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# Home style

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## Remaking *a classic*

Alton architect  
puts stamp  
on historic  
Post House



ARCHITECT MICHAEL LEFFERSON USES A KEEN EYE AND ECLECTIC DESIGN STYLE TO TURN A HISTORIC ALTON BUILDING INTO HIS COMFORTABLE SHOWPLACE



Photo courtesy of Michael Lefferson

Putting a *STAMP* on the Post House



PHOTOS BY MARGIE M. BARNES

Above: Michael Lefferson, president of Lefferson and Associates Inc. in Alton, smiles at the staircase of his newly-remodeled 1838 home, known as the Post House. Left: Lefferson spent seven months doing extensive projects within, including turning a second-floor space into a media room for his family.

**B**lending pre-Civil War construction with a contemporary lifestyle, seamlessly merging the old with the new and making it work aesthetically, functionally and fabulously is not a task for the faint of heart. But it can be done.

Michael and Cindy Lefferson proved it when they purchased what is known as the Post House in Alton, and the feat is a fete accompli.

As president of Lefferson & Associates Inc., an Alton firm providing architectural and interior design services, Michael Lefferson has a bit of an edge. In his work, he applies strong design principals to create unique personal and professional styles, depending on the application. He used that same keen eye and natural ability to spot what works and what doesn't in his own home.

The couple took about seven months to transform the Greek Revival Parthenon-style house, built in 1838 by William Post and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980, into a comfortable showpiece. Post was twice mayor of Alton, in addition to being involved in many business enterprises and endeavors, including captain of the steamboat Columbus.

And the Post House is not lacking in socially historical significance either. Democratic Sen. Stephen A. Douglas, of Lincoln-Douglas debates fame, was a friend of the Post family, who is said to have entertained the "Little Giant" in the house while he was in town for the seventh debate, held in Alton in October 1858.

"We considered this renovation to be a commitment to the long-term history of Alton," Lefferson said. "It's a very important piece of that heritage."

## OPENING POSSIBILITIES

He acted as his own general contractor and used local craftsman and contractors almost exclusively.

Opening up the entry hall was a must as far as Lefferson was concerned. What was a narrow doorway was widened, which also opened up the adjacent window to the parlor and exposed the newel post and elegant wooden staircase.

A wooden compass was inlaid in the foyer floor to emphasize Post's riverboat captain roots. Lefferson's nostalgic Mississippi Lime Co. collection of river-related lithographs, purchased several years ago, adorn the walls, providing a backdrop for the baby grand piano

and the 1930s Barcelona chairs. They were designed for the German Pavilion International Exposition in Barcelona, Spain. Also in the room are a Knoll 1969 square Andre table and a Hickory Chair Co. sofa, custom-made to fit the depth of the space. A "Tree of Life" Swarovski crystal chandelier illuminates the room.

**At the bottom of the staircase, Michael Lefferson had a wooden compass laid into the floor to pay tribute to William Post, a steamboat captain, the builder of the house.**

— Photo by MARGIE. M BARNES

The 9-foot windows at the front of the house at one time opened up entirely as walkouts to the porch — New Orleans fashion. Other downstairs windows are more than 6 feet tall and surrounded by unusual tapered window casings in a Parthenon style. Fabric window shadings were added to filter the light when lowered, but Lefferson said he most often likes to raise them to the top and let the natural light come through, with the wrap-around porch providing a muted shading of its own.

The kitchen serves as the heart of the home, nestled in one end of what Lefferson calls "the big room," formed after restructuring



of the center of the house, knocking out walls and moving the basement steps. The former three-room area now houses a large open space with a keep area, complete with a wood-burning fireplace, kitchen and casual dining area.

"In our previous homes, we've always had a formal dining room that didn't really get used

*continued on page 19*

# POST HOUSE

from page 17

very often," Lefferson said. "So we decided not to have one and really use more of our space."

Modern appliances in the kitchen make cooking a breeze. Cindy Lefferson spotted the countertops made of Oro Persa — an unusual species of granite — in a magazine and knew it was what they wanted. The granite's variegated golds, blues and browns unite the colors on the walls, coffee wash cabinets and hardware. Also by Knoll, a suspended glass Lunario table is surrounded by upholstered chairs where family and friends can visit in the keep area.

The house's two wood-burning fireplaces were constricted when it was purchased. The smoke chambers in both were totally rebuilt and made fully functional with absolute black, granite surrounds. Wooden floors throughout were refinished to a gleaming chestnut then topped with Oriental rugs in various patterns and shades, including Williamsburg reproductions, Iranian antique hand-woven runners and Karastan area rugs.

**Michael Lefferson said while many of the furniture collections and appointments are antiques, collectors items or one-of-a-kind pieces, he is always open for bargains, and it's not unusual to see a lamp or two that he found on sale at a discount store.**

number of years, accented by pieces specifically acquired for their new home.

The master suite has an environment of its own. Part of the original summer kitchen and carriage house — once separate structures that were joined to the main house around 1870 — the space provides the couple with a separate climate control zone for optimum comfort and efficiency.

"We can adjust the thermostat much cooler or warmer than the rest of the house, which saves in energy costs," Lefferson said.

The inverted ceiling with ambient lighting casts a calming effect in the bedroom; draperies along the walls give a cozy ambience. A glass door leads to a quiet, screened veranda — a nice spot for the Leffersons to enjoy morning coffee.

Twin French porcelain sink vessels adorn the large wooden cabinet that was originally built-in to the wall of the dining room, now

relocated to the master bathroom.

"We wanted to save the old cabinetry, and the master bath seemed like the perfect place," Lefferson said. "We use the upper section for storage and then added the plumbing and sinks in the 'buffet' half."

Using natural light whenever possible, yet maintaining total privacy, French-style doors separate bath and living areas featuring frosted glass set into the wooden panes. The 20-inch-thick walls subdue outside noises, hold in the warmth in the winter yet keep it cool in the summer. Radiant heating in the floor provides toasty warmth on cold winter mornings.

## MAINTAINING HISTORY

The age of the house is evident in some of the door-frames, where Lefferson said the historical authenticity was purposely maintained by leaving gouges the house achieved from being lived in and well loved.

"We could have easily smoothed out all the places where the walls are rough, but we thought it was nice to leave some of its original character," he said.

Whenever possible, original door hardware was cleaned and saved.

The house formerly had one 1950s full bath on the second floor and now has three and a half in all for more comfort and convenience, with modern fixtures and either marble or ceramic tile.

The house has virtually zero carpet. Lefferson said while many of the furniture



**TOP: Michael Lefferson does not think everything in an older house should scream "antique," therefore he mingles contemporary furniture and modern art in his home that is nearly 170 years old.**

**ABOVE: Oro Persa granite countertops make cooking in the updated kitchen a lot easier.**

collections and appointments are antiques, collectors items or one-of-a-kind pieces, he is always open for bargains, and it's not unusual to see a lamp or two that he found on sale at a discount store.

"If you shop around, you can find some things that look really nice, and they certainly don't have to cost a fortune," he said.

All new mechanical and electrical systems in the house leave no room for lack of power to illuminate the 114 canned lighting and other fixtures added to allow adjustment for virtually any type of mood lighting in every room of the house.

"Lighting and color are very important aspects of design," Lefferson said. "We all respond so much to light and the way it effects color."

The house has had a couple of renovations in the past. The brick addition in the rear was added in 1863, and after purchasing it in 1922, William Hancock essentially gutted the interior. His daughter, Pauline Roller, inherited it in the 1960s and lived in the house her entire life.

The Leffersons just added a 7-foot-wide, 10-foot-long back entryway, which provides room for hanging coats and entering the house with snow-covered shoes or wiping the

continued on page 22

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# LEFFERSON

from page 19

feet of the couples' cherished pooches, Talley and Martin.

"We were very careful to make the addition blend with the rest of the house," Lefferson said. "We felt it was necessary because we needed the extra space and garage."

The laundry room, a large garage and room for washing pets with a drain and separate porch complete the addition.

"We use the extra wash room for our dogs, but I could see it easily being used for a gardening or art room," Lefferson said.

Amazingly enough, in a house of this age, the basement was in good enough shape to actually finish a portion to form a workout area. It also allows Lefferson the first chance ever to display his collection of vintage Structo trucks in an 1870s bookcase relocated from its built-in spot on the main floor.

Part of the second floor was restructured to create appropriate rooms and to replace a portion of the old flooring. The original second-floor gun room is now a media utopia with a big-screen television and Bose sound system. One of Lefferson's favorite pieces in the house is the 1977 Burle olive wood cabinet accommodating some of the couple's books and collectibles on its highly lacquered shelves.

"The soft colors in the media room have a calming and relaxing effect for watching television and winding down in the evening," Lefferson said. "It's very serene."

The Leffersons gave the outside of the house a face lift and thorough painting of the pillars and trim. The upper frieze received a paint job that updated it yet mimicked an older looking finish. Large, thick limestone, taken from the bluffs along the Mississippi River, provides the main structure of the house, and the brick on the first addition was at one time painted and then allowed to weather, creating a European cottage look. Large, fluted Doric columns support the exterior front porch, accented with wrought iron railing and dentil moldings on the roof above. Outside gardens are in process.

"I like houses that just make you feel good," Lefferson said. "And this one is like that."

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