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Monday, August 20, 2007

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ROBERT BEHRE/STAFF

The blue home in Downtown Charleston and its neighbor to the north (right) were built around 1867 as a hospital for Confederate soldiers. The building later was cut in two and moved about a block to this site.

Couple find proper treatment to turn hospital into showplace

It's a good bet that the current residents of this home are much happier and more content than the first people who lived there. That's partly because the building's first residents were injured or sick, dependent on others and had just lost a war.

The wood-frame house and the neighboring house to the north originally were built by the U.S. government as a hospital to help handle the glut of Confederate wounded following the Civil War, owner Abby Himmelein says.

Originally, the hospital was built on Tradd Street, but as demand for it



Robert Behre
ARCHITECTURE

waned, the building was divided into two homes that eventually were moved about a block to their current lots. At some later point, the piazzas were removed though they survive on the house next door.

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So obviously these buildings didn't start life as a showplace, but that would gradually change over time.

Himmelein and her husband, Fred, bought the home about two years ago and recently completed an extensive renovation done by Classic Remodeling and Construction Inc. of Johns Island.

The work won the Best Historic Renovation prize at the 14th annual Chrysalis Awards for Remodeling Excellence.

With most Charleston home renovations, the goal is simply to return the home to its original opulence, with a few modern, subtly conveniences.

This one gives the house a sense of grandeur it most certainly never had to begin with, while respecting nearly all of the original fabric. The only changes to the outside included removing a wooden gate, adding a new metal gate farther back on the driveway, as well as removing a clumsily added porch enclosure.

"Usually, when we get into these old houses, we don't have a problem with the main structure," says Bob Fleming, owner of Classic Remodeling, which designed as well as carried out the renovation. "It's undoing everything that's been added over the years."

Inside, the work involved repainting the walls a simple



photo by Tripp Smith

The living room of the house features a new mantel based on a design from an 1860s pattern book, published around the time the house was built.

white shade that helps display the Himmeleins' collection of modern art and sculpture, and adding grander mantels on two downstairs fireplaces with a design taken from an 1860s pattern book.

Toward the back of the house, a small screened porch area was

fully enclosed with glass and glass shelves to display a collection of pottery and other sculpture. The downstairs kitchen was redone with state-of-the-art cabinets and stone counter tops, and the bathrooms got a similar upgrade.

Fleming says he wasn't sure

how everything was going to come together, with all the contemporary art in such a traditional house, especially because the house was empty at the time. He says he surfed the Internet to study small images of the Himmeleins' former home in Indianapolis for clues.

"I was pleased when we were done, but I was especially pleased when they brought all the artwork in," he adds.

The house's entrance was made grander by enlarging the opening between the entry hall and the living room from 3 feet by 7 feet to about 6 feet by 9 feet, and a double-door sized opening also was enlarged to about twice the size, all to encourage a greater sense of flow through the first floor.

Abby Himmelein says they were drawn to the house by its large windows and natural light, as well as its human-sized rooms.

"We didn't want to change the flow of the house that much," she says. "We just wanted something we were comfortable with, that we could live with."

"We plan to go out of here feet first."

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