New Life Given to Rochester Landmark

ROCHESTER, NY - In 1855, when Patrick Barry chose to build an Italian-style villa at 692 Mt. Hope Avenue, the astute businessman not only selected an architecturally designed that was all the rage for well-heeled Victorians, but one that was practical as well. From the mansion’s third-story octagonal tower, Barry could look out in every direction over the 650-acre botanical nursery he had founded and that was, at the time, the continent’s largest supplier of trees and shrubs.

Today, as part of the newly restored residence for University of Rochester Provost Ralph Kuncl and his wife Nancy Kuncl, that same tower is once again treating the house’s residents and their visitors to delightful views.

Within weeks of moving in last November, the Kuncls began a tradition of sharing the historic house with groups from the university and the community, including trips to the tower to watch the downtown fireworks on New Year’s Eve and to enjoy views of the estate’s eight acres of perennial gardens later in the year.

But no one is more enchanted with the tiny rooftop room than the Kuncl’s three-year-old granddaughter, who dons special attire before ascending the stairs.

Largely shuttered for the last nine years, the Patrick Barry House is again full of both life and light. While painstakingly protecting the historic integrity of the Rochester landmark, the Kuncls have rejuvenated the interior with a less-is-more approach. They replaced dark floral wallpaper with a yellow color scheme in the main parlor, highlighting the original intricately painted plaster reliefs on the 13-foot ceilings. Heavy draperies came down, allowing light to stream through the grand arched windows, and wall to wall carpet was stripped away to reflect the beauty of hardwood flooring. The new kitchen, equipped for the demands of entertaining, was the touch that finally made the house feel like a home, instead of a house museum. Virtually all of the work was completed by University of Rochester craftsmen.

Designed by Gervase Wheeler, a prominent nineteenth-century English architect, the rose brick and limestone mansion is considered one of the best examples of the Victorian Italian villa style in the country. It was designated a city landmark in 1970 and is part of the Mt. Hope/Highland Avenue Historic District that is listed on the federal, state, and local levels.

The 16-room mansion boasts eight carved marble fireplaces, 11-foot faux-grained doors, original gas chandeliers now wired for electricity, and numerous collections of portraits, furniture, silver, dishes, glassware, and linens from the Barry family. The grounds, which include a new of rare specimen trees are a living legacy of the Elmhirst and Barry Nurseries.

It is the holistic preservation of the home and its contents that makes the Patrick Barry House the historic landmark it is, which was possible because of its long-term residence by Harriette Barry Letchiur during her 91 years of life and the active stewardship by the university.

The house was given to the university in 1962 by descendents of Patrick Barry. It initially served as the residence of former university President Robert L. Sproull, and from 1984 to 1999 was the home of former Provost Brian Thompson and his family. The provost’s wife Joyce Thompson, designed and planted the extensive perennial gardens on the grounds and the Thompson family endowed the gardens to ensure their maintenance. On June 30, 2008, the gardens were officially dedicated to Joyce Thompson in her memory.

For additional images of the Patrick Barry House, visit www.rochester.edu/currents/V36/V36N11/barry_house/index.html.

The interior of the Patrick Barry House has been carefully restored to rejuvenate it while maintaining historic integrity.