RESTORING A HOUSE IN THE CITY

A GUIDE TO RENOVATING TOWN HOUSES, BROWNSTONES, AND ROW HOUSES

WITH GREAT STYLE

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a townhouse whose facade is attached to and nearly identical to its neighbors. This architectural device, popularized in Georgian England, was an attempt to create city blocks with the harmonious appearance of a palace front. Today, the term *row house* usually refers to the small, adjoined homes originally built for working-class families. Meanwhile, in New York, the town house is commonly referred to as a **brownstone,** whether or not its facade is swathed in the chocolate-hued sandstone that was all the rage in the city in the nineteenth century.

The homeowners in *Restoring a House in the City* are as diverse as their homes. Among their ranks are a pair of Baltimore set designers, architects and interior designers, a photographer, two fashion designers, a movie-set veteran married to a twelfth-generation Charlestonian, and the actress Julianne Moore. Moore and her husband, the movie director Bart Freundlich, searched for years for a New York town house before finding just the right one in Greenwich Village, and overseeing every aspect of its renovation. "If you are really serious about renovating an old house," she said, "try to live in it first, and figure out *how* you want to live in it."

The houses in the book span 160 years. In Philadelphia, a young couple with a taste for modern furnishings renovates a 1763 Colonial. In San Francisco, two Williams-Sonoma executives bring a cobwebby 1920 Edwardian town house back to life. There are modest homes, and almost mansions, period pieces (where every detail has been thoroughly researched and preserved), and town houses where the entire back walls have been replaced with sheets of glass.

Restoring Tradition

CHARLESTON REVIVAL

|HISTORIC DISTRICT, CHARLESTON|

Date built: 1843 | Width: 48 feet | Stories: 4 | Square footage: 9,900 | Bedrooms: 7 | Fireplaces: 11 working
Year purchased: 2003 | Length of renovation: 4 years | House style: Greek Revival

In historic Charleston, Richard Marks is the contractor of choice, both for his expertise in bringing antique houses back from the brink, and for his detectivelike pursuit of their forgotten past. Marks, who goes by the nickname Moby, was the first person that Ozey and Sarah Horton called when they were thinking of buying one of Charleston's grandest town houses, the William C. Gatewood house. Situated on one of the oldest streets in town, the Gatewood is a classic Charleston side yard, named for its long two-story porch—known in Charleston as a piazza—that runs the length of the south side of the house and gives way to the garden in back. The purpose of the piazza is dual: to offer shade from sun during the stifling Charleston summers and a view of the lemon trees lining the long allée in the side yard.

ABOVE: The finishes in the kitchen house were left deliberately rustic in keeping with its early character—a "new" floor was laid in reclaimed Charleston brick from the early 1800s and the original staircase was restored. **OPPOSITE:** The open-plan kitchen—with its La Cornue range, sitting room with television, and state-of-the-art appliances concealed in built-in cabinetry—is the most contemporary modification to the town house. A dropped ceiling was removed to reveal the original framing while adding height to the space.

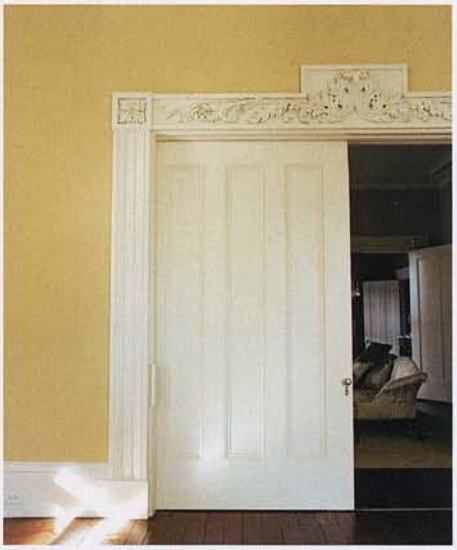
The Hortons—he is a tenth-generation Charlestonian and a management consultant, she is a former assistant director who has worked with Clint Eastwood and Tommy Lee Jones—are both passionate preservationists. Determined to resuscitate a local architectural gem, they searched for eight years for a house with enough original features to make a restoration worthwhile. Finally, they found the Gatewood house, a particularly fine and rare example of Greek Revival architecture for the area. The building had endured ten different owners, a major earthquake, and several decades as a rooming house. Still, its bones were remarkably intact, from the S-shaped newel post at the base of the main staircase to the lofty parlor rooms of the grand second floor, with their lavish ornamental plasterwork. What's more, there was an old kitchen house in the rear, which had been connected to the main house sometime after the Civil War. Unfortunately, Gatewood was not for sale. But the Hortons wrote to the owner explaining their intent to undertake a serious restoration, and their offer was accepted.

The Hortons's worst fear—that the house's foundation would need to be overhauled—was allayed by a structural report that deemed it stable. But everywhere else, the house was coming apart. Among the countless alarming discoveries, an inspection

RIGHT: For reasons of fire safety, the kitchen house, located at the rear of the property, was originally separate from the main house. The buildings were later adjoined after the Civil War. Architect Gil Schafer used the connecting passage to create a butler's pantry and bar, with brick walls (above) showing the exposed face of the original exterior structures. **OPPOSITE:** In the much grander main house, the hall was painted in Rhett Pumpkin, a shade from the Colors of Historic Charleston paint collection. The front parlor has classical American furniture from the first quarter of the nineteenth century, collected by the Hortons over the years.
FOLLOWING SPREAD: The dining room (left), which leads to the middle parlor (right), is decorated with hand-painted scenic wallpaper from de Gournay. The mahogany dining table was made in Boston in 1830, and the 1820s Klismos chairs are from Philadelphia.

revealed that the brick in the south walls had become delaminated as the mortar had deteriorated. The roof trusses were rotted, the parlor's ceiling joists were on the verge of collapse, and in one corner the house had sunk twelve inches, a probable consequence of the Charleston earthquake of 1886. Amazingly, the Hortons decided to proceed. They hired Marks to oversee the restoration, working in tandem with New York–based architect Gil Schafer, a former president of the Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America, who was given the mandate of updating the house without compromising its historic value.

Marks, who teaches preservation at a local university and oversees a staff of fifty artisans, researchers, and experts, studied the house for five months. Schafer says it "felt as though we were living out a thrilling episode of *CSI: Charleston*. Moby and his team would tackle each element of the house with forensic focus—they were sleuths and archeologists, and best of all, they were creative problem solvers."



OPPOSITE: The parlor's triple-hung windows are original to the house. They were taken apart and restored using Thomas Jefferson's Monticello house as inspiration. The windows open to the floor and adjust to varying breezes. **LEFT:** The original pocket doors, cleaned and restored, separate the two parlor's and help keep rooms warm in winter.

The house was literally taken apart and put back together. Craig Bennett, a structural engineer, dismantled half of the disintegrating south wall, salvaging all of the original bricks and stitching the wall back up with thousands of stainless-steel tie rods. Two feet of soil were excavated below the house to create air circulation around the joists. On the north face of the house, the wall was pulling away from the internal central staircase and leaning into the neighboring alley. The solution was to reinforce the sagging steps with steel channels and flitch plates and, in a feat of engineering, to use the staircase itself as a thirty-two-foot brace to tie the wall back into the property.

Once satisfied that the house was not going to collapse, Marks located the building's original floor plan, chain of title, will, and probate records from local archives, discovering that Virginia-born Gatewood was a wealthy merchant of sea island cotton and rice who had six children, ten slaves, and a dog. This kind of information, along with checklists detailing Gatewood's furnishings, gives a sense of what the rooms looked like and what purposes they served. Marks also treated the house itself as an archaeological site, gathering "nail typologies," in which nail styles are used to determine the age of the home's architectural elements, and finding evidence that the house had such 1840s high luxuries as gas lighting and indoor plumbing.

Marks studies an old house for what he calls ghost marks—traces on walls that reveal the presence of features long removed. In the Hortons' house, he discovered evidence of a missing staircase, as well as clues that the kitchen house had once had an outside porch. The Hortons put them both back. Much attention was also paid to making the house look as much as possible as though it had not been touched since the 1840s. Extra layers of paint were applied to give surfaces an aged appearance. Outside, the brick's crumbling mortar was placed under a microscope, and its recipe—a mixture of crushed brick, feldspar, crushed stone, quartz, lime, and color—

ABOVE: The design for the attic floor bathroom was inspired by Charleston's landmark Aiken-Rhett House. The paint color was matched to the shade of a plank-and-batten door found in the attic and now installed in the bath. The peg board is also original to the house. **ABOVE RIGHT:** This bedroom's American four-poster plantation bed from the 1840s belonged to Ozey Horton's grandfather. **OPPOSITE:** This bathroom in the kitchen house has walls of mill-sawn cypress, original to the house, when this room would have been used for dry goods storage. The lighting, fabricated by Marks, is designed to resemble traditional gas lamps from the Greek Revival period.

reconstituted. "When we leave a job, we don't want anyone to know we were there," Marks says.

Like many grand old houses, this one was originally designed to have two separate spheres: one for the servants, and one for the served. But the Hortons have no live-in staff and Sarah, an accomplished chef, loves to spend time in the kitchen. Schafer says his first impulse was to indulge the Hortons with such creature comforts as luxury bathrooms and large closets. Most of his East Coast clientele expect those kinds of modern amenities. But in Charleston, his ideas were received with extreme caution. "Everyone would look at me in horror and say: 'We don't tear down walls that have been here since 1840,'" he says. "I learned to ask Moby: 'Do they do this here?'"

Schafer ultimately devised several ingenious solutions using what he calls "smoke and mirrors": rather than locate a shower down the hall from a guest bedroom, as he found it, for example, he managed to conceal a full bathroom suite inside a white cabinet designed to look like an 1840s wardrobe armoire. Without moving a single wall or feature, he and Marks succeeded in updating the house with six new bathrooms, two new kitchens, three new staircases, modern heating, central air-conditioning, new electrical wiring, high-speed data lines, and an elevator. Each alteration was designed to be easily removable so that the fundamental integrity of the historic house remains unchanged.

In the end, the restoration of the Gatewood house took more than four years. The Hortons are still recuperating as they painstakingly assemble a collection of fine antiques worthy of their historic home. They take immense pride in salvaging one of the town's great houses and knowing that it will likely stand firm for another 150 years. "It was a privilege to restore the house and bring it back to life," Sarah says. "As we say in Charleston, we are just the stewards for the time being."