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A Different Take on the Loft
Historic Renovation and Expansion
Residential Conversion

LOFT BAROQUE

Historic Meets Modern Chic in the Residential Conversion of the Old Bricks

Roswell, GA: While the loft is now the quintessential urban form in America, its elements are ever evolving as designers strive to meet the needs and demands of its aficionados, who often desire what seem to be two contradictory ideals. The loft dweller often wants large, open expanses with monumental flair and drama while at the same time harboring a nesting impulse that demands enclosure and comfort. With the renovation and expansion of what is affectionately called “the Old Bricks” in the historic town of Roswell, in greater Atlanta, designer and urban planner Lew Oliver has managed to give loft lovers both. The result is a space that is spare and sumptuous, historic and chic, baroque and modern, dramatic and restful—alternately and sometimes both at once. Oliver’s new home is part of a larger residential conversion project recently completed by the designer and the Macallan Group, and exemplifies how connoisseurs of the form can get their cake and eat it too. The home is a study in contrasts—rough/refined, light/dark, metallic/prismatic, solid/free-floating—with contradiction and opposing desires engendering serendipity and a rare in-town magic.

An Ambitious Rehabilitation

Looking at the Bricks today, it is hard to believe that but a few months ago, the building was in disrepair and surrounded by gravel lots, service areas, and dumpsters—a virtual urban void. The original structure dates back to 1840, and was erected by Roswell King as apartments for factory workers in the nearby Roswell Mill. The Greek Revival gem was one of the first apartment buildings constructed in the U.S., and through the years, has served as everything from a hospital for Union troops during the Civil War to public library to private club.

Oliver had ambitious goals for the project that went far beyond transforming the

apartments into twenty-first-century dwellings. He wanted the conversion to help revitalize the Mill District of historic Roswell, encourage pedestrian traffic, remove commercial vehicles from the neighborhood, and foster neighborhood-oriented startup businesses on the nearby historic square. The award-winning designer and New Urbanist planner has long been involved in revitalization efforts in Roswell. In 1988, he restored an old mill house in the village as his personal residence, and he is the designer responsible for the vision behind Founders Mill, austere brick town homes across the street from the Bricks that are commonly mistaken for old mill buildings. He is now involved in designing a master plan to remake Roswell into a more walkable, pedestrian-friendly city by connecting its disparate squares with the five-acre estate of Barrington Hall, perhaps the preeminent antebellum mansion in the Atlanta area.

Restoration and expansion of the Bricks was particularly important for the plan and its vision due to the fact that in many respects the building is the historic heart of the Mill District. The setting is an urban ideal, uniting historic import, natural beauty, and an almost rural charm. The Bricks are sandwiched between one of the old squares of historic Roswell and the Chattahoochee River, directly above the last remaining original structure of the Roswell Mills, most of which was burned down by Sherman because they were used to produce the fabric for Confederate uniforms during the war. The city of Roswell recently constructed a new covered bridge below the Bricks near the Old Mill on Vickery Creek, facilitating use of one of the longest trails in the eastern U.S. Stretching for approximately fifty miles, the extensive park boasts waterfalls, wetlands, trout streams, and mountain ravines filled with wild azaleas and laurel as well as Civil War and native American archaeological sites.

Grandness and Intimacy

Oliver and his partners restored and extended the original buildings, transforming them into modern town homes while remaining ever mindful of their historic charm and significance. Chimneys were meticulously rehabilitated, and the old bricks exposed and whitewashed. Over the years, superficial and inappropriate ornamentation, much of it dating from the turn-of-the-century, had been tacked on here and there, stifling the building's original beauty, spare aesthetic, and historical significance. During the renovation process, the bric-a-brac was not replaced, and the grand spirit of the structure was returned.

The new additions reflect the Greek Revival style of the original building in pared-down form. Handmade brick, some of it salvaged from an antebellum mansion in nearby Marietta, was laid in a common bond, thus named because the bricks are common to two walls, thereby lending the complex a material unity and authenticity. No opportunity for salvaging old materials was overlooked.

Although the floor joists of the original building had been infested with powder-post beetles, site contractor Wade Chappel refused to throw them away, and instead sent them off to a mill shop to be planed down and used as front doors. With their wormholes, imperfections, and ravaged identity, they stand as testaments to the history of the building and the town, and have been appropriately outfitted with iron thumb-latches and framed by exposed open-flame gaslights. Tin shingles with a stamped fish-scale pattern were salvaged from the back porches of the original buildings and used to sheathe the back wall of kitchens as backsplashes.

Replacing the gravel parking lot are new townhouses whose form and details reference and streamline the spirit of the original. The streets, Oliver points out, are now whole, while the adjacent park to the east now boasts a terminating vista. The designer further tied the complex to the historic cottages that surround the park and adjacent streets with a new mill cottage of similar scale at the south end, which, he says, soon became a highly coveted property due to its intimate dimensions. At 1,350 square feet, the cottage is perfect for empty nesters, artists, and singles.

Oliver aimed throughout for a combination of grandness and intimacy. He situated the piano nobile on the second story of the new additions close to the street. The balconies allow people to see out from their homes, but people on the street cannot see in. Also adding privacy are the brick fences with elegant iron gates that surround the property and its courtyards. The fences serve to detail the street, providing not only intimacy for those living within them but also for residents of the neighborhood, who commonly gather in the streets to talk and walk their dogs. Oliver describes them as “living streets,” intimate places surrounded by homes, trees, and flowers where people and animals come first and cars second. As throughout the project, no detail has been overlooked--even the curbs have been constructed with original or antique granite. Trees have been placed but two feet from the curb, signaling further to passersby that this is a residential area. A benefit to such design is that it significantly slows down traffic in contrast to wide streets with big turning radiuses and without urban detailing, which, structurally, encourage high-speed traffic and, accordingly, more danger. The complex features a rear auto court, with cars, trash, and utilities well out of sight.

The Power of Contrast

Oliver describes his home within the complex as “mid-19th century meets the future, or baroque meets industrial.” The first floor features intimate, compressed spaces with antique brick floors and whitewashed walls. Adding to the den-like atmosphere are ceilings dressed in Sherwin Williams’ Urban Bronze. The ground-floor suites were designed to serve as offices, studios, nesting dens lined with

books, or accommodations for in-laws, guests, and boomerang kids. The ground floor of Oliver's unit serves as the office for his companies—Lew Oliver, Inc. and Whole Town Solutions. Here, he and his associates work together around a massive machine-shop table in a charette format with neither cubicles nor separate offices, the arrangement facilitating camaraderie and the rapid-fire exchange of ideas.

The affect of the home's top two stories is the total opposite with 11' ceilings flooded with light; pared-down detailing; and smooth, untextured walls, inviting large-scale artwork. The proportional contrast provides variety and high drama. The second floor features a kitchen with pewter cabinets set in the back of a large room in French grey loaded with glass in order to view the streetscape directly below and the riverscape further beyond. Lighting is minimal, and has been carefully positioned to accent art and architectural details and to create what Oliver calls "activity pools." The locus of one such pool is a massive table that occupies the heart of the first floor and is faced with a grand expanse of windows that flood the space with natural light. The dark hardwood table hails from a machine shop in Belgium from the last century, and at 14 X 3'6, is multifunctional, serving at various points in the day as dining table, worktable, library table, craft table, homework table, and conference table. Oliver sees such multifunctional tables as objects worthy of investment, and points out the importance of correct lighting for them. Low-hung chandeliers can be used, but Oliver preferred the New York Public Library solution and drilled small holes in the massive piece, outfitting it with a pair of stacked-cube lamps of pristine crystal with refined white silk shades, which play off the rusted iron of the furniture's base.

Adding further contrast are dramatic silk curtains of an almost acidic chartreuse that stretch from floor-to-ceiling and cover two entire walls of the major living area. Sweep back the curtains, and one experiences a different effect altogether—sparse and undressed. Oliver has situated furniture to create additional activity pools. Some work to anchor the space, while others, such as the grand piano situated at the east side, seem almost to levitate. The same combination of qualities can be evidenced in the spiral staircase that connects all three floors of the dwelling. Constructed of motel-grade steel, the structure has been left unfinished. Lending it a feeling of warmth and substantiality, the treads are translucent heart pine that, Oliver was delighted to discover, glow at night like lit amber due to the high amount of resin in the wood. Left alone, the structure is a dramatic, freestanding piece of art. Its mood, however, can be transformed in an instant by a massive curtain in French grey that creates something of the feeling of a crushed velvet cocoon. Providing texture, drama, privacy, and noise reduction at once, the curtain stretches a full thirty feet from the top of the house to the bottom. Dangling from the top is a crystal and iron chandelier.

The second level also contains an exercise room secluded at the southeast corner as well as a guest room. As throughout the house, the beds are low and modern and feature upholstered headboards. An antique chandelier placed at eye level serves as end-table lighting. The bath is large, and features a modern seven-foot-long lavatory surface topped by mirrors that extend from splash to ceiling. Adding further to the baroquely modern affect are antique dragon sconces that Oliver mounted directly on to the mirror, making them seem to float across multiple surfaces.

The Charm of Unpredictability

The juxtaposition of new and old, modern and baroque, can be seen throughout the house, and often results in unpredictability and serendipity. The home boasts custom two-panel doors in pared-down Greek Revival, floors of heart pine, and almost medieval ironwork as well as modern granite fireplaces with post-and-lintel mantels and minimalist low-voltage lighting. Trim work is executed in the same color as the walls. No attempt has been made to hide technologies, whether in the form of refrigerators and other kitchen appliances, televisions, computers, or exercise equipment. Indeed, in contrast to the organicity of the building materials and the lushness of the upholstery and textiles, their sleek utilitarian function is celebrated and virtually ritualized.

On the top floor is an enviable master suite flooded with top light and featuring a bathroom worthy of a spa. Bed and bath are separated by a tactile wall of sheer bronze silk. The second floor also features a second bedroom, occupied by Oliver's teen-aged daughter Elizabeth, with accompanying bath. Instead of boxing in the shower in the large space—the usual solution—Oliver's friend Deb Golding suggested a custom-made curtain of white suede that stretches from floor to ceiling. The space's pale yellow walls have been accented with draperies in a combination of lime-green and teal, while the bed is anchored with an upholstered headboard of green suede.

The house is full of counterintuitive color combinations that amplify its baroque modernity. Julie Wild—designer of the award-winning Grand Bohemian in Orlando, Florida; the Casa Monica in Saint Augustine, Florida; and the Mansion in Savannah, Georgia--helped pick out many of the colors. Others were the result of serendipity. The upstairs hallway, Oliver likes to point out, was mistakenly painted in Urban Bronze—an error he now finds unexpectedly charming. The richly saturated butternut suffuses warmth throughout the lofty space and seems to retain daylight well into the night.

Indeed, a number of the house's best features, says the designer, are due to serendipity, whether the wall color of the hallway or the amber glow of the staircase treads. The power of the unexpected can be evidenced also in the home's

courtyards, which feature potted plants, trees planted directly in pea gravel with no fuss, and Chinese urns oozing water over their meditational edges. The front steps are of stone interspersed with ferns, mosses, grasses, and something rather unexpected—massive vines whose genesis is unknown to the many passersby who stop to congratulate the owners on their gnarly charm. The steps, it turns out, were a favorite resting spot during the summer, and melon seems to have been the snack of choice.

About the Designer

Lew Oliver grew up in the historic towns of southern Georgia and northern Florida, and at the age of seventeen, was instrumental in saving Atlanta's Fox Theatre, a Moorish-Egyptian landmark, when his fine-line drawing of the building was printed and sold throughout the Southeast. The New Urbanist designer and master planner has worked on major projects across the U.S., including Rosemary Beach, Celebration, Vickery, Clark's Grove, Lost Rabbit, and I'on. He is town architect of Vickery, Serenbe, Clark's Grove, Norcross Downtown, and Woodstock Downtown, and is also involved with the creation and design of McDaniel Glenn, Briar Rose, and Glenwood Park, as well as projects in downtown Marietta and historic Roswell, where for many years he served on the Historic Preservation Commission. He is a member of the Northwest Fulton County Design Review Board, and commonly participates in charettes for Andres Duany's DPZ both in the U.S. and abroad. His work has aptly been described as a fusion of classical restraint and vernacularism with close attention paid to form, detail, and proportion. His many awards include the New American Home for the National Association of Homebuilders and Westin's Best in Brand worldwide. In 2005, his designs swept the gold awards in eight different categories at the Professionalism Awards of the Atlanta Homebuilders Association. His latest projects are located in Tornagrain, Scotland; Arcos, Spain; and Panama.

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