

Win Perry: Restoring the Hopper House

The Challenge

“It must have been 1973. I had not been involved in the acquisition of the boyhood home of Edward Hopper, but I was worried about its decrepit condition and accelerating decay. I was oblivious to the fact that the Board was busy incorporating a not-for-profit foundation and struggling to meet the payments on a \$15,000 mortgage. (You could buy a house for \$18,000 in those days.) Knowing several Trustees, I naively said to one of them--I think it was William Hope—“Why have you owned the Hopper House for two years and yet have done nothing to repair it, at least to keep out the wind and rain?” Less than a month later I was told that I was on the Board of the Edward Hopper Landmark Preservation Foundation and was in charge of restoration of the house. Budget? ‘Well there isn’t any money, but do the best you can.’ Thus began a most exciting and rewarding adventure.”

Keeping Water Out

The first challenge was to fix the roof and gutters because in every rainstorm water was pouring in, bringing down plaster and causing floorboards to warp and swell, leaving wide open joints when they dried and shrank. Fortunately, one of the trustees knew Michael Delia, a multi-talented and eager young artist who needed work and a place to live. Michael agreed to repair and shingle the roof and do certain other basic repair tasks in return for a place to live. He built a kitchen to create an apartment on the second floor, and moved in with his wife Betsy. Al Turk, a Nyack roofing and sheetmetal contractor, donated the installation of the copper flashing and lining of the built-in gutters. I think we found money to pay the cost of the copper. Being an artist, Michael Delia was determined to have a studio in the attic where Edward Hopper had sketched his rowing machine and punching bag. Karl Radmer of Valley Cottage gave us insulating glass panels from his sliding doors that had turned cloudy and

needed to be replaced. Michael carried them to the roof and installed them as skylights for his new studio. The trustees agonized over this non-historic change, knowing that it would create the false impression that the skylights had been part of Hopper's attic studio, but they ultimately gave in to Delia's eager enthusiasm because they figured the skylights could be removed in the future without serious damage to the historic structure.

Heat

Simulation

Another part of the Hopper family heating system was a gas-fired water heater that stood between the sink and the stove in the kitchen. Besides doing normal duty to heat water for the faucets, it also fed a device in the corner of the bathroom called a coil pipe that helped heat the room. Doubtless very little heat reached the bathroom in the early morning from the basement furnace and the coil pipe helped offset the heat loss from a large window with single panes of colored glass. Since we were converting the old kitchen to a gallery room, the water heater had to be replaced by one in the basement and the coil pipe was removed.

Floors and Doors

John Cant and Win Perry removed the kitchen floor boards, repaired the beams, and reinstalled the floor boards, fitting them closer together and replacing one with a similar antique board.

During the interim between Marion Hopper's death and the purchase by our committee some young squatters had occupied the house and caused a fire when they plugged the old refrigerator into an outlet at the back of the center hall. Fortunately the firemen arrived before there was serious damage, but they had to break in through the front door. Two floorboards were left charred halfway through. Fortunately, Win's father had saved several antique boards left over from the restoration of his house and they were a perfect match. We installed them in place of the burned boards and challenge anyone to find which they are. We glued the broken lock stile of the old front door and it continues to serve through many years of heavy use. For the record, the large glass pane in the old door was originally

surrounded by small glass panes of about four by six inches square that were removed when the glass was replaced some years later.

Volunteers sanded the existing pine floors to show their natural grain and refinished them with polyurethane. Many carpet and linoleum tacks were removed.

Windows

Old double-hung windows are amazing and so were the early trustees. They are made of far better wood than is now available (the windows), and their simple design, improved over centuries of use, makes them easy to disassemble, repair and maintain. But the Hopper House windows were in trouble. Unpainted for decades, the putty was broken and loose, and the glass was falling out. By that time we had raised enough money to have the Kimmels install good metal storm windows that matched the traditional wood design. Using the new storm windows for security and protection from the weather, we took out the old double-hung sash and sent them home—one or two with each trustee and friend, along with careful written instructions on how to remove the glass, strip the remaining paint without breathing lead dust, make repairs, prime, reglaze and paint them. The trustees were terrific—artists, businessmen, homemakers, lawyers—none of them had done it before, but they all brought back window sash that were as good as new.

The small stained glass window sash in the powder room was contributed by Beth Gross, an Upper Nyack resident, who found it on a local curb on trash day and restored it for our use.

In-Kind Contributions

Of course we soon found that the old electrical system was totally inadequate and unsafe. We had to pay to have a new service and main panelboard installed by a licensed electrician, but the local union of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers generously brought their apprenticeship class to the house to install our branch circuits with outlets, lighting and switches. Much of the material was donated, including the

track lighting system which was made by Swivelier, a company that had a factory and warehouse in Rockland at the time. The apprentices were just learning, like the rest of us, and after they left we had to fix a few outlets that were wired backwards or not at all.

The carpenters union also pitched in. They replaced a rotted back vestibule with a larger addition to give us a first floor powder room and an alcove to store our folding chairs. The BOCES masonry class donated the foundation work. We found that each of the lumber yards in the county was reluctant to give lumber for fear of losing out in the tough competition in their business, but a happy solution occurred when four or five yards each agreed to give several hundred dollar's worth on the condition that their competitors do likewise.

Because the trustees were concerned about possible break-ins through the basement we replaced the rotting wood windows there with steel basement sash specially fabricated to fit the openings and donated by the manufacturer.

Floor Structure

In the basement of the original (south) part of the house we took a close look at the floor beams overhead as a clue to the age of the house. If they were hewn it would mean they were really old, before about 1825 when sawn beams became easily available from a local mill. If they were sawn, of course, that would be consistent with the reported date of 1858 for the construction of the house. What we found really surprised us—the beams were each hewn on three sides and sawn on the fourth! Apparently the frugal Victorian period builder had bought used timbers, perhaps from an old barn, and had them rip sawed down the middle to make two joists out of each big square timber. Most of these beams looked sound and adequate, but they were supported by a wood girder down the middle of the house that was clearly undersized for the loads that could be imposed by a large number of people on the first floor. In order to reinforce it without reducing the already low headroom we added a steel channel beam on each side and put bolts through the whole assembly to tie them together. We

replaced a wood post that rested on a stone with a steel column on a concrete footing. A concrete floor slab was later placed over the old earthen floor.

Lots of Volunteers

Many other people helped. A retired carpenter undertook to replace missing pieces of the delicate supports for the front porch roof, while a boy scout replaced some of the porch floorboards. A group of volunteers pruned back the old wisteria vine that was climbing the front of the house, weaving through the shutters, and trying to pry off siding boards. It had even crossed Broadway on the utility wires. We devised a wire trellis bracketed off the front of the porch so we could keep it away from the house but still enjoy its flowers and shade. With its powerful ancient root system it still needs to be pruned several times each year.

Many evening and weekend work parties of trustees and friends patched plaster, sanded and varnished the floors, and did other interior finish work. Typical of the volunteer spirit was Joe Diamond, Upper Nyack businessman, who carefully replaced missing plaster in the former living room, doing a trade that was new to him.

Higher Education

With the fundamental repairs in place, the house urgently needed a paint job. Philip Fey, Dean of Continuing Education at Rockland Community College arranged for the college to offer a course called "Caring for an Old House". The course was taught by a senior man in the college's maintenance department. He, the students, and Dean Fey himself, accomplished many remaining repairs, a complete exterior paint job, and some of the interior painting. The paint was contributed by the Benjamin Moore Company. One late-evening session involved cleaning the almost-black ceiling of the former dining room. Every washing with Spic-N-Span made it a couple of shades lighter and we were amazed to see it turn to a beautiful golden honey color after repeated scrubblings.

The Grounds

The initial cleanup of the grounds was enthusiastically undertaken by the Nyack High School Environmental Club and then the Rotary Club of Nyack made the landscaping of the site a club project. Club member and landscape architect Edward Gaudy drew a plan featuring alternating groups of shrubbery and sections of fencing to enclose the back yard. Rotary members participated in work parties to install the fence, rake the yards, and plant. The rhododendrons were donated by Jefferson Weishaar from his own property. Older members of the club, including A.D. McLeod Sr. and A.W.Rittershausen, both about 90, faithfully showed up to work along with the younger ones. The next year when Robert Lewis became club president he had the club underwrite the construction of the round brick patio.

The trustees decided to hold concerts in the back yard so we borrowed planks that the Village of Nyack had used as forms for concrete curbs and constructed a platform in the northwest corner. Initially, lighting for concerts was simply clamp-on aluminum reflector lamps attached to trees and fed with extension cords. A grant enabled us to hire John Cant to install a flagstone path for access to the back yard. Some of the stones were salvaged from South Nyack sidewalks. Once when digging in the back yard, someone discovered a large underground brick cistern that had obviously been built to collect rainwater for washing and gardening. Such cisterns are common at old houses and there had been some dangerous cave-ins, so we filled ours in to prevent trouble.

Finished!

Throughout the restoration project, the Village of Nyack maintained a very helpful policy of benign neglect. We did not apply for a building permit, stretching the theory that we were only making repairs, and they never asked. They did not try to apply any requirements based on a change of use, such as would make the project practically impossible under today's codes. Nor did they raise the question whether the caretaker's apartment upstairs constituted a "mixed use" that would have triggered other onerous requirements. They simply took us off the tax rolls and left us alone. We

had the house ready for the first show, watercolors by local artist Edwin Dahlberg in May 1975, although a few things such as the front porch trim were still incomplete.

We never added up how much money we spent on the restoration, but it was probably less than the initial estimate of \$10,000. Donations of material and labor by businesses, organizations and individual volunteers were worth several times that amount. (For today's dollar add a zero and more.) I do know that we seldom had more than a few hundred dollars in the checking account and sometimes ordered work before we knew how we could pay for it. We accomplished the restoration on a shoestring through "sweat equity" and the generosity of the Nyack and Rockland community.

Winston C. Perry Jr., Past President

Edward Hopper Landmark Preservation Foundation