



# Chestnut Hill Local

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Monday, February 8, 2021

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## The challenge of restoring historical rooms



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### **The restored Living Room of the 18th Century Center City Townhouse destroyed by fire.**

Posted Thursday, November 5, 2020 9:44 am

**by Patricia Cove**

Although it is a well certified and established belief that the architectural exterior of a building conveys, with great distinction, a very specific period in time, a single historic facade can tell us a myriad of details about the economic and social climate of the day, through the materials used, the fenestration employed, even the curves and angles of the trims and moldings applied. And just as the exterior of a building tells us about our world, the interior tells us about the individuals that lived in that building during that particular historic period. We can learn about family life, pastimes, hobbies, and recreational activities. We can learn about social mores and political beliefs. We can usually even discover the ages of the people who first lived there, their gender, their likes and dislikes, even their professions. The room configurations alone reflect daily activities, and a certain molding profile can speak volumes about the socioeconomic status of the family within.

So, it is always with great interest, when my interiors firm, which specializes in historic renovation and 'restoration, is presented with a project that is within a historically significant building. Such was the work on this home nearly 20 years prior. It was within an 18th-century townhouse near 21st and Locust in Center City. The newly purchased home was resplendent in architectural detail, wainscots, decorative crown moldings and chair rails, the original chestnut floors, and plaster relief moldings filled the dining room along with mahogany pocket doors that reached to the 18-foot-high ceilings. The young family was excited to own such a historically grand home. But as I stood inside the sprawling entrance hall this time, it was clear that the house was not the same. There had been a fire, and the interior was almost gutted.

It is rare in this day and age when faced with such devastation that owners of a historic property would even consider a renovation, let alone a historic restoration. The cost of bringing such an interior back to its original appearance can be so cost prohibitive, that such plans are soon abandoned in favor of turning the spaces into sleek, modern interiors devoid of architectural detail, adopting instead a more avant-garde approach in interior design. But this family was determined to salvage any pieces of history that remained and to recreate the pieces that had been lost. And so the restoration began.

Luckily, having many photographs of the original spaces, as well as our collective memories, it was beneficial to know the appearance of the various spaces before the fire. It was a bit more difficult, though, to determine more minute details, such as the actual size of a molding or trim, and the tinier dimensions of actual molding profiles. In those instances, we were able to salvage any charred pieces remaining, and competent restoration contractors were able to recreate the trims and moldings to the original specifications.

An even more interesting aspect of the project came as a result of an unfortunate renovation to the rear of the home sometime in the 1970s. During that period, homes such as this one were considered obsolete and as a matter of course were often broken up into apartments.

This break-up resulted in the dismantling of original floor plans, and the addition of things called "kitchenettes." Sometimes entirely new staircases were added to provide separate entrances to apartments. Up until this time, the family had been living with such a staircase, which had been most insensitively added when a second living space had been created. If there was any benefit to the fire, it was that it gave us the chance to remove that staircase and return the formal entrance hall back to its original stature and glory. With all the architectural details finalized, it was time to turn to the

furnishings. Appropriate color schemes were researched, and several design concepts were considered, all staying within the Federal time frame. A magnificent stripe wall covering from the Winterthur collection was chosen along with coordinated fabrics and trims to complement the historic pallet. An asymmetrical window treatment was selected to highlight the floor to ceiling windows, and paint colors were chosen to act as unifying elements throughout the various spaces.

All in all the project took almost two years to complete. And today, the majestic entrance hall, finished in creams and golds and Federal blues, harkens back to a more dignified time, a time when families alighted from a carriage, swept through the front parlor and dined graciously beneath plaster moldings and gilded mantles. Of course, we don't live that way today, but it is so wonderful to remember when we did!

*Patricia Cove is Principal of Architectural Interiors and Design in Chestnut Hill and chairs the Historic District Advisory Committee of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy.*

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