

Three-family in Jamaica Plain restored for sake of neighborhood

By Kathleen Howley
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Domenic Calautti didn't like the look of a long-neglected three-family Victorian two doors away from his home in the Parkside area of Jamaica Plain.

"It was bringing down the whole street. It had been rundown for years," said Calautti, 43. So, in the autumn of 1997 Calautti bought the Sylvia Street property and began a year-long project to change it, inside and out.

"Neighbors have stopped me on the street to thank me for doing it. Fixing up this one house is having a ripple effect in the neighborhood," he said.

Calautti turned the three apartments into three condominiums. In the last few months, two have sold.

The remaining unit, on the second floor, is listed for \$192,000 with John Macdonald of Innovative Moves Real Estate in Jamaica Plain.

It has a living room with a rounded turret area, an at-home office wired with a computer-dedicated line, a dining room with a High Victorian mantelpiece, a butler's pantry, a kitchen with a wooden floor, two bedrooms, and a full bath.

All of the wood floors – some oak, some pine, one Douglas fir – have been sanded and restained in a light shade. Some of them have blemishes that Ca-

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / PAT GREENHOUSE

Domenic Calautti and wife, Mildred, leave Jamaica Plain Victorian they converted to three condos.

**Sylvia Street,
Jamaica Plain**

Price: \$192,000

Style: Victorian

Lot size: 1,304
square feet

Rooms: 6

Bedrooms: 2

Baths: 1

Sewer: Public

Year built: 1895

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Calautti crews couldn't get out. But, Calautti said it give the home its character.

"People who like old houses don't mind being reminded that they have a history," he said.

In the front hallway of the house, Calautti restored the oak staircase to the way it looked at the turn of the century.

That required taking it apart, stripping the banister and balusters, re-assembling it, and sealing it with two coats of polyurethane.

"It was almost black because of the old orange shellac that had been put over the wood. This is the way it originally looked. You can see the grain," he said.

The same goes for the mantel of the fireplace in the second-floor unit's dining room. It was never painted, Calautti said, but the old shellac had darkened over the years. Now, it's restored to a light oak color.

On the lower part of the mantle there are two columns and, in the middle, a delicate carving of a Grecian urn. Above, there is a beveled glass mirror surrounded by two tiers of shelves, with delicate spindles.

"It's amazing the top part of the mantelpiece survived. In the 1950s, people were taking them off to make their homes look more modern. This one is in perfect condition," Calautti said.

The dining room also has an oak chair railing and, like the living room, it has its original ceiling medallion, made of sculpted plaster.

In the kitchen, all the walls have tongue-in-groove wainscoting that appears to be made of walnut. Calautti said that when he bought the house, the wood was covered with yellow linoleum.

"The worst part about removing it was getting all the glue off without damaging the wood. The glue they used was heavy-duty," he said.

Of course, turn-of-the-century kitchens did not have cabinets. And, modern home buyers tend to insist on

such luxuries. So Calautti turned the extra-large pantry into a laundry room and installed Shaker-style cabinets – maple with a cherry stain.

All of the windows have old-fashioned blinds with two-inch wooden slates. They look old, but actually they're new. Calautti matched the color of the wooden slates to the hue of the wood on the floors of each room.

When complementing Calautti on the quality of his work, don't use the word "re-hab." He pays as much attention to word choice as he does to the smallest Victorian detail on this 1895 house.

"I don't do rehabs. I do restorations. We don't gut a room and put up plasterboard. We restore the original horsehair plaster," said Calautti, a house painter turned small-project developer operating under the name Residential Interiors.

As an example of the level of his meticulousness, the exterior is painted with seven different colors that he chose for their similarity to authentic Victorian paints, he said. This is the third Boston home he has restored, and already he is working on the fourth – a mansion a few miles away on Walnut Street in Roxbury.

While the Sylvia Street project looks ready for the cover of a design magazine, there's still work to do in the surrounding Parkside neighborhood. Some sections of Jamaica Plain have experienced a revival and others, such as Pondsides, never fell out of favor, but the community that borders Franklin Park still has a bit of a neglected look to it. That doesn't discourage Calautti, who grew up nearby on Paul Gore Street.

"I've had a lot of people tell me, 'You're putting too much into this house.' But I live here and I know the potential of this neighborhood," he said.

Calautti said that neighborhoods are turned around the same way they become run-down – one house at a time.

"The way it works is, I fix up my house, and that encourages the guy next door to fix up his. And, if he doesn't do it on his own, I offer to help him out," Calautti said.