

SAVING grace

A physician's need for a place to practice resuscitates an 1870s Victorian in Connecticut.

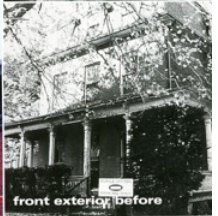
BY JOHN RIMA PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF MCNAMARA



Built in 1872, this handsome Second Empire brick Victorian in Middletown, Connecticut, received sympathetic attention to become the home and medical practice of Dr. Julie Flagg.



front entrance before



front exterior before



side exterior before



The living room is the center of the apartment. It opens to a library with a cozy reading nook and to the entry hall with stairs leading to the lower levels. Neutral colors for walls and trim dignify the architectural details. Because the interiors were completely gutted, architect Robert Orr had to reinvent period details.

The prognosis was not good. Dr. Julie Flagg studied the symptoms closely, then came to a carefully considered opinion. "Beyond redemption," she decided.

In fact, it seemed no one wanted anything to do with the decrepit, rotting 1870s house. Abandoned for more than 25 years, the old hulk sat directly across from the Middlesex Hospital in Middletown, Connecticut, where Julie practices, its crumbling brick exterior an unavoidable eyesore on her way to work. Yet each time she passed by it, she gained a bit more appreciation for the house's dignified facade and the especially convenient location. At the time, Julie was searching for a new location for her private medical offices, and she couldn't help noticing the big Second Empire Victorian's assets. The top floor, for example, would make a fine apartment; the hospital operating room was a mere 30 seconds away. The potential was intriguing.

"Initially I thought it wouldn't be possible," says Julie. "Nobody thought the house could be restored. There were large holes in the ceiling and holes in the walls exposing it to the outside. The hospital owned it at the time, and they were going to tear it down for a parking lot."

"But the more I looked at it, the more I thought about the possibilities. I wanted to live and work in the same place—the convenience was very compelling." After discussing her plans with the hospital, she eventually bought the building. A three-year odyssey of design and renovation awaited.



JULIE'S SMALL BUT EFFICIENT KITCHEN IS A "DREAM COME TRUE."



Julie Flogg

"I think that it helped that I was young and perhaps a bit foolish," laughs Julie. "I had no experience with a project like this." So she fortified herself against naïveté by reading everything she could on architectural history and preservation.

"I educated myself with books like *Victorian Country Homes* and *English Cottages and Farmhouses*," she says. "I read old

preservation catalogs and made many checklists."

At the onset, three major challenges presented themselves: extensive repairs and renovation to the original structure, converting a musty attic to Julie's top-floor apartment, and incorporating her medical practice on the first and second levels. The South Green National Historic District of Middletown was helpful with the challenges Julie faced. Any alterations to the facade would have to be historically sensitive and undergo the scrutiny of the historic commission.

"Many people in our town have been active in renovation," Julie explains, "and they provided much advice and encouragement."

"It was complicated," admits architect Robert Orr. "But we had good communication. We had biweekly meetings with Julie and the contractor. She's one of those amazing people who thrives with only a few hours of sleep

"I love to cook!" Julie says. The kitchen is her dream come true. Small but efficient, the kitchen offers lots of counter space and storage. The soothing green is set off by sparkling glass upper cabinets that show off Julie's dish collection.



before





every night. She always brought an incredible amount of energy and intensity to our meetings."

The design process was painstakingly thorough. For example, to ensure that each space was precisely tailored to Julie's needs, the architectural team built full-scale cardboard mock-ups for her to test before implementing the plans. "We really got good at cutting cardboard," Orr chuckles.

The overall scope of the project was dictated largely by the need to accommodate Julie's medical practice with offices and examination rooms. By fitting an addition at the rear of the existing house, Orr and project architect Kenneth Clark doubled the size of the structure. The expansion also allowed the upper-level apartment to gain a garden terrace and conservatory with a view of the city.

To meet guidelines that typically govern alterations to historically significant buildings, the addition had to be architecturally sympathetic to, but not a duplication of, the original structure. Orr struck the right balance by fast-forwarding history. By selecting details such as moldings and window shapes from a period about 30 years after the original date of construction, Orr created an addition that was historically charged yet distinct from the primary building.

The renovation of the exterior was not without problems. Faced with a structure in complete disrepair, the architectural team found few clues that would help them replicate historically correct details. Armed with a few aging photographs and some fragments of moldings, building contractor Skip Broom managed to restore the once-proud facade to its original splendor. Windows were matched with carefully crafted reproductions. Shutters discovered in the basement were refinished and rehung.

Inside, Orr moved with a freer hand, deftly mixing history with imagination. "It was almost like a time machine," he says, "as though we hired 19th-century craftspeople and asked them to fast-forward to solve Julie Flagg's 1990's specs. We wanted the house to have a character and charm of its own."

As work progressed, Julie found she could watch from the hospital windows and admire the skill and dexterity of subcontractors plying their trades. "That was my favorite part of the whole project," she says. "It was great fun to watch people who are passionate about what they do."



OPPOSITE AND ABOVE, TOP: Julie's mom, a landscape designer, proposed the idea of turning the flat roof of the addition into a rooftop garden with a glass conservatory. It affords views of the Middletown historic district and is one of Julie's favorite spots. **ABOVE:** Subtle architectural details accent Julie's bedroom. The storage wall was built to resemble an armoire. Painted the same color as surrounding walls, the cabinet gracefully disappears.

Attic escape While technology and practicality dictated much of the design for the medical offices on the first two levels, Dr. Julie Flagg's third-floor apartment became a 1,700-square-foot flight of fancy. Proper living room, dining room, kitchen, and bedrooms are all accounted for, but the space also includes enough nooks, crannies, and light-filled niches to inspire a storybook.



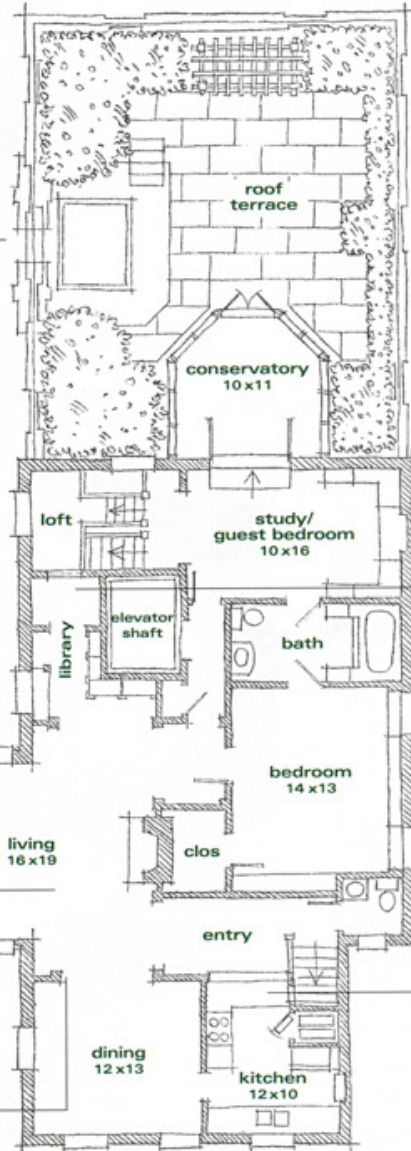
A REINTERPRETATION OF THE EXISTING ARCHITECTURAL STYLE PRODUCED AN ADDITION THAT LOOKS AS IF IT WERE BUILT 30 YEARS AFTER THE ORIGINAL CONSTRUCTION.



THE MANSARD ROOF COMMON TO SECOND EMPIRE STYLE CREATES INTERESTING INTERIOR ARCHITECTURAL SPACES. THE NEW MAHOGANY MANTEL HAS PERIOD STYLING.



THE DELICATE COLUMNS THAT FLANK ARCHED PASSAGEWAYS ARE INTERPRETATIONS INSPIRED BY—BUT NOT COPIED FROM—THE VICTORIAN ERA.



third-floor plan



A CENTRALLY LOCATED ELEVATOR SHAFT CREATED AN ODDLY SHAPED SPACE JUST OFF THE LIVING ROOM. ORR DEFTLY ADAPTED IT AS A LIBRARY WITH COZY WINDOW-SEAT READING NOOKS. THE WINDOW ALCOVE ABOVE THE RED CUSHION LOOKS INTO THE SLEEPING LOFT.



NO SMALL SPACE GOES UNUSED IN JULIE'S KITCHEN. TWO LARGE PULLOUT CABINETS PROVIDE STORAGE THAT DISAPPEARS. THE AREA OVER THE PASS-THROUGH WINDOW TO THE ENTRY HOLDS A WINE RACK AND A SLOTTED WINEGLASS HOLDER.



To add a comfortable elegance to the interesting space, Julie teamed with interior designer Isabel Leach. "At first I envisioned a rather stark space," Julie says, "like the lofts by the Thames River that I had seen in London. But Isabel was just so great with colors and fabrics, it really became more sensuous and robust, a more interesting area."

The renovation was completed after a year and a half of planning and nearly two years under construction. Now happily ensconced in the home she describes as "simply wonderful," Julie has sage advice for anyone contemplating an extensive renovation project: "Damn the torpedoes," she urges. "Then plan carefully, keep thorough lists, and work with the best people you can find." □

ARCHITECT: ROBERT ORR INTERIOR DESIGNER: ISABEL LEACH

REGIONAL EDITOR: BONNIE MAHARAM

FOR MORE INFORMATION, TURN TO THE BUYING GUIDE ON PAGE 122.



ABOVE RIGHT: Positioned along the addition and camouflaged by level porch railings, a wheelchair-accessible ramp leads to Julie's offices.

BELOW: By installing a platform over the stairs at the rear of the apartment, Orr created a sleeping loft just off the study that is perfect for Julie's nieces and nephews.



Architectural notes

Second Empire was a popular and flamboyant American architectural style during the 1860s and '70s. Characterized by an expressive mansard roof, Second Empire is one of the easiest Victorian-era homes to recognize at a glance.

Built chiefly in the eastern United States, the Second Empire house was typically three stories tall and was often constructed on narrow urban lots. The big, four-sided roof, which comprised the entire upper level, made the house appear less massive when viewed from the street. The sides of the roof were often sculpted in graceful convex curves, although straight and S-shape roof sides were also used. The roof walls were usually punctuated by ornate dormer windows featuring rounded tops and carved trim. Inside, the slightly sloping roof walls and the deep-set windows created delightful, architecturally intriguing spaces.

Second Empire took inspiration from fashionable French architecture—thought at the time to be the pinnacle of modern design. The striking roof is a legacy from 17th-century French architect François Mansart, and the name Second Empire refers to the mid-19th-century reign of Napoleon III, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte. Many public buildings constructed during the administration of President Ulysses S. Grant (1869–77) were Second Empire, and their design is sometimes called General Grant style.