

Total makeover

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One of Oaks Cloister's two grand stairways.

Capitol Improvements

Restoration of an historic mansion in Germantown uncovers intriguing connections to the seat of government in Harrisburg.

BY SEAN SCULLY, PHOTOS BY MIKE MERGEN

John Casavecchia never meant to let things get out of hand.

When the public school teacher stopped by on a whim to see an old Germantown mansion on sale for a good price, he figured it would be easy — a little paint, a little touch up work and he and his longtime partner could move right in.

Now, four years and more than \$1 million later, his mania to restore the historic 20-room Oaks Cloister mansion on Fairmount Park is only about 90 percent complete. The project has consumed his life, that of his partner Dr. Russ Harris, and

become a nearly full-time job for historic restoration master Ross O'Neal.

"It's just kind of snowballed really," says the recently retired Casavecchia, putting his hands to his face and shaking his head in wonderment. "This has just become a labor of love."

But what a love to have.

The century-old house turns out to be one of the city's more interesting historical gems, and one with national significance.



TERRY L. WAY

It was built in 1900 by Joseph Miller Huston, who in his day was perhaps the most famous architect in the city. Huston is known for his work on the Witherspoon Building, the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, the Wanamaker house, and the Union League building on Broad Street.

His crowning achievement, however, was the new Pennsylvania State Capitol building in Harrisburg, opened in 1906. Huston used his Germantown home as an architectural laboratory to perfect the fantastic designs he used in the monumental new state building.

"I was just enthralled," O'Neal says of his first sight of the house in 2002. "It was like a dream come true, this kind of job."

What O'Neal, a master gilder and decorative artist based in Pennsburg, Pa., found was astonishing. The house was shabby, dirty and in desperate need of attention, but it was in fundamentally good shape. The previous owners, the Rev. and Mrs. Wilbur Gouker, had maintained the intricate plaster-work, and, apart from some ill-advised coats of paint, had done little damage to the irreplaceable woodwork, parquet floors and stained-glass.

A few priceless items were sold off after their deaths, including a huge stained-glass window that wound up in an Atlanta museum and two irreplaceable lion statues, said to be from Renaissance Florence.

Although that kind of loss "breaks your heart," O'Neal says, there remained so much rich detail in the house that Oaks Cloister became his personal obsession. He has hand-carved wooden replacements for missing woodwork. He has repainted and gilded nearly every inch of the mansion from floor to ceiling, including the creation of several fine examples of faux painting that create the illusion of textured wallpaper or three-dimensional woodwork.

A few more details remain to be finished on the third floor and one major room, which housed Huston's art collection, needs a complete restoration.

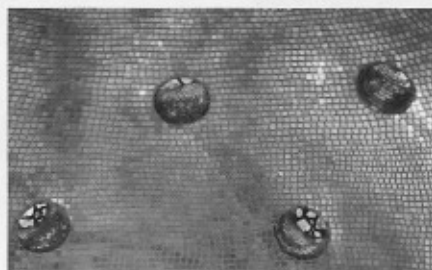
Really, Casavecchia says with a nervous chuckle, "it probably never will be done."

The owners made two major concessions to history. They gutted the kitchen, last renovated in the 1950s, and made a thoroughly modern space. But even here, they tried to preserve the color scheme and general Beaux-arts feel of the room.

"We didn't want to restore it back to 1900," O'Neal says. "That wouldn't be functional."

And in the third-floor master bedroom, Casavecchia and Harris installed air conditioning and a modern master bathroom with a Jacuzzi and a glass-enclosed shower. But here again, O'Neal strived to preserve the ornate, opulent feel of the house.

"I think it's fabulous that people have



Artistic details run throughout the mansion. Among them, Mercer tiles spell 'summer' and tiny gold squares glow inside the grotto.



ROSS O'NEAL

Ross O'Neal spent countless hours restoring a small grotto and painting the walls in the ballroom.





TILDA HUNTING



Left: The cloister as it was. Right: Owners Russ Harris and John Casavecchia, pictured here with restoration artist Ross O'Neal.

bought the place who really care about it," says Ruthann Hubbert-Kemper, executive director of the Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, a group established by the General Assembly in 1982 to preserve the state capitol.

Hubbert-Kemper was instrumental in researching the history of the house, including the architectural and decorative details that Huston recreated in Harrisburg.

Over the grand central staircase, for example, an embossed leather mural is a rare example of a leather-working technique by Henry Busse. The artist created a plaster fresco and then stretched leather across it, building up certain features with horse hair and other materials. The result is a haunting, three-dimensional picture with a rich, classic feel.

Huston intended to decorate a reception room in the Capitol with similar figurative murals. State officials, however, balked when they learned of the breathtaking effort and cost. Only a few pieces of decorative leatherwork made it to Harrisburg.

In the ballroom, an incongruous little grotto built into a niche in the wall is another example of how Huston used his home to perfect his professional techniques. The beautiful half-dome is inlaid with hundreds of tiny amber glass squares laid over silver leaf in a process similar to that used in the Capitol building's massive rotunda. The grotto contains a statue of a reclining Venus sculpted by

George Grey Barnard, who also created the sculptures that flank the main entrance of the Capitol.

To restore the grotto, O'Neal recreated the golden, mirror-like tile Huston used, layering silver leaf on the back of the glass and hand cutting each of the small squares.

Nearly every room contains reminders of the Capitol connection. A Turkish-style Berlin rug in the ballroom matches those in the Capitol. Bathrooms are lined with white hexagonal tile also used in the Capitol's restrooms. Ceiling plasterwork is nearly identical. Fireplaces and rooms are lined with decorative Moravian tiles made by the famed Doylestown craftsman Henry Chapman Mercer, who also tiled the Capitol's first floor.

And there are elements of Huston's other commissions as well, including an ornate fireplace topped with the original plaster model for Alexander Stirling Calder's "Boar Hunt," the final wooden version of which wound up in Mercersburg Academy, a south central Pennsylvania private school for

which Huston designed a dining hall.

Like the interior, the exterior of the house is an unusual mix of elements. It began as a gothic structure, but Huston later added an enclosed front porch, allowing him to create a new façade in the Tudor style. Later still, he added a castle-like



tower to one end, giving the house an odd, but attractively grand feel.

In the rear of the house, Huston originally had a long open portico (giving the house the name "cloister") connecting the carriage house to the ballroom. He later enclosed it to create a long hall to house his art collection. In enclosing the cloister, he also enclosed part of the outside gardens, leaving an incongruous outdoor fountain in the middle of the new room.

"The challenge of restoring a house with this high level of interior design ... really required owners who just love the property and are willing to go the extra mile to do it," says John Gallery, executive director of the Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia, which gave O'Neal and the owners an award this year for their restoration.

Huston's living relatives are pleased with the work. "I have to give kudos to Russ and John," said Jane Hunting, who is related by marriage to Huston's granddaughter, Mathilde "Tilda" Hunting. "They have restored it into a beautiful, livable home. They have brightened it up and tried to keep the essence of Joe Huston in the house."

Huston never fully recovered his fame after a 1910 scandal surrounding the management of the construction of the Capitol,



Above: The bedroom and the kitchen (shown here) were completely modernized. Below: The dining room, which was the first to room to be fully renovated.

for which he spent several months in Eastern State Penitentiary. Though his defenders believed he was falsely accused, the scandal left him saddened and his fortune depleted.

The career-wrecking event, combined with Huston's passion for constant experimentation and reconstruction, ultimately left his widow, Mathilde, and son with a home too expensive to maintain after his death in 1940. The family sold the house in the 1950s.

People who knew Huston called him a dreamer, says granddaughter Tilda Hunting. "He was artistic and talented, but I don't think he was very practical."

Today, his reputation is experiencing a renaissance, aided by the restoration of his home. The completion of the Oaks Cloister coincides with a renewal of appreciation for Huston's public projects, as state officials in Harrisburg celebrate his design work to mark the centenary of the State Capitol. ■



Left: The ballroom contains a well-preserved antique carpet that matches rugs placed in the state capitol building. Right: An elaborately gilded fireplace in the master bedroom.

