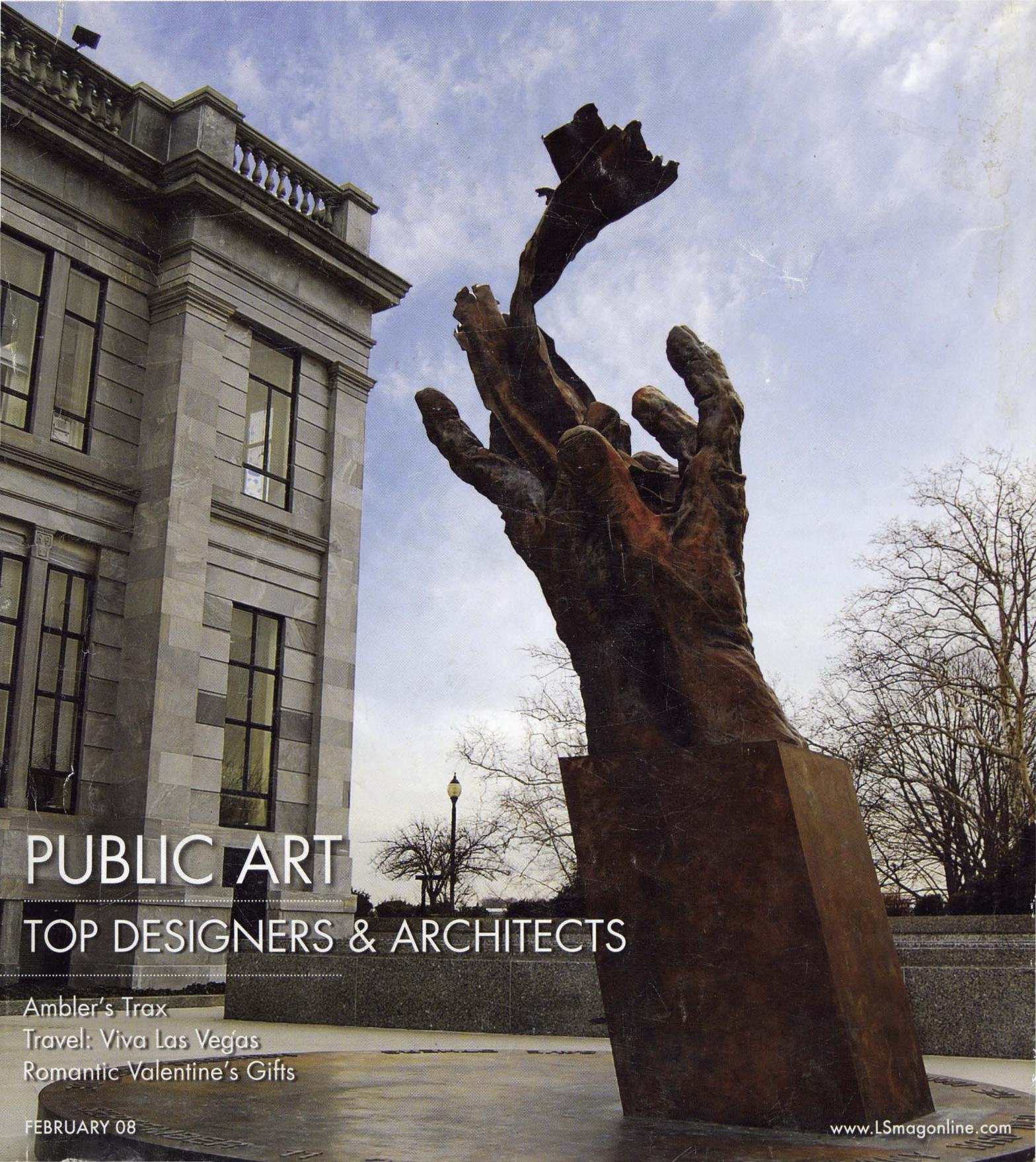


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Rising From the Ashes

Reclaiming a Nation's Past and a Family's Present. *By Susan Pevaroff Berschler*

Patricia Marian Cove | Interior Design
Chestnut Hill, PA | 215-248-3219
Cove-interiordesign@verizon.net

Traumatized, they stood on the curb as their worldly possessions—and two decades of family history—went up in smoke. For Hope Comisky, her husband Jeff Braff and their three children, that chilly March night in 2006 might as well have been yesterday. “It was horrible, just horrible,” she recalls vividly. “We stood outside as they were throwing things out of the window and putting out the fire. I think actually watching it happen was the worst part.” Though most of the 19th century, Federal-style Center City home and its furnishings succumbed to either the ravages of the electrical fire, or the smoke and ensuing water damage, miraculously Comisky was able to salvage irreplaceable family scrapbooks. “They were up against a wall in one of my daughter’s rooms,” she says. “The fire had spread out toward that side of the room but somehow missed the area where she kept the scrapbooks.” Holding those precious mementos in her hand—and appreciating the fact that the house had been empty at the time of the blaze—she took a deep breath and said: “Okay, we will all survive this.”

Surveying the wreckage, contractor Kevin Tuohy’s historically trained eye immediately processed tragedy into opportunity. Stripped to its fine, bare bones, this home could easily shed the ill effects of countless, historically incorrect structural alterations and reclaim its authentic Federal period status. First order of business: eliminating the auxiliary staircase,

a feature added when a previous dweller divided the house into three apartments and an owner’s unit. Though the segments of the house had long since been reconnected, the staircase remained; a monument to that particularly unsightly incarnation. “It just horrified my contractor,” laughs Comisky. “When he walked into the house, which was a total mess, he could visualize its former grandeur, but he could not get over the back steps. ‘Who put these in? Why are these here?’ he said.”

“Federal design calls for a big grand hallway, not a hallway full of staircases,” explained Tuohy of the architectural style adopted during the latter part of the 18th century by a young, newly independent America. “I told Hope that we could remove the staircase, walls and any other evidence of the home’s divided years and restore it to its original integrity.”

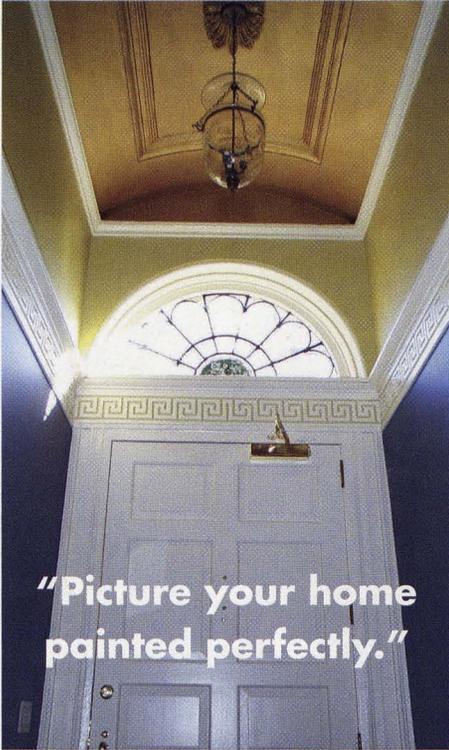
Recreating an environment that celebrates our patriotic, post-revolutionary past was a labor of love for interior designer Patricia Marian Cove. “My favorite projects integrate the elements of a bygone era into a context that supports a 21st century lifestyle,” explains this enthusiastic history buff. “We’re respecting our heritage, keeping a connection to a gracious, very elegant time, while adapting to the demands of the present.” For Cove, confronting the charred remains of the home’s interior was like a walk down bad memory lane. “It was pretty clear when I took a step inside the door that everything had to be redone from scratch,”

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says the designer, lamenting the scorched state of the work she completed 20 years ago. "We had to specify all new paint finishes, wall coverings, furniture and fabrics. Basically we redid the entire design."

More committed than ever to honoring the history of their newly renovated home, her clients instructed Cove to keep everything new looking old again. Only too happy to comply, Cove filled the common areas with authentic period details amid a color scheme reflecting the blues, golds and creams of the Federal era. Thomas Jefferson would approve. Eager to break ties—architectural as well as social and political—with their former oppressors, he and our other founding fathers purposely eschewed traditional English Gothic and chose to mimic a European neoclassical design style inspired by those other famous democracies—Greece and Rome. One can almost imagine Jefferson striding over the random-width pine floors and planting himself on the living room's heart shaped, shield backed chair as his cronies relaxed on the camel backed sofa. Surrounded by wallpaper from the Winterthur Museum's historic reproduction collection, the retired revolutionaries could warm themselves by the fire while gazing at the oval medallion above the mantle's fluted pilasters, or out the bay window through the asymmetric swag and jabot treatment with gathered top. "This home

is a tribute to a special time in our nation's history," enthuses Cove. "From the crown moldings with ball detail, to the beautiful fan shaped windows above the doors, there are so many fine points that capture the flavor of the time."

As designer and contractor recaptured the essence of yesterday, they were also able to focus on the needs of this couple and their children as they are today. Case in point: bedrooms designed to enchant little princesses are not exactly what 20-somethings would prefer if they had the choice. Once again turning adversity into advantage, Tuohy and Cove worked with Comisky's young adult children to create new bedrooms more appropriate to their current tastes. "This is not the same family that moved into this house 20 years ago. We've had a chance to reinvent and update to accommodate who they are today," notes Cove. Frou-frou flowers are gone. In their place: a sleek and sophisticated arts and crafts motif. "Rooms have a contemporary edge that the kids love."

Clearly, Hope Comisky would never have wished for these circumstances, but in the end, she is thrilled to have returned a home she has always loved to its former glory. "We've had a rare chance to really give back to a house that has given us so much happiness over these last 18 years. Now on to the next chapter." **IS**

Susan Pevaroff Berschler lives in Bryn Mawr, PA.