

Vision accomplished

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Love it or list it?

Mark Dejong, who lives a couple doors up the street from the Camp Washington shotgun he restored, has a big decision to make: Should he move into it or sell it?

Dejong rubbed, scraped, plastered and painted a lot of love into the old place, but his current digs – a loft-like, two-bedroom with lots of personal touches, natural light and privacy – is also close to his heart. It used to be his artist mother's studio.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," he said.

For now, he said he is content to use it as an occasional art gallery.

Touches of green

Mark Dejong wasn't trying to restore his 1895 shotgun house to LEED standards. But he did find ways to recycle and repurpose in a way that cranks up the historical ambiance.

- The butcher-block countertops in the kitchen came out of an art room at Schwab Elementary School in Northside.
- An old kitchen cupboard was a built-in cabinet he pulled out of an old house years ago. It had been in storage awaiting a future use.
- A similar cupboard in an upstairs bedroom came from Building Value, a non-profit salvage outlet in Northside.
- Two large industrial molds made of wood decorate the stairwell. One is embedded in the wall, the other protrudes where only a very tall person would have to duck. Dejong's best bet is they were salvaged from the defunct Buckeye Bell Foundry in North Fairmount and ended up in Building Value's inventory.

What's a shotgun house?

Built in great numbers from the Civil War through the 1920s, shotgun houses are as narrow as 12 feet and have a single corridor with rooms off to the same side. The name came from the belief that a gun could be shot through the front door, down the corridor and out the back without damaging anything.

Mark Dejong had passed the handsome brick and stone shotgun house on his Camp Washington street every day for seven years. The place appeared to have great bones.

And when he bought the 1895 building in 2011 for just \$5,000, the 47-year-old residential construction and wood-finishing specialist understood it could be the restoration from hell.

In a word, he said, the interior condition of the 3-bedroom, 1 1/2-bathroom house was "gross."

Plaster was falling off the walls, and there was a lot of water damage.

"Despite everything there, I could see past a lot of the dirt and nastiness to the potential," Dejong said. "I saw it as a unique opportunity to make a beautiful home."

Dejong, who has a bachelor of fine arts degree from Alfred University in Upstate New York, worked as a sculptor and owns and operates Landmark Finishes, a Cincinnati company that hones interior woodwork finishes to European standards.

He said he saw the shotgun house as a chance to bring it back to life by using his construction knowledge as well as artistic skills that had been dormant for about 20 years – and his love and respect for history.

His artistic eye was drawn to circular images in the home such as the rosette blocks in the top corners of the doors' wood trim and the round flowers painted on the home's three cast iron fireplaces.

Dejong looked at the crumbling paint and plaster and envisioned scraping it all off, layer by layer, to reveal the industrial-looking brown coat, the second of three plaster layers.

And then he thought of decorating the walls with raised circles crafted in new plaster.

He made a nine-footer, the first of what became about 15, on the stairway wall.

Next, he plastered a half circle in the corner of a stairwell landing's wall and extended it out in oval form on the abutting wall, creating a graceful arrow that beckons people to walk this way.

The third circle Dejong created by cutting out the shape in a bare plaster wall in the living room to reveal brick behind it.

After that, Dejong pondered whether more circles would be overkill.

Nah.

The restoration began in January 2012 and ended in late fall.

The circle theme is visible in every room.

It's in the closets, ceilings, light fixtures and hardwood floor plugs needed after blow-in insulation was added between the first and second floors.

In the second floor corridor, which is rare for a shotgun house, Dejong said, the artist modified the circle theme and plastered a raised "blue worm" that winds around the bathroom door at the hallway's end and returns on the wall opposite of where it started.

Dejong brought the circle theme outside to where the cornice had fallen.

He fashioned a contemporary covering for under the roof line that features round steel mixing bowls he found at a local scrap yard.

Bare walls and circles, it's not a look the original builders would have come up with 118 years ago, but it works.

His design, Dejong said, "is respectful to the age of the house and the building, but it has an aesthetic that's very contemporary."

Dejong, who put more than 1,800 work hours into the project, is pleased with the results.

And his choice of the theme for the house is reflected in the name he gave it.

"I call this house 'Circles,' because in the end, I felt I'd come full circle with my art and construction," he said.