the DIA's permanent collection, commissioned and paid for the house.

The cultural pedigree of the address was only part of the reason James and McIntosh fell in love with the home last summer. "I got lost inside the house because nothing lines up," James says of his first visit. "The house is kind of magical. When I walked through, I had the best feeling.

"The previous owner had big 1950s curtains covering every window and shutters and drab gray walls. I kept thinking this house needs to be light and alive and released from its prison."

McIntosh and James had checked out other homes in much more dire need of help. There was a home on Burns in Indian Village, for example. "It was a wreck," James says. "Someone had gutted it. It had great bones, but one or two walls in the living room were gone. They had removed the plaster. Some people don't know what they're doing and they should be forbidden from buying old houses."

By comparison, the Seyburn house was intact.

"I was amazed that it was so untouched," McIntosh says. "I was expecting carpeted floors, horrible additions. I was just taken aback with the pure quality of what was there. We didn't even blink an eye. Within a split second, we said we have to be there."

The home was remarkable enough to lure them away from their immaculately finished 1872 red brick Italianate home in Ann Arbor.

Renovating their new home is an imposing endeavor. "What's amazing is that over the 100 years of the house every single one of Melchers' carvings is still intact," McIntosh says. "Every single piece of original artwork is there. We uncovered a house that was locked in time and untouched."

Still, ordinary house hunters would recoil at the task of replacing wiring and plumbing, having 20 layers of exterior paint stripped with a torch, repairing termite damage and jacking up the foundation which, in their case, created fissures in several plaster walls.

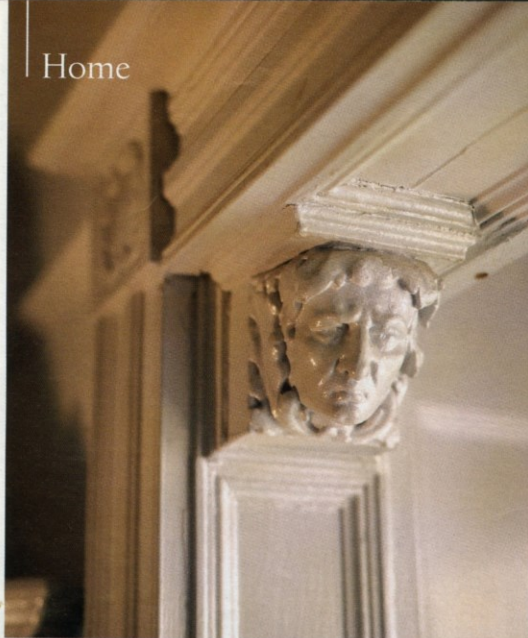
McIntosh kept a box full of surgical instruments on hand; they came in handy for the nearly archeological work of excavating heavy paint to reveal Melchers' carvings.

A large volume of archival photographs has helped guide their work. "The porch was ripped off 50 years ago," McIntosh says. "We would never have known its original design if it weren't for the volume of photographs documenting the

SNAPSHOTS IN TIME: Doug McIntosh (standing at top) and Scotty James (seated) moved to Detroit from Ann Arbor to restore the frame home. The carved tulip motif appears throughout the home (center). A treasure trove of architectural photos (bottom) helped the homeowners devise accurate reconstruction plans. Opposite: Large ornamental carvings, including rooftop embellishments, are being restored and, when necessary, re-created.

HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY DOUG MCINTOSH





“What I like most about West Village and Indian Village is the [architectural] diversity, the million-dollar mansions next to apartment buildings, carriage houses, big houses, row houses. And with that, you get diverse types of people.” — DOUG MCINTOSH

home.” Exterior photos helped them duplicate the half-round wooden porch, as well as the configuration of the front sidewalks.

While the project continues, James and McIntosh live out of three rooms in the 5,200-square-foot home. The main-floor library serves as a makeshift kitchen. Paint chips taped to various walls hint at the completed vision. Planned finishing touches also include furniture from the Bill Solfield Collection by Baker as well as antique furnishings. In the front yard, a formal garden is planned with oval beds edged with boxwood.

Meanwhile, veteran craftsmen are busy carving new embellishments to match a few missing elements carved by Melchers.

Another design highlight is the delft tile fireplace surround, a focal point of the living room. The 1620s-era tiles, brought into the country by Gari Melchers, were antique long before the home was built. Those tiles will stay, along with the many carvings and built-in corner cabinets in the dining room. On the floors, 1920s-era white oak planks will be removed to expose the original wide pine plank flooring.

From the outside, the home looks like a typical center-entrance colonial with Dutch influences. But looks are deceiving. “The floor plan is quirky,” James says. “It’s both formal and informal at the same time.

“You would think it had a center hall that goes all the way through. But it’s a foyer and the hall turns right and the stairway is almost tucked away. It creates great spaces.”

On the previously unfinished third and fourth floors, McIntosh has drawn blueprints for a separate suite of multi-purpose rooms along with a pair of four-floor libraries linked by a bridge. The plan includes a two-story sunroom off the back wing of the house.

In rooms where original fixtures had been removed, they will add new in the style of the old. “We’re going to make the kitchen wonderful, with painted wood cabinets to match the profile of the dining room cabinets,” McIntosh says. “The focal point will be the oven hood with a delft tile backsplash and surround using antique delft ceramic. The kitchen floor will be antique pine.”

James and McIntosh will paint the exterior in colors similar to the original palette. They plan on buttercream with white trim, dark green shutters and door with carved insets in seafoam green. The roof will be cedar.

Standing on the quiet block all around the home are comfortable addresses. Some homes are built of heavy stone; others are wood frame with wrap-around porches and lace at the windows. “What I like most about West Village and Indian Village is the [architectural] diversity, the million-dollar mansions next to apartment buildings, carriage houses, big houses, row houses,” McIntosh says. “And with that, you get diverse types of people. It’s real healthy and it’s the way the whole city should be. It’s the most remarkable neighborhood.”

And while they’re happy to be among the village residents, James says they feel like more than occupants. “We believe you don’t own a house,” he says. “You’re just a caretaker.” ■

SURVIVORS: The carved head of a man (top) gazes across a dining room window toward a carved female companion on the other side of the window frame. At center, an archival photograph depicts the living room fireplace in its original decor, complete with a picture of Abraham Lincoln on the mantel. Around the same fireplace today (at bottom), the antique delft tile remains intact. Above the mantel, sketches illustrate a planned mural that will echo the delft-tile designs and the home’s repeating tulip motif.