

MANSION

INSIDE STORY

Let There Be Light

Renovating this 1730s home to maximize natural light took time and perseverance, thanks to its historic designation

By NANCY KRATES

Stepping inside the small, stone New Jersey farmhouse—built in 1734, before the U.S. was the U.S.—felt like going back hundreds of years in time.

That’s exactly why the Teaneck property appealed to Clement Huyghebaert, 38, a startup co-founder from Brussels, and his wife, Dr. Eleonora Spinazzi, 36, a neurosurgeon who spent her childhood in Milan, Italy.

“We grew up around these old houses,” says Huyghebaert, who came to the U.S. for college at Columbia University. “It felt like home.”

The house, one of the country’s earliest examples of Jersey Dutch-style architecture, is on the National Register of Historic Places. More recently, it was occupied for 17 years by a Buddhist monk from Korea who operated a temple there.

Despite the charm, the home needed work. “I loved it, but I felt like we couldn’t live in it because it was so dark,” says Spinazzi. After buying the property for \$1 million in May 2022, the couple set off on a \$426,000 interior renovation that aimed to preserve the building’s character while creating functional spaces and maximizing natural light. It wasn’t an easy process: Any alterations impacting the exterior require the approval of the seven members of the Township of Teaneck’s Historic Preservation Commission.

The home sits on 1.5 acres along the Hackensack River, in a leafy suburb just across the Hudson from New York City. It is known as the John Ackerman House, after an early owner who was a farmer and a descendant of



In the original portion of the house, part of a stone wall was replaced with a large glass window and french doors to provide light and views.

a Dutch immigrant family. The sandstone home is one of only a few remaining examples of Jersey Dutch-style homes, which generally feature gambrel roofs with flared overhanging eaves, according to Tim Adriance, a historic-preservation consultant who lives

nearby and has studied the property.

The property was owned for years by neighboring Fairleigh Dickinson University, which used it as the president’s house and for hosting visiting professors. The university then sold it to Zen

Master Sung Hae, who operated his Bulbuka Temple there. When Claire and Gideon Karlick purchased the house for \$526,000 in 2010, they found a piano, yoga mats on the floor, hundreds of Korean language books and even a pot of beans cooking on the stove.

“It looked destitute,” says Claire, 74. Hae couldn’t be reached for comment.

The Karlicks fixed the roof and put in a new kitchen, which required gutting part of the first floor. By 2017, however, they had

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grown tired of mowing the grass and thought the property would be more valuable for their children if other homes could be built there. They proposed preserving the existing house and subdividing the land to allow two additional houses on a quarter-acre each.

Neighbors complained about parking, and the local planning board rejected the proposal, saying it would violate lot-size requirements, cause traffic-flow issues and have a negative impact on adjacent properties.

Wanting to move to New Mexico to be closer to their grandchildren, the Karlicks put the house up for sale in September 2021.

Claire, who was showing the house to prospective buyers, says there was a lot of interest, mostly due to its large lot size, but everyone wanted to make drastic changes to the house.

Then Huyghebaert and Spinazzi showed up. “I liked them immediately,” Claire says. “They weren’t talking about knocking the house down or making it bigger.” She says she loves their renovation.

At the time, Huyghebaert and Spinazzi were living in a tiny apartment in New York City, where Spinazzi was doing her neurosurgery residency at Columbia and Huyghebaert was working in engineering at BuzzFeed; he has since joined a startup incubator in 2023 and commutes to the city one day a week. They wanted somewhere with a yard for their Great Danes; they currently have four.

When the couple bought the Teaneck house it was 3,225 square feet, thanks to a 2½-story addition in 1787. The original beams and thick walls reminded Spinazzi of the farmhouses she stayed in over summer vacations near the Alps when she was growing up, she says. After her family moved to Princeton, N.J., when she was



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Several small rooms on the second floor were removed to create an office, reading nook, bedroom, bathroom and dressing room.

ship’s historic-commission members’ so much that they voted in November 2022 to postpone a vote until they’d had more time to think it over, says chairman Mike Norris. Even though the proposed changes were at the rear of the house, they were concerned that they would still be visible from the adjoining Hackensack River Greenway and the river. “I would have voted no at the time and I think the others would have too,” Norris says.

The architects came back with four alternative plans. The one that struck a chord with the commission proposed using a French glass door instead of the sliding-glass door, and installing folding wooden shutters over two fixed-glass panels. They also proposed installing the folding shutters on the home’s remaining windows.

The architects argued that the house originally had shutters, showing a 1938 photo of the front of the house as evidence.

The commission approved the plan in January 2023. “It’s harder and harder for us to get our historic homes bought by people

as a third bedroom. They added millwork to create continuity between the historic masonry and timber and the new walls. A modern steel stairway is cantilevered off the side wall so the stairs appear to be floating. Using metal helped demarcate the new from the old, says Fuller. “It’s a way to express change, using a material that feels complimentary to and differentiated from the original structure.”

At the top of those stairs, a third-floor attic was turned into a guestroom with a window seat. That, too, required uncovering beams that had been hidden and ripping out layers of additions, a process that required studying the materials and original lines.

Spinazzi compares the process of installing the new glass windows in the old living room to a type of surgery she’s trained in, where part of the skull is removed to relieve pressure on the brain



The house in 1936.

after an injury. While the surgery must be performed quickly to save the patient’s life, the reconstruction requires precision to insert an implant, restoring the removed bone. The doctors who trained her

aimed to create a near-exact replica, preserving the patient’s original appearance.

“It has instilled in me a deep respect for aesthetics and the protection of each person’s unique identity,” she says.

“It’s harder and harder for us to get our historic homes bought by people who want to try to keep it as it was.”

15, she remembers feeling that the houses there were trying to look old but weren’t authentic—they were much too large and made from flimsier materials.

But the couple wanted to update the home’s interiors and open up the space. A cave-like living room, in particular, was small with low ceilings, heavy beams and a massive stone fireplace. They hired architects Emma Fuller and Michael Overby of New York-based Fuller/Overby Architecture.

“We wanted to modernize the house but we didn’t want to make sure we didn’t change the aesthetics,” Spinazzi says. The first plan the architects put together called for removing two windows, a door and part of the stone wall from the original portion of the house, and installing a large glass window and sliding door to provide light and views of the trees and river outside.

The plan startled the town-

who want to try to keep it as it was,” says Norris. “We were grateful they took on the home.”

Fuller and Overby removed an entire portion of the third floor to create the double-height stair hall, exposing hidden beams. On the second floor, they got rid of some small rooms and made an office, a reading nook, and an interconnected main bedroom, bathroom and dressing room. The house now has two bedrooms and a dressing room that could be used

A window and french doors, right, provide views of the trees and river outside. Below right, a modern steel stairway appears to float.



BEFORE



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