
NEWS

Historic Grand Hill home goes from maze to mansion

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Ed Conley had a problem. Or maybe, he created a problem.

The floor planks in the third floor of his house were out of alignment with the walls — by 3 degrees.

“One guy in 500 would even notice it, but Ed could never let that go,” said Conley’s wife, Sara, teasing him as she walked on the newly replaced floor. “Ooooh, it just has to be perfect, doesn’t it?”

Conley just smiled and recited his philosophy of renovation: “It’s in the details, details and again details.”

ADVERTISING



That perfectionism has driven Conley into the business of saving St. Paul's history. He has waged a one-man crusade to rescue hundreds of historic homes and apartments. Over decades, he has salvaged mansions, schools and movie theaters.

His crowning glory is now on the market — the 1925 Schuneman mansion near Summit Avenue. Asking price: \$2.5 million.

He inspected the 9,000-square-foot structure last week, searching for any last imperfections. "To renovate something, you must enjoy it," said Conley, 54.

Conley's career as a savior of history started at age 23. Using a credit card, he got a \$3,000 advance for the down payment on a small house in Minneapolis.

He fixed it up, doing almost all the work himself, and resold it.

Conley was hooked. Over two decades, he made his living buying, renovating and selling historic buildings, including:

- The original St. Paul Academy building at Dale Street and Portland Avenue.
- His present home at 329 Summit Ave. "It was condemned, with a huge hole in the roof and a rat infestation," Conley said.
- A former movie theater at 1595 Selby Ave. "When I first went in there, it was like a prison, with cinder-block walls," he said. Now, it's home to 25 business offices.
- A condemned three-story building at Selby and Snelling avenues. Today, it has nine commercial spaces on the first floor and 17 apartments on upper floors.

This summer, he plans to install a 100-year-old clock on that building. The McClintock Co. clock will be the size of a large phone booth and cost about \$35,000.



“It’s a labor of love,” Conley said.

FROM ‘MOUSE IN MAZE’ TO MANSION

His latest effort was the family home of Carl Schuneman, owner of Schuneman’s Department Store in St. Paul. For decades, the store was a downtown landmark at Sixth and Wabasha streets.

To build his family home, Schuneman hired the renowned firm of Stem and Haslund, whose principal, Allen Stem, was an architect of Grand Central Station in New York City.

The builders started with a frame of steel I-beams, then built limestone walls 2 feet thick. On the roof, the slabs of slate weighed about 25 pounds each.

“It looks like a rich Episcopal church,” said Sarah Kinney, the Coldwell Banker real estate agent handling the home’s sale.

The 9,000-square-foot interior had been chopped into dozens of dark rooms, and spacious archways were closed off with small doors. “You felt like a mouse in a maze,” Kinney said.

After buying the mansion for \$724,000, Conley said, he and about eight workers spent a year on the restoration. They tore out walls and yanked out 22 interior doors. Twelve bedrooms morphed into six; 10 bathrooms were reduced to six.

He added 210 indoor storm windows for \$70,000.

Each arched doorway has 268 pieces, which Conley had the opportunity to count as he refinished them.

Costs piled up. Conley paid \$10,000 for a custom-made, two-person tub in the master bathroom. The wheeled ladder in the library, which rolls on rails, cost \$6,000.

Conley recycled antiques. He found unused chandeliers from the Governor's Residence on Summit Avenue and installed them in the dining room. From a University of Minnesota building, he rescued a 6-foot-wide chandelier base and incorporated it in an outdoor fountain.

He found pieces of a wrecked French stone mantle, carved out of marble in the 1700s. He rebuilt it in the house's second-floor fireplace.

FORGET AUTHENTIC, GO FOR REAL

Showing off the home recently, he caressed the centuries-old face of a woman carved in the stone. "When I was single, I could have dated her," he joked.

His favorite detail of the house is tucked up on the third floor — a set of servants' bells to summon them to any of five locations.

Conley saw the bells on his favorite TV show, "Downton Abbey." He tracked down the English bell maker and placed the man's second-biggest order ever — after the TV show itself.

Conley even put the names of the show's servants on the bedroom doors — for example, a "Charles Carson" plaque on the butler's room.

The Schuneman project showcases Conley's approach to restoration.

He has faithfully restored the exterior its original condition. But for him, preservation stops at the front door.

That's because no modern family would choose to live in an authentically restored interior.

On Summit Avenue a century ago, families lived with servants — who had separate bedrooms, stairways and even kitchens. The Schuneman mansion had 12 small bedrooms.

Servants were usually the only ones working in the kitchen. The Schuneman kitchen had been split into four dreary rooms. “It was the worst kitchen I have ever seen — a rabbit warren,” said Kinney, the real estate agent.

The Schunemans entertained in a third-floor ballroom — another fossilized feature. Conley divided it into two bedrooms.

A true preservationist would restore the interior, he said. The building could be turned into a museum. But that’s not his approach.

Conley, who declined to say how much the Schuneman mansion renovation cost, resells his houses, making a profit so he can duplicate his renovations all over the city.

“I am not ashamed of being a capitalist,” Conley said.

Maybe so, but he doesn’t always think about money.

There’s not much profit to be made in the bells, the \$10,000 tub, the centuries-old face on the mantle. Most renovators would not bother with them, not to mention the floor that’s a teensy bit crooked.

Why does he do it?

“I learned from my dad when I was in Cub Scouts,” he said. “Around the campfire, they would say: ‘Leave this place better than when you found it.’ It’s a lesson I never forgot.”

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Bob Shaw

Bob is a 40-year veteran (yes, he is grizzled) who edited one Pulitzer Prize winner and wrote two that were nominated. He has also worked in Des Moines, Colorado Springs and Palo Alto. He writes about the suburbs, the environment, housing, religion -- anything but politics. Secret pleasures: Kayaking on the Mississippi on the way to work, doughnuts brought in by someone else. Best office prank: Piling more papers onto Fred Melo’s already trash-covered desk.

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