

A pair of Main Line gems are finally sparkling again

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The two dowdy Victorian houses were supposed **to** be torn down, like so many other old Main Line mansions. People said they were too big, too rundown, and too undistinguished **to** bother saving.

Now, we know they were wrong.

In the last few weeks, major repairs have been completed on two grand 19th-century houses - **Beechwood** in **Bryn Mawr** and the Creutzburg Center in Radnor - and the Main Line is the better for it. The renovations have not only enabled these old buildings **to** become useful again, they also help us see their architecture fresh.

If you drive past the newly renovated **Beechwood** mansion on Montgomery Avenue in **Bryn Mawr**, you may risk damage **to** your neck as you struggle for a better look at the remarkable transformation. Once a blah beige, the **house** now vibrates with color and pattern, just as it did when it was built in 1876 for a wealthy and cultured Philadelphia merchant.

For decades, passersby knew **Beechwood** only as a watered-down version of a Tudor-style **house**. In the 1920s, the **Beechwood**'s true exuberant self was encased in a cocoon of ugly, tobacco-yellow stucco. Its elaborate exterior trim was painted brown, and the fanciful checkerboard dormers were removed. Different occupants took their toll. In 1998, its current owner, the **Shipley** School, was set **to** tear it down and put the **house** out of its misery.

But before the school could carry out the plan, neighbors on Roberts Road voiced objections **to** the proposed replacement. Then, a historic-preservation group claimed that **Beechwood** played a role in the formation of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Someone found an old photograph showing that the drab Tudor was a Victorian beauty in its youth. When local residents said they would raise the money **to** renovate **Beechwood**, **Shipley** graciously accepted the offer.

After three years of painstaking work overseen by West Chester architects Frens & Frens, the original **house** has now been liberated from its stucco prison. Workers who chiseled away the material discovered that the original horizontal bands of red, tan and black brick were still intact. So were the checkerboard gables on the east facade.

The architects were able **to** restore a dramatic stair window shaped like a slash of lightning, and they re-created the porch. Although the trim paint was limited mainly **to** the original red and green, the exterior glows as if there were many more colors.

Now back **to** its Victorian self, **Beechwood** can be understood as one of the important buildings that helped establish the Main Line as an exclusive suburb. The **house** was designed by Addison Hutton, an architect primarily known for understated buildings that were the epitome of Quaker taste.

But when the New Orleans-born tobacco merchant Stephen Fuguet hired Hutton, he asked for something bolder. **Beechwood** looks more like a design that might emerge from the wild imagination of Frank Furness than Hutton, who designed the Philadelphia building that houses the High School for the Creative and Performing Arts.

Fuguet not only had a taste for the flamboyant in architecture, he loved good music. He frequently invited a group of prominent musicians **to** perform in his oak-paneled parlor. They became the nucleus of the Philadelphia Orchestra when it was founded in 1900.

When **Shipley** School renovated **Beechwood**, it could be as lavish as Fuguet was. The millions raised by the **Friends to Save Beechwood** enabled the school **to** hire an expert in historic

renovation who could bring the building back **to** its original appearance. Few details were overlooked. Even the nail holes left in the exterior brick from the stucco's lathe will be patched with a matching filler.

Such exactitude is expensive. George E. Thomas, a well-known preservation expert in Philadelphia, said the cost **to** restore **Beechwood** was so high that he would have advised tearing it down. Luckily, the school found donors **to** foot the \$2.85 million bill. The **house** will be used as a conference center and will also contain faculty apartments.

In contrast, the recent renovation at the Creutzburg Center in Radnor's Harford Park was done on a shoestring. The center, which is the home of the Main Line School Night continuing-education program, now occupies an 1881 **house** that Furness designed for a prominent Philadelphia judge, John Hare.

Even in its prime, the Hare **house** was more of a modest country retreat than a mansion. Only some fancy trim and an imposing staircase **save** it from being plain. It was already in bad shape when Radnor inherited it in 1969 and Creutzburg moved in.

The Hare **house** might not have survived at all had it not been for Radnor's construction manager, Burt Grossman, who took a liking **to** the forlorn relic. With about \$200,000 raised by the school and the township, Grossman stabilized the exterior. He personally rebuilt the porch, using a scrap of surviving railing as his guide. The porch's mahogany floor was given such a high coat of varnish, it is as seaworthy as a ship.

But unlike Frens & Frens, Grossman was not able **to** research the **house's** original appearance. After making trips **to** San Francisco and Cape May, he decided the plain gray **house** needed a bright contrast for its trim. The colors - tomato bisque, Chadds Ford blue, and ripe peach - are a bit extreme. Although it is widely believed that Victorians used a vivid palette, George Thomas, the preservation expert, said that even adventuresome architects such as Furness would have chosen trim colors **to** match the stone.

Anyone who tries **to** repair an old building will eventually have **to** grapple with such choices. Should buildings be restored **to** their exact original appearances, or adapted for modern taste?

"We didn't want **to** be a slave **to** the past," argued Arlene Olsen, who teaches architecture at Creutzburg. The vibrant colors "make people look at the building," she said.

Given the number of Main Line mansions that have fallen **to** the wrecking ball, it's hard **to** disagree with that approach. If bright paint makes people look at, and appreciate, a historic building, then that's certainly better than tearing it down.

Next time, maybe Radnor will have the money **to** do for the Creutzburg Center what **Bryn Mawr** residents did for **Beechwood**.

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