

MARC SCHULTZ/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Where old meets new

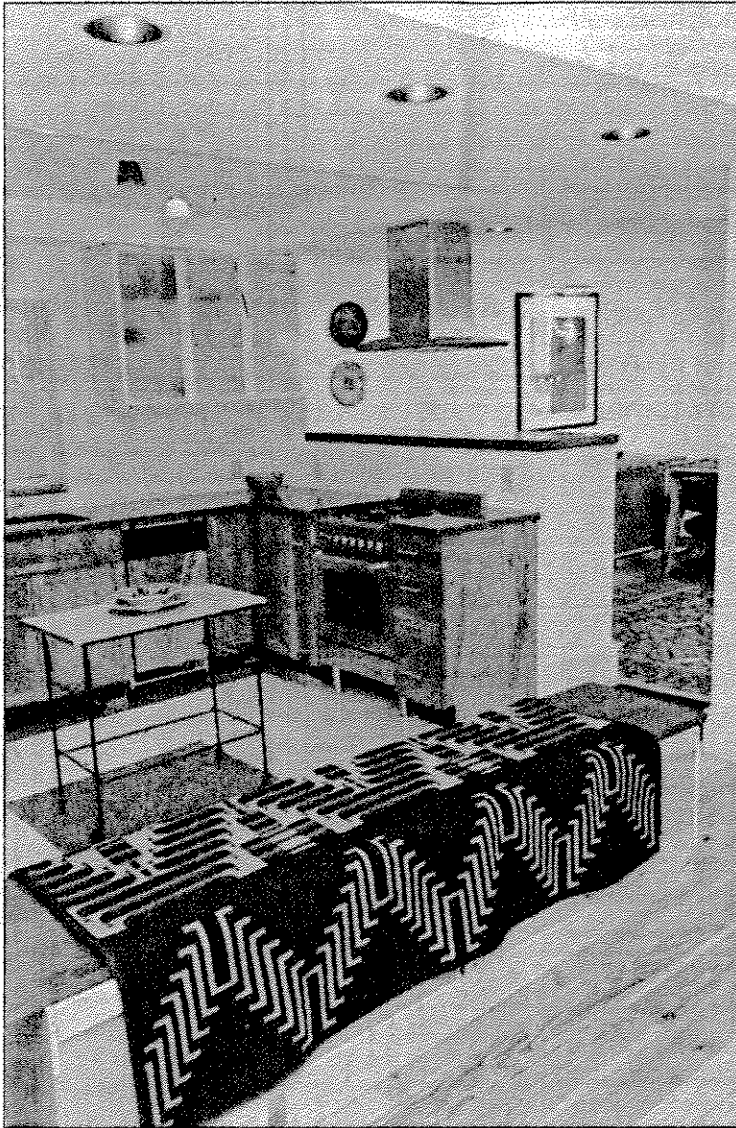
Restored Myndert Wemple House boasts classic, modern elements

BY JOANNE E. McFADDEN
For The Sunday Gazette

SCHENECTADY
Some people build model airplanes, strum the guitar or play golf in their spare time. Schenectady resident Robert Woods' hobby is houses. When you talk to him about old houses, you get the feeling that they are blank canvases, waiting for the artistry of a thoughtful architect who wants to not only breathe new life into them, but to do it in such a way that honors their historic character as well as modern sensibilities, personal tastes and functionality.

Robert Woods spent the past six years restoring his 184-year-old home in the Stockade in Schenectady. The house will be open to the public during next weekend's Stockade Walkabout.

THE SUNDAY
GAZETTE



Woods retained some of the house's historic features, but added several modern elements, including a stainless-steel kitchen with recessed ceiling lights.

Woods recently finished renovating his home, the Myndert Wemple House, in the Stockade neighborhood of Schenectady. He purchased it in 2000 when he was living a few doors down the street in another house that he'd renovated. He moved into it the following year and began the process of transforming the dwelling, which had seen quite a bit of wear and tear in its 184-year history. The renovation called for gutting the building and installing new plumbing, electricity and heat.

The job took several years, as Woods did most of the work himself with the help of a select few contractors. He took his time with this renovation, in part because he works full time as a senior architect for the state Department of Health's Bureau of Architecture, Engineering and Facilities Planning, and partly because of the intuitive nature of his work.

"I like to take the time to become familiar with the character of the house," Woods said.

MODERN AND HISTORIC

While there are many historical elements in his restoration, Woods juxtaposes elements of modern architecture with the historic character of the dwelling to create a warm and simple yet elegant setting. He likes to think that contemporary architecture doesn't have to be cold and inaccessible. He has demonstrated this throughout the house, combining the old and the new in seamless style.

The historic begins right in the entryway. The doorknobs are reproduction hardware

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Stockade Walkabout

WHAT: Robert Woods' newly renovated house will be open to the public on this year's Walkabout and Waterfront Faire

WHEN: Saturday, Sept. 29. From 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

TICKETS: \$18 before Sept. 28, then \$25.

Stockade: Architect's vision

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of a design developed for exhibition at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. He chose them because they are similar to the hardware he found on the pocket doors between the front room and the adjacent living room.

The tile in the entryway is encaustic, which means that the design was created by making an impression in which clay is inlaid. Woods designed the tile himself, modifying a design from the tile in the lieutenant governor's office in the State Capitol.

Just to the left of the foyer is a coatroom and a half-bathroom. It is the transition between these two areas where one gets a glimpse of Woods' artistry and attention to detail. He knew that he wanted something interesting there, so he built an arch between the two rooms. But when it was done, he felt it needed something more. He wanted to bring wood into the design, so he installed a sub-framework of Brazilian cherry that mim-

ics a rectangular doorway.

"It became a sculptural piece unto itself," he said.

BLENDING DESIGNS

This room is where Woods begins to meld some of his favorite contemporary designs with older pieces of furniture. A sleek chrome Bauhaus coatrack from Germany hangs on one wall. On the opposite wall there is a 1950s dresser designed by American furniture designer and decorator Paul McCobb flanked by two black wing-backed molded plywood chairs designed by Danish architect and designer Arne Jacobsen.

"I feel that architecture should accommodate individuals' tastes and their collection of lifetime experiences," he said.

To this end, there are two Louis Poulsen lights from Denmark on the walls, industrial light forms with exposed bulbs. On the side table directly underneath is an antique Japanese obi that Woods brought back from Switzerland and a burl bowl that he picked up at a flea market.

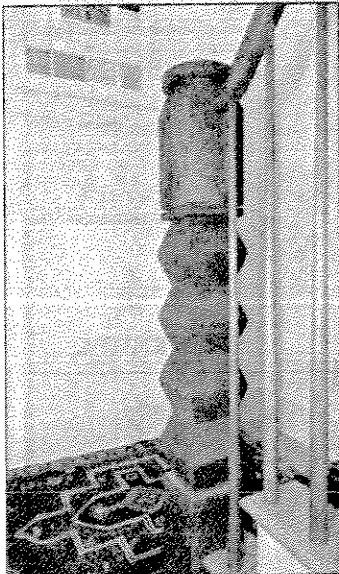
The room to the right of the foyer features a grand piano and a hearth as its centerpieces. Woods expected to find a firebox in the hearth, but discovered that it had always been purely ornamental. He retrofitted the fireplace so that it would accept a gas stove that looks like a coal stove. Right now, the opening is covered with hand-painted delft tiles. The mantel itself looks like marble, but it is actually Woods' first attempt at painting a faux finish.

The floors are hard yellow pine, as Woods said that he wanted to be sensitive to the original plank flooring.

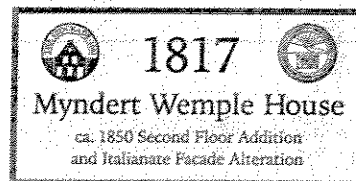
Adjacent to the front room is the living room, which is separated from the kitchen across from it by an island. There are pieces of Woods' favorite artwork, and some of his own, throughout the home. On the wall over the couch, as well as in the coatroom, hang sets of Woods' "urban typology" works. He used newspapers and cut them into pieces, assembling them into configurations inspired by his study of Italian urban spaces.

The kitchen features charcoal-colored granite countertops, Brazilian cherry cabinets below with Ikea cabinets on top, and stainless-steel appliances. There are five low-voltage Merano glass lights by Italian lighting designer Artemide on the ceiling of the kitchen, and other lighting so that he can get "just the right atmosphere" through the lighting in the kitchen and eating area. Next to the kitchen is a dining area that overlooks the back yard. Simple muslin curtains hang, because Woods wanted them to be "a backdrop rather than an accent."

Woods said that these three liv-



For the main staircase, Woods designed the balusters and newel posts with a totem theme to achieve a Scandinavian look.



pays off

ing spaces are designed to be open to one another and interchangeable, depending on the tastes of who is using them. The three spaces flow nicely together. He achieves the open yet delineated spaces by using soffits, rather than floor-to-ceiling walls, as space-forming tools.

REDESIGNED STAIRS

Woods completely redid the stairway that leads to the second story. Originally, it had been a straight run, which made it hard to move furniture upstairs. He reconfigured it to be a switchback staircase with a landing. Woods turned this utilitarian feature into a work of art. He designed the balusters and newel posts with a totem theme to achieve a Scandinavian look. On the bottom part of the staircase, the design is the negative image of the design on the platform. The railing is smooth, simple, sleek native-grown cherry.

On the landing of the stairs hangs a stained-glass window that he found in another part of the house and had restored. It has pieces of patterned etched glass and colored glass, as well as a colored glass panel of Zurich, another juxtaposition of the old and the new. A simple, Japanese paper lantern pendant light hangs in the stairwell.

Upstairs, there are two smaller bedrooms and a master bedroom. The home had originally been a two-room, one-story house. When owners added a second floor around 1850, they also redesigned the front facade in the Italianate style.

In the front bedroom, Woods found evidence of the home's former configuration. To make the ceiling higher in this room, Woods raised it in the area where there had



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Woods uses one of the home's secondary bedrooms for his study.

been an attic. The room is spacious, with a walk-in closet and a smaller closet (Woods calls them "his" and "hers" closets, with the "hers" being the bigger one). For Woods, it serves as a study, with a large L-shaped desk on one side. On one wall over this workspace hangs a signed picture of one of the study models of Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, who was Woods' instructor when he studied at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology.

The back bedroom upstairs has a great deal of natural light because of its large windows that overlook the bluestone patio with a fountain below. There is also a view of the adjacent back yard, which Woods' neighbor maintains as a wooded landscape.

Woods notes that a good deal of the work he did is not visible. In addition to the plumbing, electrical work and heating that he redid, he turned the basement into usable space. With the help of six college-aged workers, Woods dug out two feet of earth, loading it into buckets

and out through the front basement window into a dump truck. He then poured a concrete floor himself. He also dug out the crawl space and put in stairs and a door to the outside so that he could take his yard equipment in and out easily.

HISTORIC MARKER

Woods' home bears a newly designed historic marker that has not only the seal of the Schenectady County Historical Society, but also The Stockade Association.

Woods is inspired and influenced by the work of Swiss-born architect Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, who was known as "Le Corbusier." The architect, urban planner, artist, writer and furniture designer was famous for his contributions to modern architecture and dedication to improving life for the residents of crowded urban areas. It seems Woods has sought to do the same with the homes that he has renovated in the Stockade. Of his latest work, Woods said, "It's a nice quiet sanctum in the inner city."