

Victorian's Secret

This two-year-old Newport house looks like it has been on Old Beach Road for a century.

by Lisa L. Palmer

Photography by Kindra Clineff

THE IDEA OF BUILDING a landmark Victorian home was common a century ago, but designing and building a sprightly Victorian in the 21st century is something very special.

When Mark Horan purchased a lot located on Old Beach Road in Newport, Rhode Island, he wanted to build a period home that would pay homage to the neighborhood's style and history but would also suit a contemporary lifestyle. Ultimately, he chose to build an authentic neo-Victorian of his own making. Working with Rhode Island designer Ron Alose, Mark built a stylish home that is the very embodiment of the gracious and ornate Victorian age.

Mark's company, Horan Building Company, Inc., built the nearly 8,000-square-foot, three-story residence. Its bold French Second Empire style blends seamlessly into the fabric of its historic neighborhood of Victorian, Colonial, neo-Gothic, and Craftsman period homes.

Because the land is within the Historic District, the building plans had to be submitted to Newport's Historic District Commission for approval. "They were very skeptical," says Mark. "They had the notion we couldn't repeat something that had been done so well in the last century." The commission may have feared that a hulking Italianate villa or a gargantuan antebellum Southern mansion would emerge -- a not-uncommon outcome with other new projects this size.

Mark spent hours comparing Victorian architectural styles across the state. "Almost every detail in the home is customized," he says. He located building resources through the Internet and trade publications that catered to builders interested in period details. He also visited Preservation Society of Newport County homes to get ideas about style, design, and scale. "I've had the luxury of taking my time, since I am both the homeowner and the builder," says Mark.

Indeed, while most of Horan Building Company's projects are done within months, Mark's home took 1-1/2 years to complete.

"I wanted to make this house look like it has always been here -- like it's 100 years old," says Mark. And so it does. Most passersby would never guess that this land had been vacant since an early-1970s fire destroyed a home built in the 1880s.

The site plan and landscape design by Katherine Field and Associates keeps the formal front yard bordered with privet hedges, yew shrubs, and flowering perennials, and preserves a pair of 150-year-old beech trees in the more relaxed rear yard. The lawn extending under the trees creates a quiet, natural courtyard beneath a canopy of shade.

Striking color and spirited decoration are highlights of the jaunty yellow, red, and green exterior, which varies from surface to surface. "The colors and shapes we used were chosen for their rich tones and interesting forms," Mark explains. "We wanted to make the exterior work and look authentic."

Stepping into the home, you first notice the richly carved paneling and the sculptural, turned newel posts that support the foyer banister. Evoking both an old aesthetic and an up-to-date, refined lightness, the entrance hall provides a sense of place among layers of newly varnished moldings, playful paint colors, and decorative herringbone flooring. It hints at an earlier century without the heavy, sullen woodwork or the dark, moody rooms we often associate with Victorian homes.

To the right of the front door, looking out on the wide front porch, is the 14-by-16-foot dining room, one of the few rooms with purely classic Victorian styling. Ivory-painted wall paneling, extending more than six feet high, is capped with deep red garden wallpaper made by English designer Nina Campbell. Decorative plastered crown molding looks like a garland of flowers.

On the other side of the foyer is the 14-by-16-foot living room. To bring bright light into this room, Mark added a floor-to-ceiling bay window styled after a Victorian home he saw in Providence's Eastside. Opposite the cased opening is a fireplace where vintage seating pieces and golden fabrics provide warmth and intimacy to the space.

The kitchen is clearly the most modern room in the house -- a contemporary space with a roomy layout. The breakfast alcove and family room adjacent to the kitchen provide an open layout while maintaining Victorian details. The doors of the handcrafted cabinets are decorated with a variety of surfaces: some have seeded-glass front panels, others are constructed of solid wood, and the top-level cabinets are fitted with antique brass wire mesh panels. The professional cooking surface is topped with a hammered and aged custom-made copper hood vent, and the counters are made from Giallo-Veneziano granite.

At the top of the main stairway, on the second floor, a bridge landing lined with built-in shelves leads to the master bedroom and bathroom. The bedroom is arranged in two sections: an intimate sleeping and fireplace niche that extends to the bathroom and dressing area, and a spacious 10-foot bay window area with French doors that open to a private porch. Two other bedrooms, two baths, a storage room, and a laundry room complete the second-story layout. A cottage-style third floor, accessed via a rear stairway leading from the kitchen, contains four additional bedrooms, two baths, and a sitting area where a cushioned window seat provides a perch to watch the sun rise over the ocean.

"My goal was to make an original home," reflects Mark. "I've done this to satisfy myself, and something inside me. I think I've succeeded."

