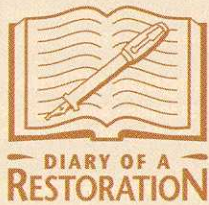


Reincarnating a Mansion

The project to turn a funeral home into a grand residence gets personal.

By Robyn Davis Sekula • Photography by Chris Little



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We found out that the funeral home across the street is probably going on the market. We are concerned about the neighborhood, and this house is large enough that how it's used makes a big impact on it. We are really worried about what could happen to this home. We want to help the owners find a buyer who can maintain the building as a home. —Joan Ruppman

Walter and Joan Ruppman spent 30 years living across the street from an expansive Victorian mansion converted into a funeral home without giving it much thought.

They, like everyone else in their small town of Washington, Illinois, attended visitations and funerals in the space, and got glimpses of the grandeur of the structure. A light fixture here, vintage wall coverings there and a few gorgeous mantels in the home's first-floor rooms showed them that the house had the kind of period details

that regularly transfixed them on visits to other historic sites on travels around the country. It could, they knew, be a great residence.

But it was a funeral home and had been for nearly 70 years. It wasn't on the market, and the idea of restoring it had never come up.

And besides that, the Ruppman's were comfortable in their 1929 Colonial Revival. It suited them. "We thought we'd live there forever," says Walter Ruppman, who is president of his own technology firm in Peoria.

"We had done the kitchen and it had a master suite," says Joan Ruppman, who is director of nursing at a Peoria hospital. "We knew how to entertain in it."

Then something interesting happened. A new funeral home came to town, built a modern one-story building, and the owners of the funeral home across the street from the Ruppman's began thinking about expanding. Their idea was to build an addition to the front of the home's first floor where they could create a one-level space, which would be easier for those using a cane or walker to access.

But the neighbors protested, knowing it would ruin the aesthetics of the home and their street, which is primarily residential. In 1999, the funeral home's owners decided to sell the property and instead build a new facility altogether.

This posed an interesting dilemma for the Ruppman's. They were heading



The Denhart home was built in 1884 for Henry Denhart. From the 1930s until the late 1990s, it was a funeral home in Washington, Illinois. Walter and Joan Ruppman have embarked on a massive restoration of the home.



Much of the exterior detail on the home was covered by aluminum siding, and large awnings darkened the porches and interior rooms. The restoration on the exterior included adding a dormer back to the roof line and reconstructing the porch.



Opposite: Elaborate fretwork spans the doorway into the red parlor from the front hallway. The Ruppman's replaced the wallpaper and carpet in this room, dubbed the red parlor, with period-style décor and chose draperies that allow the woodwork to be exposed in the room.

Right: Heavy curtains obscured the woodwork in the house and kept the rooms dark when the house was used as a funeral home. The Ruppman's discovered the beautiful woodwork underneath when they removed the curtains.



Left: Covering the light fixture and mantel offered protection while the restoration work was ongoing in the red parlor.



for retirement and didn't really want to have that much more house to handle.

If they didn't buy it, though, the house's future was uncertain. Would the church next door purchase it and tear it down for parking? Would some-

one else turn it into a business? Would someone divide its spacious parlors into tiny studio apartments and line the gracious front porch with electrical meters for all of the different tenants?

Even if someone else bought it to

turn it into a residence, would they do what needed to be done to bring the house back to its glory?

After dozens of visits inside the structure, the Ruppman's began to realize that they were the people to reincarnate the funeral home as a residence. In 1999, the Ruppman's purchased the house with the idea of restoring it and then selling it. But little by little, they started making decisions that weren't about preparing it for selling, but instead would fit with their own lifestyles and desires. They began to see it not as an abstract project, but a personal labor of love. "We had a good, solid structure to work with," Walter Ruppman says. "Almost everything was still intact, even down to finding little folding keys in the pocket doors, and the fretwork across the doorways. We really got a gem."

The Ruppman's weren't the first to love the home. The home was built for Henry and Clara Denhart in 1884. It is best classified as a stick-style Victorian, though it clearly has elements of Eastlake and Aesthetic design on the interior. At 5,000 or so square feet, it was well-appointed with high-style period details such as mantels, enormous original light fixtures and stained glass.

Seeing the light

One of the great legacies of the Denhart house is its light fixtures on the first floor, all of which were left intact by the previous owners, who used the home as a funeral parlor.

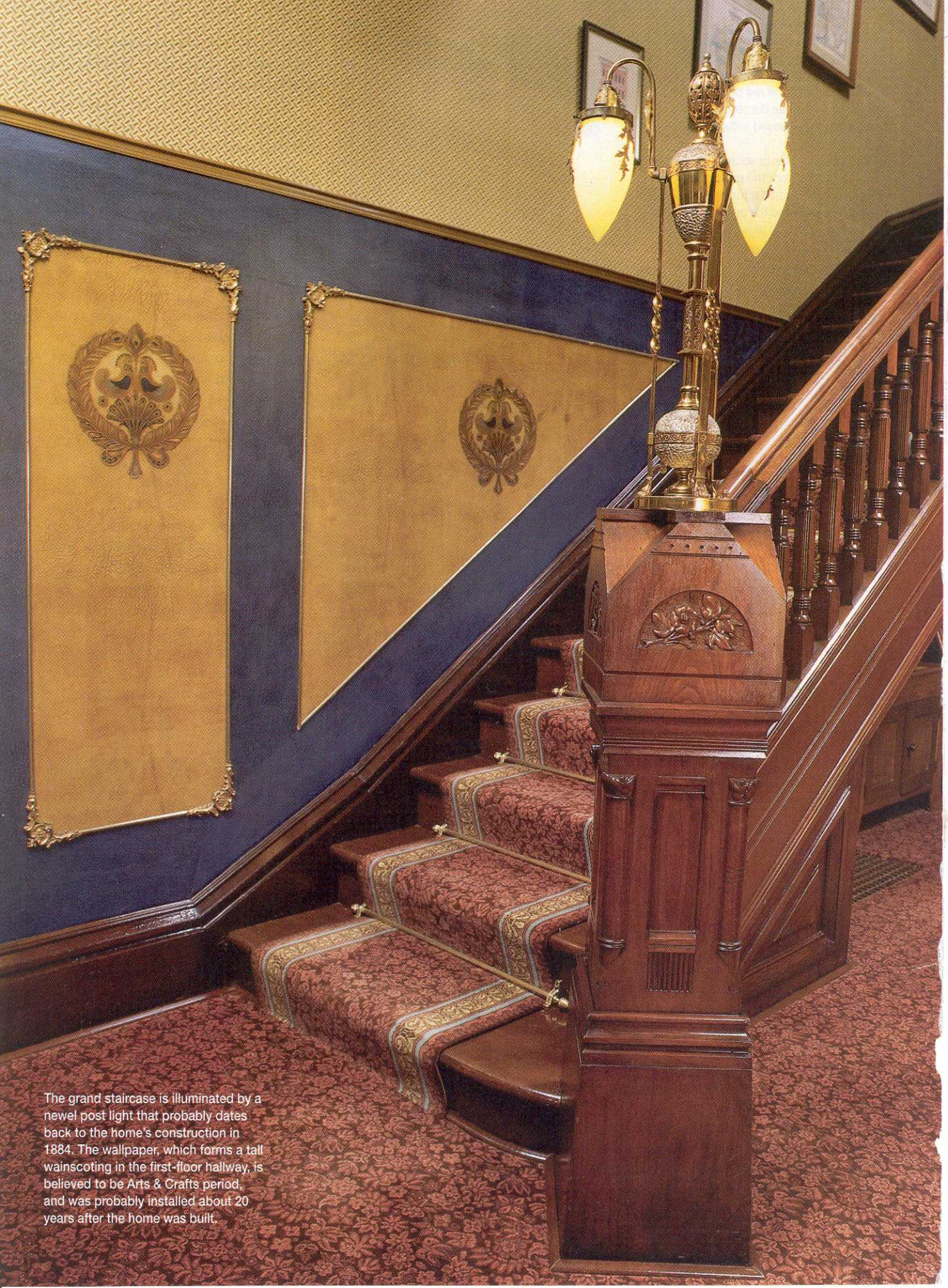
The Ruppman's decided to have all of the first-floor fixtures rewired when a person who was hanging wallpaper got a shock in the green parlor. Light fixtures in the red and green parlors and the library were all removed and rewired.

The light fixture in the red parlor was so elaborate that the electrician on the project built a special cage to hold it during its rewiring. The fixture has some 130 to 150 glass balls that had to be removed individually. The red parlor fixture has six lights that are electric and six that originally took gas. The Ruppman's decided against rewiring the gas parts for electricity to keep the fixture as authentic as possible. Fixtures in the green parlor and library were also rewired.

The newel post light has three glass shades, and in the process of the home's renovation, one was broken. The Ruppman's hunted down three replacement shades in Cedarburg, Wisconsin. The other two shades will remain spares, Joan Ruppman says.



Among the Denhart home's most compelling features are the light fixtures, many of which date back to the home's construction. This fixture was built as both a gas and electric model to accommodate both types of lighting.



The grand staircase is illuminated by a newel post light that probably dates back to the home's construction in 1884. The wallpaper, which forms a tall wainscoting in the first-floor hallway, is believed to be Arts & Crafts period, and was probably installed about 20 years after the home was built.

Portrait of a Restoration

When the Ruppman's began their restoration, they started with something nearly every homeowner buying a grand old mansion has to do: clean. They rented dumpsters and began tossing things out, which took only a few days, according to Joan Ruppman. Next came replacing the home's systems, including new heating and air conditioning, new plumbing and new electrical wiring. During the second year, they tackled the roof and stripped wallpaper inside. Then came the more rewarding parts of the restoration: interior finishes.

See more results from the Ruppman's project in the next segment of "Diary of a Restoration," coming in April.



Carpeting lined the staircase to the second floor of the house when it was used as a funeral home, and a flocked gold and white wallpaper covered the walls above it to the ceiling. The Ruppman's replaced the carpet and wallpaper.

By all accounts, Denhart was a wealthy man. He owned a local bank, which is under restoration by another family on the square in Washington, a lumber mill near his home in Washington, cattle in Colorado, a farm in Louisiana and land in Indiana. He was married twice, and there were no children from either marriage, so when he

died in 1933, the house sat vacant for a few years before the White family turned it into a funeral home. The Ruppman's point out that the proprietors of the funeral home were careful with the home. They didn't harm it so much as cover up details that have revealed themselves like buried treasure to the Ruppman's during their six years of restoration.

Luckily for the Ruppman's, they've had some important help on this journey through restoration. Their first call was to a contractor friend, Tim Beutel, who had previously assisted them on a kitchen project in their other home. Beutel walked through the house and helped them plan how

exactly to tackle the monumental task, and was the person who actually helped them see that the house was waiting for them.

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We called our builder and friend Tim Beutel and asked if he planned to retire, and he said no. That more or less makes our decision for us on this house. We don't know anyone else to do this project, and we know the quality of his work. That makes this decision that much easier. We're going ahead with it. —Walter Ruppman

In April: Parlor restoration, and a dining room fit for entertaining ❧



Both Walter and Joan Ruppman enjoy their morning paper in the garden, where they grow vegetables and flowers.