

Preserving Historic Homes Has its Rewards

Westporters Involved in Award-Winning Restoration

SWS Builders has been honored with the 2008 HOBI award for the Best Antique Home Restoration. This is the construction firm's second HOBI Award for outstanding residential construction and project management.

The award is for SWS Builders' faithful restoration of a historic 1856 gothic Victorian in Darien that reclaimed the home's original grandeur while artfully incorporating 21st century conveniences.

SWS Builders, of which Westport resident David Williams is a partner, was among numerous builders vying for the HOBI in the Antique Restoration category. The HOBI awards are sponsored by the Home Builders Association (HBA) of Connecticut and are referred to as "the most prestigious awards presented in Connecticut for excellence in design and construction."

The current owners bought the almost two-acre property in 2002 and spent a few years in the house before tackling the large-scale restoration that would honor the home's original Victorian heritage. They were highly involved in the design process with their Westport-based architect, Mella Kernan, AIA.

SWS Builders' role was to present the tradeoffs between design and structure. "Teamwork among the homeowner, architect and SWS Builders was essential to maintaining the integrity of the house," Williams said.

The blending of time period and functionality created a beautiful, livable home in which the owners can raise their children. This Victorian has reclaimed its place of honor on the thoroughfare through town.

Preserving an Antique Treasure

The year-long restoration project entailed rigorous attention to detail to preserve the authenticity of the Victorian period, including locating resources for unusual windows, moldings, and plaster trims. Every aspect of the project had to appear original to the mid-19th century structure, while the mechanicals had to be upgraded for modern living and technology. All 11 rooms in the 7,100-square-foot house were affected by the restoration. And while the finished home is captivating, the process was not without its hurdles.

Among the obstacles encountered by the SWS team was the unexpected discovery of two abandoned brick dry-wells 9 feet in diameter and 8 feet deep during excavation — right where footings were to go. The house had major rot and the post and beam construction made snaking wires and running pipes as well as retrofitting two HVAC systems a challenge. Compounding the complexity of the project, the young family of five lived in the home during the entire construction phase.

Under the circumstances, the homeowners became quite close with the construction team and were delighted with the final result and the process, stating, "We spent 'smart



money.' Because choices and estimates were presented in painstaking detail we made decisions that were right for us."

Seamlessly matching materials original to the house disguised the transition from old to new. Details from the restoration included custom-milled moldings and columns, custom-fabricated elliptical arched windows and corbels, the preservation of an antique plaster ceiling medallion,

Contributed photos

SWS Builders won a HOBI Award in the Antique Restoration category for its work on this Darien home originally built in 1856. SWS, of which Westport resident David Williams is a partner, worked with Westport-based architect Mella Kernan.

sourcing black granite to match the original stone, and constructing the rear porch roof with a built-in gutter and custom copper edge detail and scuppers.

A Home with a Long and Storied History

The home, originally called "The Lindens," started off as a 17-acre estate. Photographs from the period show Victorian men and women enjoying the day on the expansive lawn. Today, linden trees still line the front walk.

In the 1930s, the home became the property of The Primavera family, owners of Florentine Iron Works. The Primaveras brought in master craftsmen who installed intricately scrolled wrought-iron gates throughout the house and enclosed the porches.

The house was renamed "Garden Gate," a name it still goes by today. In addition to the iron work, the Primaveras also introduced modern bathrooms and a completely new kitchen that was considered so advanced and elegant, it was featured in a 1939 issue of *House Beautiful*.

