

Lamorinda OUR HOMES

Lamorinda Weekly Volume 09 Issue 1 Wednesday, March 11, 2015



Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for March ...read on page D12

Orinda's Old Yellow House

Everything old is new

By Cathy Dausman



The Old Yellow House, now fully restored

Photo Cathy Dausman

A walk through James Wright's now fully restored Old Yellow House is like taking a walk through history. In the past three years, the architect has transformed his 1890 two-story house into 2,050 feet of what he calls "the most comfortable building" that he has ever worked in or lived.

Currently, he's doing both. Wright estimates he sank an additional \$500,000 into remodeling, renovations and upgrades; that figure doesn't include the estimated two-and-a-half years of full-time labor he dedicated to the project.

As seen from the street, the Old Yellow House is a modest affair, restored to its original golden yellow exterior paint. Original windowpanes are still in place, but a closer look reveals awning and rooftop solar panels, and hints at technology backing the remodel. Interior and exterior materials were meticulously preserved, restored or recycled.

With the exception of computers and necessary code upgrades, very little in the house is new, thanks to what Wright calls his dedication to "thrif, salvage and second-hand stores." The man is a huge fan of Habitat

for Humanity's ReStore and Urban Ore Inc. Street-side entry includes dual front doors, which Wright explains were part of the caste system of the time. Laborers used the right side door, white-collar workers the left. Both lower and main levels can be accessed by ramps.

The main floor consists of three rooms – a parlor housing an upright piano and Victrola, a bedroom and a kitchen. The kitchen was enlarged to accommodate a conference table, and Wright added a main floor bathroom to the rear of the house.

History surrounds those climbing the staircase to the second floor – Wright papered the walls with 1930s- and 1940s-era newspapers reclaimed from the house. The years surrounding World War II come alive as you climb the wooden treads to the upper level, which holds four furnished bedrooms and a full bath tucked under the roofline.

"Roofline" is the operative word on the second floor. Wright has left the 8-foot-9-inch ceiling beams fully exposed, and the view extends to the rafters. The skylights admit enough natural light that indoor photography is possible without a flash.

Wright loves gazing up at the view from his bed late at night when the moon is out. "It feels as if I'm in a spaceship," he confides. Much of the interior wood is reclaimed old-growth redwood and Douglas fir. Wall studs align perfectly with each roof rafter – a style Wright calls "optimized framing." The roof and walls are lined with radiant barrier plywood foil, and the west-facing roof holds a series of ventilated, photovoltaic thermal skylights.

... continued on page D4