

# A Crumbling Barn and a Dream

After 30 years, historic preservation is a reality *By Susan Pevaroff Berschler*

Spanning the chasm between past and present—in the most literal sense—Mike and Beth Wahl have creatively and definitively linked their personal history to that of their 17th century property, a parcel of land on the former Scott family estate. Yes, the paper people. Unique and daring in both concept and design, this renovation is the culmination of a protracted dream; a vision steadfastly nurtured, defined and redefined over the course of three decades.

From the moment the Wahls, then young history buffs, laid eyes on the 1600-square-foot former servant's quarters, it was love at first sight. But it was the crumbling, original stone carriage barn directly behind the little jewel of a house that ignited their passion and spawned the first inklings of an idea. Somehow, someday, they would unleash the architectural potential in their own backyard by joining the two structures and integrating a part of those stately old stone walls into their home.

Translated and honed by mother/son design duo Jean and Paul Macht, and contractor Scott Roberts, those aspirations are finally a reality. The two historic buildings are connected by a glass enclosed hallway and seamlessly merged into one. The centuries old stone walls outline the exterior of an elegant great room; the centerpiece of an undertaking that includes a new garage, office suite, laundry room, and bed-and-breakfast worthy master bath. The Wahls' overall living space has more than doubled. Ironic when considering the three children with whom they shared those charming but cramped quarters—and its one and a half bathrooms—are now grown and gone.

"The kids always complain that we didn't do this sooner while they were in high school," laughs Mike Wahl. "We tell them that after that huge sum of money that went out the door with them to college, we had to recoup and get the finances to catch up to the dream."

Melding historic integrity with modern sensibility, designers Jean and Paul Macht took a worn out-building and gave it new life.

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The clean lines of the interior keep the style modern, while natural elements maintain a rustic ambiance.

Though their young family quickly outgrew the snug surroundings, Mike and Beth were determined to stay put and expand out into the old carriage barn as soon as circumstances would allow. Each time they looked out into the backyard, they saw opportunity, the key to connecting to the property's past and maintaining its historical integrity. However, not all who viewed the decaying relic were thus inspired. In fact, when the tract's original mansion was listed for sale, the realtor had a few choice words for the couple. "I'll never forget that phone call," says Beth Wahl. "The person who had listed the mansion house at the end of the lane called me and said the reason the mansion wasn't selling was because our barn was such an eyesore. It was awful."

Resolve unshaken, the Wahls did not level their dilapidated little slice of history. But they did go to a charity auction to benefit a local school. On the list of items: a consultation with architect Paul Macht. They bid \$75, and the rest, as they say, is history—a very, very, long history. "The auction was about 11 years ago," recalls Mike. "And that was seven years prior to the time that we actually got down to serious negotiation." Slowly, but surely, what was for so long a figment of the Wahl's imagination, began to take actual shape on the drawing board. "For most of the 11 years, the large addition that incorporated the barn was designated as the kitchen, dining, sitting area," explains Macht. "It was only in the 11th year that we pulled the kitchen out of it. I think primarily Beth had a vision of this large open space here. She imagined taking off her shoes and dancing," he smiles, pointing to the sign in the kitchen that says "dance as if nobody is watching you."

While the architect and his favorite associate, Jean—better known to him as Mom—toiled over blueprints, Wahls, both young and young at heart, rolled up their sleeves and set about the task of dismantling the wood portion of the carriage barn, stripping it down to the bare stone walls. Evidence of their painstaking efforts is visible throughout the new construction. "When my kids and I disassembled the structure, we saved all the original wood and incorporated as much of it as we could into the house," enthuses Mike Wahl. "We used one of the larger beams in the new great room as our fireplace mantel." The fireplace itself is located in the barn's former entryway. It was the only existing hole in the stone, and the design team

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was determined to keep it that way. "We didn't make one new hole," emphasizes Macht. "It was a way to be extremely rigorous about respecting what was here. We didn't want to risk cutting it apart."

Preserving and recycling—just what the "green design" architect ordered. Working within the strict parameters dictated by both logistics and history, Paul and Jean strived to support 17th century authenticity with state-of-the-art, environmentally compatible design. The result is a study in continuity—and contrast. "We decided to build inside the stone to be sympathetic to the external context of the neighboring structures," explains Macht, who then purposely juxtaposed old and new by finishing the room with a modern wall of glass that traps solar energy and visually engages the adjoining courtyard. "Your eye is drawn outside into the courtyard amidst the remaining ruins which we left as crumbling as we could. There were a few minor touchups for safety and integrity over time, but essentially they are untouched."

Crediting Jean with the project's artistic merit, Paul assumed the technological challenge, which included the overall energy efficiency of the newly expanded home, a task that was daunting at times. Not many 400-year-old homes have radiant floor heating or duct work for air conditioning. "We had to find places to hide equipment and shoe horn it in," he recalls, shaking his head. "The journey was never simple. We didn't learn the secrets of this house until we started taking it apart."

A true collaboration, this 11 year odyssey proved a moving experience for both clients and design pros. "I'm in love with it," beams Jean Macht. "I worked on it for so long there is a lot of my heart and soul in it."

An emotional Beth Wahl cannot thank her enough. "It's like living in paradise," she says. "We often will come into this room and sit down at night and look at it and just tear up because we are so grateful."

To those who are tempted to abandon their dreams when the going gets tough, Mike Wahl enthusiastically suggests observing the turtle. "It never moves unless it sticks its neck out," he muses. "Take a risk and set a goal. You'll find a way to get there if you just stay attentive to it." **LS**

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