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HOME & DESIGN [HOMES WITH STYLE]

Serving as the portal that links the dining and music rooms, the rotunda is modeled after a larger rotunda in London's Sir John Soane Museum.



MUSEUM QUALITY

THIS AWARD-WINNING RITTENHOUSE HOME HAS BEEN CALLED
ONE OF THE GREAT TOWNHOUSES IN AMERICA.

BY JOSEPH DENNIS KELLY II



The music room provides an elegant setting for solo concerts and fluid-ranging cocktail parties. The French doors open onto a secluded urban garden.

When Philadelphia hosted the 1876 Centennial Exhibition, more than 10 million visitors from around the world arrived in the city to join the national celebration of the United States' seminal advancements in science, technology, industry and the arts. Visitors saw Thomas Edison's telegraph, Alexander Graham Bell's telephone and Steinway's Centennial Grand piano. When they weren't strolling through the more than 100 buildings that the city erected in Fairmount Park—where today only Memorial Hall stands—they sauntered through Philadelphia's eminent neighborhoods, admiring the mansions lining Delancey Street near Rittenhouse Square and marveling at Philadelphia's evolution from its storied colonial past into one of the world's most civilized and sophisticated urban environments.

Among the mansions these visitors probably observed was a four-story, 21-room house, then a mere 16 years old, that today is nationally recognized by design professionals as one of Philadelphia's best representations of the Georgian/Federalist-style of residential architecture. It is within this house that the elegance of early 19th- to early 20th-century Philadelphia society lives on.

"This [house] is [Philadelphia's] best survivor of [1860s] architecture," says Steven Anthony Weixler, partner of Center City's Weixler, Peterson & Luzi, the firm that lead the two-year renovation that transformed this once dilapidated 10,000-square-foot building into a regional treasure. "This [house] is the last of the really good period for big city houses."

It's easy to understand why. An historic building that's soon to celebrate its sesquicentennial, this house features fine plasterwork and spatial configurations long abandoned by contemporary designers striving for minimalist nirvana. But trends aside, what really defines this house is its owner's extraordinary private collection of



A neo-Gothic chamber organ purchased from the estate of Rudolf Nureyev and built for English Monarch George IV before he ascended to the throne sits in the music room.

"This is one of the great townhouses in Philadelphia. I would say that it's one of the great townhouses in America."



Weisler, Peterson & Luzzi traveled with their talent to antique dealers, galleries and auction houses within the United States and all over Europe to assemble a distinctive collection of fine art and furniture.



The light, four-wall mural of Fairmount Park in Boat House Row adorns the walls of the first floor's powder room. The drapery evokes the optimism of lounging within a tent in the midst of a pastoral setting.

museum-quality fine art and furniture from the late-18th to the early-20th century that includes iconic works from legendary Philadelphia artists and craftsmen, such as Charles Peale Polk, Ralph Emerson and CH&J White. In amassing this collection, Weixler, Peterson & Luzi traveled with the client, a prominent Philadelphia philanthropist, to antiques dealers, galleries and auction houses regionally and in Europe.

Locally, Weixler, Peterson & Luzi purchased artwork at Chestnut Street's Schwarz Gallery and fine furniture from Antique Row's

Alfred Bullard and Antiques Showcase. The Steinway 1876 Centennial Grand piano came from New York. Located in the living room, this piano features 19 different types of wood inlaid in beautiful patterns. Another extraordinary piece is the neo-Gothic chamber organ, which was built for English Monarch George IV before he ascended to the throne and purchased from the estate of Rudolf Nureyev. At Center City's Anthony A.P. Stuemfing, Weixler, Peterson & Luzi found a CH&J White secretary desk that partner Walter Bayard Peterson calls one of the finest examples of Egyptian Revival American furniture he has ever seen.

Awarded two first place honors from the American Society of Interior Designers—one for historic preservation of a national historic register house and another for best residence over 3,500 square feet—the house sat empty and neglected for several years before Weixler, Peterson & Luzi's client purchased it. After an 1880 expansion added the Gothic Revival-style music room and a subsequent 1930s redesign resulted in a Colonial Revival-style interior, the house experienced other cosmetic changes, but past owners neglected its façade. For several years, water seeped into its walls. What started as a moderate renovation quickly escalated into a major reconstruction. "The wood floors were as thin as four sheets of paper held together by glue," says Tim Dilworth, president of Bryn Mawr's William Powell Dilworth & Son, the project's builder. To reverse the years of neglect, Dilworth installed new floors and rebuilt the ceilings and walls.

The walls in the dining and living rooms were painted by artisans to resemble stone, a practice common in Federalist design. Weixler, Peterson & Luzi selected a natural palette to convey Philadelphia's casual sophistication. The palette also serves as a neutral canvas against which to display the boldly colored artwork and dark wood furniture. Unlike the smothering, overcrowded interiors of the late-19th century, where dark and excessively ornate wallpaper com-

manded the setting, this house allows the eyes to fully enjoy the richness of the pieces without experiencing visual overload. Nothing extraneous is tolerated. The surfaces are clear, allowing the space to breathe. Diffusing uplights in the 14-foot-high music room and kitchen decrease the spatial vastness to suggest an intimate setting. The kitchen is a particular treat. Weixler designed cabinetry in a style that visually blends with the house's original architectural style in dimensions that accommodate the Sub-Zero fridge and freezer units. The design won a national award from Sub-Zero.

The second floor renders a contemporary interpretation of early-19th century interiors. The hall features a series of circa-1930s murals by Philadelphia artist Edith Emerson. Originally installed in the dining room of the Cosmopolitan Club's former location, the museum-quality murals depict the pageantry of Philadelphia



The dining room showcases one of the earliest known paintings of Lemon Hill in Fairmount Park. The renovated interior recalls the elegance that defined late-19th-century Philadelphia.



With its mix of 19th-century furniture and architectural elements, such as the black marble mantelpiece, the second floor's private living room is a cozy place for intimate gatherings.

society during the 1830s. The scenes show pedestrians walking near the now-vanished Chestnut Street Opera House and visiting Fairmount before the site became the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1929. Installed by Emerson, the murals—like the house's structure—were neglected for years. The foil upon which the murals are painted had tarnished due to a chemical reaction to the paint, causing fading and peeling. Weixler, Peterson & Luzi hired conservators to reattach the paint, a painstakingly slow process. Working amidst the chaos of electricians, plumbers and carpenters, the conservators could only focus on several inches at a time, causing the restoration to take several months to complete. But from their efforts, a refurbished mural emerged that is supposedly more breath-taking than the original. "This is one of the most exuberant hallways to be in," Peterson says. "I can't think of another [Philadelphia] house that has something like this."

The second floor also houses the owner's private living room, a dark-wooded sanctuary epitomizing fine 19th-century living. Its layout includes a Biedermeier desk (Austrian, approximately 1810 to 1830), an Irish Georgian armchair and Scottish William IV wing chair. The surprise is the faux-Regency bookcase. Designed by Weixler, the three-unit bookcase features ornate yet restrained carvings in the upper moldings, including the owner's family coat of arms in the center and shields indicating the owner's Francophile and musical interests on the flanking units. "The level of millwork was a challenge," Dilworth says. "[Weixler] drew things that were incredibly detailed."

The second floor's master suite exemplifies Weixler, Peterson & Luzi's plan for the rest of the house. "This is where a lot of disparate things come together," Peterson says. "There are things English, French, Indian, Portuguese, Persian." The print used for the valance atop the windows and the nine-foot high George III canopy bed depicts a grand tour of the Ottoman Empire and alludes to the fact that the owner has collected from eras now gone. In a wonderful bit of detailing, the valance cut-outs resemble mosque portals. The master bath features a tri-color floor design that Weixler developed

after experimenting with four patterns and six colorization plans. Though he often works with the region's top architects and designers, Dilworth has never encountered the level of design sophistication that Weixler, Peterson & Luzi created. Though its design celebrates a shared cultural heritage, this house shows contemporary urbanites how they can live with fine historical pieces in a functional everyday environment. "This is one of the great townhouses in Philadelphia," Peterson says. "I would say that it's one of the great townhouses in America." ■

The cosmopolitan feeling of the master bedroom is enhanced by the Ottoman Empire-styled valances adorning the windows and the nine-foot high George III canopy bed.



Originally installed in the dining room of the Cosmopolitan Club's former location, the second floor circa 1930s murals by Philadelphia artist Edith Emerson depict the pageantry of Philadelphia society during the 1830s.

