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by Andrea E. McHugh

Past, Present, Future

A Tiverton couple turned a neglected property into a creative sanctuary



Daniel Heyman, a teacher at RISD, and Vincent Renou, a ceramist and bilingual teacher at both the Wheeler School and Rhode Island College, weren't unlike many New England house hunters when they began searching for an old home filled with character and charm. Having spent 19 years restoring a coveted 19th-century brick row house in Philadelphia's historic district, the two hardly back away from a challenge. So when they feasted their eyes upon an outdated, poorly laid out, small 19th-century farmhouse in Tiverton with a "depressing, dark and awkward kitchen," a pair of defunct fireplaces, a heinous odor throughout and

The 1848 house was rebuilt to retain the charm of the farmhouse it had once been, while being more functional and energy-efficient

spaces that were "cramped and unpleasant in all respects," the couple had one reaction: bring it on.

"If you looked out the windows, you had the most amazing views, and we started to imagine living in this exciting spot. The house, as David, our realtor, said, wasn't





ugly, it just hadn't been loved in many, many years," recalls Vincent. Completely engulfed in weeds and overgrown trees, the house spoke to them when they saw the protected open farmland on one side and a protected wilderness area stretching 36 acres to the Sakonnet River directly behind the property. And the old wooden barn on site would eventually be perfect for the studio they always hoped to share.

"Let's just say a project of this kind, unless you truly are independently wealthy, requires some steady nerves as well as faith in what you are doing," concedes Daniel. "It also requires a lot of flexible and creative thinking – how can we make this happen? How are we going to ignore all the nay-sayers who think we are crazy?"

The two found a match in Shawn Harris at Sixteen On Center, a local design-build firm with deep roots in Tiverton. "He has a bright and creative mind and a willingness not just to work with us, but to really take our ideas seriously as partners in the design

process of this project," says the couple, who worked with the firm to reimagine the whole home, described in its original condition as "cramped and dirty and un-functional," while paying homage to its past. The team redesigned the kitchen as a functional galley that the two avid cooks could utilize simultaneously. Built in 1848 by retired New Bedford whaling captain Henry Fayles King, the house now has two full bathrooms, three bedrooms (one is used as a TV room and study while the master suite and walk-in closets offer wall-to-wall carpeting and a second-floor covered balcony), a laundry room, a small dining area, a large living room with a wood stove, an entry way with a slate floor, a wooden terrace and a screened-in porch.

"We were very strict about preserving the nature of the house as a home with 170 years of history," says Vincent. "We wanted to keep all of the windows we could and remove layers of linoleum tiles and carpet that hid what we hoped were gorgeous wood

floors. We wanted to keep the original interior doors, but the exterior ones were neither pretty nor well-functioning. And most importantly, we wanted the façade to still feel like an 1848 farmhouse that had now, at long last, been loved back to life." They also wanted a home that was as energy efficient as possible, and were adamant about supplying their own electricity through solar panels.

Today, the couple love the place they call home. "Tiverton reminds us both of rural France, particularly Brittany where we were married and have been visiting for many decades. The combination of farms and sea, rocks, woods and fields, dotted with charming stone and wood houses, there is something Brittany-like in the south coast that makes us both feel quite at home," says Daniel. "We love the closeness to the water, the beach is just a few minutes away and we can go after work for a swim in the warm weather and for a walk at other times of the year."