Grand Finale

Susan and Ronnie Mizell's crowning achievement

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The Mizells wanted a kitchen with a contemporary European feel; the design includes custom cabinetry|!!| stainless steel appliances|!!| honed marble countertops|!!| and Thomas O'Brien pendant light fixtures from Circa Lighting; the service area behind the kitchen (with original brick hearth) is now a sitting area; the pocket doors are reclaimed cypress|!!| and were purchased from Strip Ease and then dipped.

In the Lower Garden District sits an elegant grand dame of 19th century architecture. This antebellum townhouse style home, which the owners have traced back to 1857, but think may have existed earlier, is believed to have been part of the Livaudais plantation. Today, it is owned by Susan Mizell and her husband, Ronnie, who have lovingly restored it.

"I think a house is a living thing," says Susan, for whom the inspirational legacy of such a home includes not only the people who lived there, but the many workers and crafts people whose hands constructed it and ran it on a daily basis. "When I walked in and saw all the brick in this house was handmade, I thought about all those people who needed to be honored."

Ronnie had a similar revelation when he saw the worn corners of the wooden stairs leading to what was originally the second floor servants' wing. "You have to appreciate how many feet went in and out of there," he says. "A lot of lives have been here."

The Mizells began renovating properties in the late 1990s. Susan, a realtor and design enthusiast, and Ronnie, a hands-on restorationist, share a love of returning rundown historic structures to their former glory. Over the years, they've renewed both residential and commercial properties in the Lower Garden District and Irish Channel, where Ronnie's mother was born and raised.

In 2015, the Mizells were settled in a house they'd renovated as their family home in Old Metairie. But as empty-nesters, they found that a new adventure trumped the comfort of the familiar. The blighted condition of the Race Street house was a challenge that the couple couldn't resist.

Left: The living space, like the rest of the house, showcases old and new; the plaster medallion is original and the antique chandelier from Paris was purchased from Antiques de Provence on Royal Street; the two midcentury modern sofas opposite each other were inherited from Ronnie's family. Middle: Susan and Ronnie Mizell in the French Quarter style courtyard of their Lower Garden District Home; blue slate courtyard design, pool and landscaping by Kim Alvarez and Allan Basik. Right: The 19th century masonry double-galleried townhouse features lacy wrought iron columns and railings with bougainvillea; the front door is highlighted with a massive doorframe of carved cypress.

Left: the master bath includes an open curb-less shower, counters of aqua quartzite, honed limestone floors and a slipper tub with rooftop views; antique chandelier, from Shades of Light. Middle: A peek through the original roof hatch was enough to convince Ronnie that he wanted a roof deck overlooking downtown and the Mississippi River; architects Richard Albert and Leslie Raymond of Albert Architecture executed his vision. Right: The elegant curved staircase is original to the house; chandelier, La Belle Nouvelle Antiques.

"When I think about this house, it sort of seems like the culmination of our lives together, the grand finale, the crowning glory," says Susan. "This house has too much heart and soul in it to move on."

When the couple first viewed the home, it was in a state of severe disrepair and neglect. There were holes in the walls, ceilings and floors, the original handmade ceiling medallions and crown moldings were broken and the layout had been carved into apartments. Yet, there were cypress joists under the floors, which meant that the home was of high quality. The original curved staircase was intact, and front and rear porches, wide plank wood floors, pocket doors, brick cooking hearth and service quarters in the rear of the home were still preserved. The Mizells looked past the deterioration and saw a historically significant, single family home where they could enjoy an urban lifestyle and still welcome family with plenty of room (the couple have three grown children – all married – and ten grandchildren).

Working with Richard Albert and Leslie Raymond of Albert Architecture, they kept as much of the home's original elements as possible but also requested a modern, European-inspired kitchen, a full master suite with his and hers closets, a second floor laundry, guest bathrooms, spaces for overnight guests, an elevator and a roof deck.

To emphasize the history of the house, they used reclaimed and repurposed materials and exposed parts of the architecture. All of the materials that were pulled out of the house during the renovation were reincorporated in some way. A floor joist is reused on the third floor as a support beam under the rafters, for example. Features, such as brick walls and peeled layers of paint, were revealed to tell of the house's 160-year past.

To maintain the integrity of the interior architecture, owners and architects took painstaking care with the addition of a new HVAC system. The equipment was housed under the stairs and the ductwork placed under the house.

The Mizells' involvement with the project is evident throughout. Ronnie made several discoveries during the renovation process that are indicative of the home's affluent beginnings — a network of wires used to ring for servants, and lead pipe that conducted running water, a very rare amenity for a residence in the1850s. He also re-glazed every one of the original windows by hand.

Today, the house stands as a testament to the contributions the Mizells have made over three decades to the cause of preservation in and around the Lower Garden District. "It is a joy to see the revitalization of the neighborhood" says Susan. "It is a privilege, and very gratifying to be a part of something so important."