

# Saving a neighbor

This owner never dreamed as a child that the decaying mansion next door in Somerville, New Jersey, would be her destiny

GROWING UP IN A 19TH century home that needed constant repair, realtor Helena Mitchell swore she would never raise her children in an old house. Now she says, "Never say never." The three-story Victorian she shares today with her husband and four children dates back to the year Edison invented the light bulb—and it's right next door to her childhood home in Somerville.

Mitchell's return to her roots began in 1983, when she received a frantic call from her mother. The grand mansion with multiple gables next door was in danger of being bought by developers for demolition, and she wanted someone to come to the rescue.

She agreed that the historic integrity of the street shouldn't be destroyed by a teardown. She had never been inside the ornately designed residence, built in 1880 for a tycoon named J. Harper Smith. But its towers, stained-glass windows and wraparound porch had often caught her attention.

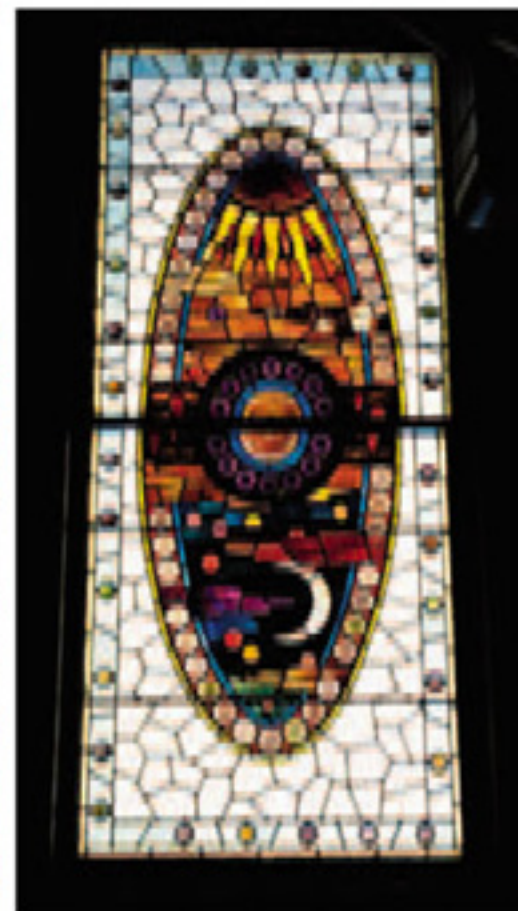
Mitchell and her husband Thompson, a software developer who is a member of the borough council, were not planning to purchase a house. But they decided to take a peek inside the 15-room house anyway.

"It rained the day of our walk-through," Mitchell remembers. "We needed umbrellas, even indoors."

What they saw further dampened their spirits. Water damage from leaks in the roof reached all the way down to the first floor. Years of dankness had eroded woodwork, plaster and



For Helena Mitchell, the challenge of rescuing this 1880 home began with a telephone call from Mom.



A circular breakfast nook, left, has six bay windows, installed in 1885. Stained-glass is found throughout the home. A celestial motif and four matching window panels capture light from the upper landing.

molding. Windows were broken and boarded, and a thick layer of dog and cat hair covered every surface.

“There had been boarders living in the house and they’d trashed it,” Thompson Mitchell recalls. “There was graffiti all over the walls upstairs—it was like walking through a subway station.”

Despite its state of disrepair, Helena fell in love with the home’s potential. “She called it her dream house,” says Thompson. The couple decided to take on the challenge of renovating the home, and a loan from Helena’s mom helped them purchase it for \$138,900, outbidding the developers.

“I went through about 60 contractors to find the most talented,” Helena recalls. When she did, restoration began immediately. First, the slate roof and all the windows





Designed by Horace Trumbauer in 1898, the library features a mahogany mantel with a tapestry above and a three-side bay window.

on the second and third floors were replaced. A new parquet wood floor was installed in the parlor, gas chandeliers and sconces were wired for electricity, and plaster and woodwork was either repaired or replaced.

As the work progressed, the Mitchells learned more about their acquisition. Original owner Smith had owned the nearby Raritan Woolen Mills, which made blankets for the Army in the Civil War and World War I. An old newspaper clipping revealed that Smith had added the circular six-bay window in the dining room in 1885, and descendants of later owners furnished photos that helped solve

other mysteries.

It took 10 years and what the Mitchells call “a small fortune” before the family moved into the mansion, and another six years before the restoration was complete. But today, crystal chandeliers reflect light from white marble tiles in the broad entrance hall, Helena’s favorite space. Archways featuring cherry columns and intricate woodwork in a combination of cherry, mahogany and walnut mark doorways to the library, parlor and dining room. A grand walnut staircase stretches from an alcove off the hall to a midpoint landing, where soft light shines through four sepia

glass windows.

Stained-glass masterpieces adorn the first floor. Three Tiffany landscapes dominate a bay window in the entrance hall, and a colored pane in the front door depicts a pre-Raphaelite lady. In the library, small decorative windows feature birds and plants in shades of red, blue and green, and fabric wallpaper with a medieval theme shows mounted knights.

The Smith mansion is listed on the state and national registers of historic places, and the Mitchells open its first floor annually for a public tour. The once-endangered giant next door now feels like home. ☐