

Inhabit: Old logs get new life as cabins are restored into Va. weekend retreat

By Deborah K. Dietsch, Published: August 26, 2011



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View Photo Gallery — A tollkeeper's log cabin, slave quarters and a clapboard shed have been reborn in the shadow of Old Rag Mountain. [2]

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Once derelict and threatened with demolition, a toll keeper's log cabin, slave quarters and clapboard shed have been reborn in the shadow of Old Rag Mountain.

The pieced-together home outside Sperryville, Va., was a labor of love for District real estate developer Joe Svatos. He spent nearly four years overseeing the transport, assembly and renovation of the small buildings into a weekend retreat for himself and his guests.

On approach, the home's rustic timbers and chinking belie two-story rooms outfitted with all the comforts of modern living. Up-to-date bathrooms and kitchen, central air-conditioning, heated floors and radio-frequency lighting are inserted into the structures without detracting from their original rough-hewn beauty.

“The design is all about creative tension between the old and the new,” says Svatos, who oversees acquisitions and large commercial projects for the Akridge development firm. “The sense of history is preserved, but the interiors are treated in a contemporary way.”

The oldest part of the house is a tiny log cabin now used as a cozy sitting room with leather armchairs pulled up to a massive stone fireplace. Blackened in places, the worn, axe-gouged timbers lining the walls attest to centuries of habitation.

The saddle-notched corners and hand-forged nails are construction techniques from the 1790s. The original owner of the home was likely a toll taker on the Old Sperryville Pike, which extends past the property.

In the mid-1800s, the cabin was expanded with a “modern” addition built of sawn wood framing. The structure’s ground floor now functions as a dining space with a new wet bar and powder room. Its second level, still bearing the original pine floor boards, provides just enough space for a study and a bathroom. Visible in the wood-slatted ceiling are remnants of a tin roof.

Svatos, who bought the 200-acre property in 2004, was initially unaware of the structures’ provenance and considered tearing them down. “I thought it was just a shack,” he says of the 1790s cabin. “It was covered in siding and pretty creepy on the inside. You had no idea what you would find in there.”

Once the cladding was removed to expose the log walls, he began thinking about ways of preserving and expanding the cabin and its addition. A local newspaper ad led him to buy a complementary log cabin in 2007 from Timothy Robinson of Heartland Restorations in Leon, Va.

Local historians said that structure, originally built in the mid-1800s on the Mount Joy Farm in Howard County, Md., may have been used to house slaves. “That piqued my curiosity,” the developer says.

Slated for demolition to make way for a subdivision, the slave cabin had already been dismantled by the time Svatos bought it. Robinson, a specialist in saving and resurrecting log buildings, had carefully labeled each of the weathered logs of chestnut before delivering the pieces to the developer for reassembly.

“At first I thought it would be a stabilization project and I would just preserve the buildings intact,” the homeowner says. “But then I realized I could create something much more usable. The process of joining and renovating the structures turned out to be far more complicated than I thought.”

So Svatos hired David Haresign of District-based Bonstra Haresign Architects, basing his decision on Haresign’s work for Akridge and contemporary designs, including the Capital One headquarters. Haresign’s preservation experience extends to adapting the District’s

1903 Gage School into condominiums, but he had never tackled log construction before.

“This is the most organic project I’ve ever worked on,” the architect says. “Nothing about the rough-hewn shell is precise. The logs are drop-dead gorgeous. And when they were stripped and cleaned, it was clear that they would be the focus of the design. We did not want to obscure them in any way.”

From the ground up

As construction slowly progressed, Haresign and builder Greg Foster of Timberbuilt Construction in Flint Hill, Va., faced numerous obstacles in rebuilding the old structures. They discovered that the supplied measurements for the slave cabin were off by a foot, so they had to reposition the building on the site. In doing so, they took advantage of the sloping terrain to insert an English basement under the living space for a guest suite and a room for the furnace, hot water heater and other equipment.

“One of the biggest challenges was stabilizing the cabins,” Foster says. “Wood moves and flexes back and forth, and we had to improve the integrity of the structures.” Some of the timber walls had bowed and were realigned with the help of wood blocking. A new foundation with concrete footings helped anchor the structures.

Because both of the cabins had low s, their second floors were removed to create living spaces rising to 20 and 25 feet. Steel rods and plates were then inserted into the logs behind the chinking to strengthen the walls and prevent them from shifting.

Leaving the logs exposed on both the exterior and interior posed the basic problem of insulating the structure. Foster’s solution was to insert strips of Styrofoam insulation into the spaces between the timbers and cover them with colored mortar simulating the original mud chinking. High-performance insulating panels were laid between the s and roofs, and soy-based insulation sprayed onto the walls of the cabin addition.

In places where pieces were missing, Foster filled them in with weathered timbers reclaimed from old buildings in the area. Flooring from the historic courthouse in Madison County, Va., now extends throughout the chestnut cabin. A 1800s corn crib from a nearby farm provided worn timbers for beams and gable paneling. Boards from an old barn in Woodstock, Va., were spliced together to create new doors with hardware forged by local blacksmiths to resemble early American locks and hinges.

Preserving ‘historic fabric’

By the time construction was completed in spring of this year, the L-shaped home had reached 2,480 square feet, just shy of the building size allowed by the conservation easement on the property. The former slave cabin was turned into a two-story, loft-style space with the kitchen left open to the living area and a mezzanine built over the kitchen for a bedroom.

On a recent tour of the house, Haresign says he worked hard to integrate new components into the irregular log shells. “The fundamental premise of the design grows from respect for the beautiful but humble historic fabric,” he says. “Each piece should be of its time, so wherever we inserted modern elements, we differentiated them from the historic fabric.”

For the most part, existing openings were left in place and fitted with new windows in frames scribed to fit the irregularities of the log walls. Large panes in the living area, dining room and dormer next to the study open the house to west-facing views of the nearby Hazel River and Old Rag Mountain.

Ductwork for heating and air-conditioning was extended under the floors and up to the second floor through cabinets to remain invisible. Ventilation grills were made from old wood to blend into the floors.

In adapting the old buildings for contemporary life, Haresign used modern materials to define the new spaces. Steel beams and balustrades line the sleeping loft and staircases. Newly milled oak planks enclose bathrooms, closets and cabinets. Glass floor panels and floor-to- windows mark a clear separation between the slave cabin and clapboard addition. Furnishings include mid-century modern classics, including a Noguchi coffee table, along with antiques.

As the house took shape, Svatos continued to hunt for old structures to recycle. In 2010, he bought the pieces of a 1840s corn crib from J.C. Woodworking in Sellersville, Pa., and had them reassembled a short distance away from the house. Now being renovated, the barnlike structure will provide a screened-in entertaining space with a built-in bar and a storage room for a tractor.

“Doing work like this is a slow, very methodical process,” Svatos says. “There is a lot of adaptation as you go along.” Next on his list? Adding a garden shed to the property by recycling a wooden outhouse.

Deborah K. Dietsch is a freelance writer.

1. http://www.washingtonpost.com/realestate/virginia-home-is-a-labor-of-love/2011/08/26/gIQAWFsLgJ_gallery.html

2. http://www.washingtonpost.com/realestate/virginia-home-is-a-labor-of-love/2011/08/26/gIQAWFsLgJ_gallery.html