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RICHARD LEO JOHNSON

Condo Maximum

A creative partnership pairs elegance with efficiency in a renovated downtown condominium. ***Andrea Goto*** tours a small-scale space with grand designs. PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD LEO JOHNSON

ALTHOUGH VISIONS OF VAST SQUARE FOOTAGE may dance in the heads of some homeowners, some of us prefer smaller-scale living. It's a little bit like driving a Prius when you can afford an Escalade: a conscious lifestyle choice. When faced with the option to "go big or go home," Internet developer Will Miller chose the latter, renovating a 1,200 square-foot condo with an archiphile's eye for small-space innovation and historical authenticity.

Will was born and raised in South Carolina but had been living in Washington, D.C., for many years when he decided to return to his Southern roots in 2011.

"I was looking for a temporary place in Savannah until I could find 'the' place," Will recalls.

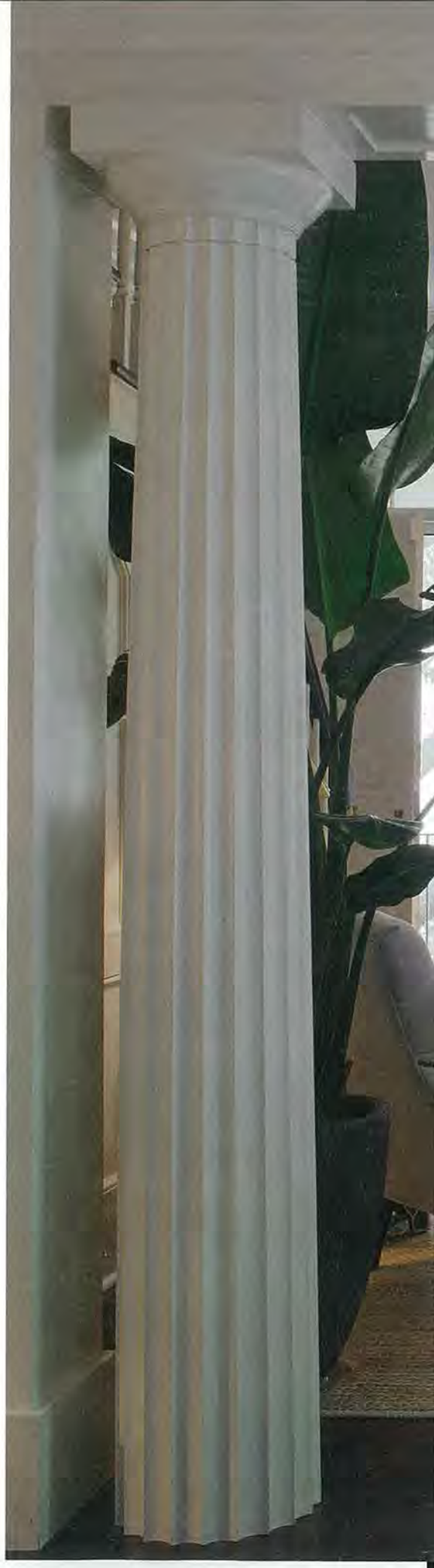
Instead, he stumbled upon an 1850s Greek revival townhouse that had been renovated into a condo. The rear carriage house and basement level functioned as separate apartments, leaving the top two floors as the main residence. There, original hardwood floors already shone like chocolate glaze, and the kitchen boasted sleek marble countertops and a handsome gray slate tile floor that carried over into the finished bathrooms. Otherwise, Will saw the space as bland, its character choked by an overly modern aesthetic and builder-grade details.

"It gave me something that I could do a little work on without a whole gut renovation," he says.

THE MILLER STATS

Owner: Will Miller
Year built: 1853
Year purchased: 2011
Square footage: 1,200
Accommodations: 2 bedrooms, 2 baths
Time to complete: 6 months

GIVE IT FOCUS. Perhaps the most stunning transformation was the addition of a grand column screen between the living and dining rooms, providing a much-needed focal point. "The previous opening was actually wider," Will adds. "It was just too broad of an opening and it felt like a condo. It didn't have character to it at all." Other thresholds throughout the house underwent subtler facelifts. "The space between the kitchen and the dining room was just a drywall opening with nothing really special about it," architect Michael Franck says. "We added some millwork to make it more reminiscent of the period."



LIVING SMALL

With the help of architect Michael Franck of Franck and Lohsen Architects in D.C., Will began to transform the condo by replacing hollow-core doors and brushed nickel hardware with period detailing. Solid wood doors, antique brass hardware and historical light fixtures allowed him to create an authentic and adaptable space where most rooms serve double-duty.

"A big part of Will's desire is to live small and be able to experience other things in life," Michael explains.

A testament to his travels, Will's ample collection of vintage Chinese exports and antique Grand Tour objects are now skillfully

Some design elements such as Greek revival columns and mantles "ratcheted the look up a bit" from the structure's working-class roots—but why not have a little fun with the project?

MAKE IT WORK. "In a place this small, it doesn't make sense to have any room dedicated to one thing," explains Will, who uses the dining room for meals, conversation, small-scale entertaining and study. An antique Swedish armchair and George II period sofa provide a comfortable respite around a neoclassical marble-top table. Michael replaced the larger, modern mantelpieces with smaller ones consistent with the scale and style of the Greek revival period. Linen, wool upholstery, jute rugs, a buttery leather chair and natural-fiber curtains soften the formality of the space.

placed throughout the space. But the primary focus of the renovation was to honor the home's history and circumvent its fate as an anywhere-in-America condo.

"When they gutted the house, they ripped the soul out of it," Michael laments. "We came in and we understood what was here, learned the architecture and honored that 1850 Greek revival period."

Michael admits that some design elements such as Greek revival columns and mantles "ratcheted the look up a bit" from the structure's working-class roots—but why not have a little fun with the project?

"I think the house has a great soul now," he enthuses.

Will, who has decided to call the once-temporary space home, echoes Michael's enthusiasm.

"The classical and traditional architectural work really changes this place," he says with pride. "When I'm no longer here, this is going to live on." ■

LET IT SHINE. Unlike many historic town homes, Will's is blessed with only one shared wall, which means that light can flood in on three sides. To maximize this natural luminescence, Michael made several key renovations. In the dining room, he changed the thickness of the mullions—which also kept them commensurate with the era. Upstairs, he added a full-light door off the master bedroom, allowing access to the upper garden terrace and giving way to a romantic view.

"The classical and traditional architectural work really changes this place," Will says with pride. "When I'm no longer here, this is going to live on."

LET IT GROW. When he resuscitated the abandoned dust bowl that was the 200-square-foot exterior courtyard, Will looked no further than the garden's historic wall. He picked up rich browns, grays and greens in the brick and used them as accents throughout the refurbished outdoor area. A Baroque zinc mirror, a deep blue ceramic garden seat and a bright-white gryphon pop against nature's hues, as do the custom oyster pavers. The existing covered terrace was painted and stately multi-colored tieback drapes were hung to bring the exterior colors together and control the eye, framing the best views.

KEEP IT SIMPLE. Serene gray walls throughout the home brighten the rooms and tie them together, serving as an ideal canvas to showcase Will's collection of antique furniture and souvenirs. For instance, the front bedroom displays a series of brown leather sketchbooks, antique mirrors, and a study of Brooklyn by Daniel Chester French that sits atop an impeccably preserved 1850s Biedermeir desk. Few items are anchored. "Will moves things around," explains Michael. "If (the aesthetic) is consistent, you can do that."

THE MILLER REFERRALS

Architects/planners: Michael Franck, Franck and Lohsen Architects
Interior designers: Will Miller and Michael Franck
Contractor/builder: Robert Szychowski, Cottage Industry LLC
Paint/wallpaper: Classic Grey from Benjamin Moore on interior walls; Dove White from Benjamin Moore on interior millwork
Painter: Tommy George
Lighting: Circa Lighting
Landscape/hardscape design: Michael Franck and master gardener Carole Beason
Landscaper: Low Country Landscapes
Hardscape: Savannah Hardscapes, Elegant Earth, Mecox Gardens in Palm Beach, Yardistry wood panel fence, Ohio Flame firepit
Furniture: Outdoor chairs and cushions from Pier One, Fermob blue bistro table and chairs, owner's private collection of antique Grand Tour pieces
Accessories: Restoration Hardware, Dash and Albert, Serena and Lily, and owner's private collection of antique Grand Tour pieces
Art: Owner's private collection

Shell Shocked

A traditional Savannah surface is getting a clever reboot. ***Reilly Mesco*** discovers the truth behind the tabby. PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD LEO JOHNSON

WHEN IT COMES TO TABBY, people around here generally think of two things: striped cats and chunky ruins.

The latter are ubiquitous in these parts, harkening back to those first-generation English settlers who mixed lime, water, ash, sand and oyster shells to form stout and sturdy walls for their homes so that they could withstand the harsh coastal marsh environment. In these modern times, tabby is used less often for buildings and more for sidewalks and driveways. Still, tabby is far from a one-trick pony.

It's a departure from the standard cement of yore—now with variety of shell options and color choices, from serene buff to complement a beachy style, to a sleek seal gray that will suit more contemporary environs.

"You can start with that traditional type of product for an exterior wall," explains William Rhangos, co-owner of Savannah Hardscapes and its high-end division, Savannah Surfaces. "But if you're looking for a thinner product for an interior wall or a tile, that just comes down to using smaller shells—scallop versus oyster, for instance."

Savannah Surfaces now offers Old World Tabby, an updated version of the old stuff

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SHELL SHOCKED

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made by an artisan who lives near Brunswick. It's a departure from the standard cement of yore—now with variety of shell options and color choices, from serene buff to complement a beachy style, to a sleek seal gray that will suit more contemporary environs.

"We've actually done interior walls of both varieties, with thicker and thinner shells," Rhangos says. "One customer wanted a living room wall surfaced with thick shells turned sideways, so it was much more rustic in appearance with very formal trim to break it up. It ended up working really well."

Rhangos's team just completed an order for a tabby wall surrounding a fireplace in a Tybee Island home, and another customer chose tabby countertops in a beach house—demonstrating that, these days, everything old really is new again.

Old World Tabby, $8-11.50/square foot at Savannah Surfaces, 64 McDowell Circle, Hardeeville, S.C., 843-784-6060, savannahsurfaces.com ■

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