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Resurrecting a Ruin A New Owner Brings an Old House Back to Life

When Tania Shand purchased the large, crumbling house at the corner of Vermont Avenue and T Street, N.W., she acquired a slice of Washington history—and a stake in her neighborhood's future. The young Capitol Hill worker also took on the challenge of managing a complete restoration of the 1878 four-story brick building, with its broken windows, burned roof and ruined floors.

Shand is one of many individual homeowners, commercial developers and merchants who are investing in the revitalization of the Shaw neighborhood and the U Street corridor, which were devastated by the 1968 riots. The heart of middle-class black Washington in its early days, the neighborhood still boasts many blocks of brick Victorian row houses, with picturesque brick sidewalks and wrought-iron fences. And U Street's glamorous past evokes images of Duke Ellington, Pearl Bailey and Ella Fitzgerald performing at local clubs back when the corridor was famed for its sophisticated nightlife.

Now another generation is discovering the charm and convenience of downtown neighborhoods. Throughout the area, new offices and homes are going up on empty lots, upscale shops and restaurants are opening their doors, and painters, carpenters and roofers are sprucing up old buildings.

On a recent Saturday morning, at least a half-dozen workers were already busy at Shand's future residence as she arrived to show a visitor around. Restoration of the exterior is nearly complete. The brickwork is clean, all 40-plus windows have been replaced and trim has been painted. Wagner Roofing was selected by Leonel Elorga of Renovations Unlimited, general contractor for the exterior work, to install a new Vermont slate mansard roof, copper roof, gutters and downspouts.

Because Shand's original contractor removed the entire mansard roof, including the underlying structure, Wagner was required to replicate the roof working solely from photographs and a video made by a neighbor. The slate was hand-cut to form decorative patterns of shapes and colors similar to those found on the original



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Working from photographs and a home video, Wagner replicated the hand-cut slate roof on this 1878 home.

roof. To create these "rosettes," red and green diamond-shaped slates were arranged in a field of gray Buckingham slate.

"Replacing the ornate slate mansard roof 'from scratch' was a challenge," says Wagner Roofing President Chuck Wagner. "Although we do a wide range of work, including residential roofs, historic restoration jobs like this one are our specialty."

The interior of the house was painstakingly rebuilt. Floors, stairs and partition walls are now in place, and Shand can walk from the basement, which will be a rental unit, to the fourth floor, where she visualizes a cozy, book-lined library at the top of the tower. Workers have christened the space "The Monument Room" for its view

of the Washington Monument in the distance.

Even though restoring the old house to its former glory has required a great deal of patience and vision, the project has been a labor of love for its young owner. Researching the house's history, Shand found that an early resident was an assistant U.S. attorney who had been one of the first graduates of Howard University Law School and was one of only 16 black lawyers practicing law in the District of Columbia in 1894. When she discovered an old newspaper account of a wedding held in the house, "that really gave me the incentive to bring the house back," said Shand. "It was all so long ago, but the house had life at one time."

Thanks to Shand's commitment, the historic house is slowly coming back to life, as is the surrounding neighborhood. Another milestone for the area—along with the extensive revitalization efforts—was the certification of the Greater U Street Historic District on January 1, 1999, by the Historic Preservation Review Board.

Chuck Wagner says he's pleased his company was asked to participate in the Shand residence restoration. "Although we do roofing and general contracting for many large projects, our company was built on residential roofing work. As a native Washingtonian, it's gratifying to me personally to be able to contribute to the renaissance of this wonderful old house—and to the revival of a neighborhood that's so important to this city's history." ●

Copper Lasts!

When French civil engineer Gustave Eiffel

devised a support system for the Statue of Liberty, he chose copper sheets riveted to an iron framework. The statue, which contains 179,000 lbs. of copper that is 3/32 of an inch thick, was restored for its 1986 centennial. At that time, it was found that only .0018 percent of the copper material had been lost over the course of 100 years in the harsh environment of New Jersey Harbor.

Copper's strength and durability account for its widespread use in roofing and trim over the years. That's why the cityscapes of New York and Boston are filled with copper. The Capitol Building and the Library of Congress are just two of the many buildings in Washington, D.C., with copper roofs and trim.

As specialists in historic restoration, Wagner Roofing often is called on to repair, replace or create copper roofs, domes, guttering and trim on old buildings. Because it requires little maintenance, copper also is specified for many new construction projects.

Copper is shiny salmon-pink when manufactured, but if moisture and sulfur are in the air, copper eventually will turn green, or patinate. Upon exposure to the elements of the atmosphere, copper protects itself through oxidation by typi-

cally forming copper sulfate that changes color over time—passing through various brown shades until it turns chocolate brown, almost black, and finally becomes green, indicating the copper has reached its weathering equilibrium. This green patina is valued aesthetically for its color, but primarily because it represents a protective barrier.

The speed at which copper patinates depends on its location, according to H. Wayne Seale, the Copper Development Association's eastern regional manager for architectural applications. The CDA tested copper in an industrial area of Connecticut and found that it took 7 to 10 years for the copper to reach its initial green stages and 25 to 30 years to fully patinate.

"If the copper is on a building on the seacoast, the green patina will emerge in just a few years because the salt air causes faster oxidation," says Seale. "If it's in Las Vegas, you'll never have green copper; it will remain brown forever." Seale explains that the absence of the green patina has nothing to do with longevity: "The copper has reached weathering equilibrium, and it won't change after that. That's what gives copper its long life."

You can expect 16-oz. copper to last 80 to 100 years or even longer, Seale notes. Regardless of its thickness, copper will form the patina that protects against the elements. For this reason, the layer below the patina is not affected. ●

Wagner in the West Indies

The official residence of the vice chancellor of St. George's University in Grenada boasts a new custom-designed copper dome roof by Wagner Roofing. Working from architectural drawings by



Washington architect Jack Brady of Dunn-Brady, Wagner constructed the dome and then covered it with copper at Wagner's Hyattsville, Md., facilities, packed the dome in a custom crate and shipped it to St. George's, Grenada. A metal worker was dispatched by Wagner to install the new dome roof.

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Waterproofing 12th-Century Stonework in Bishop's Garden

The gardens of Washington National Cathedral are as impressive in their own way as the magnificent Gothic edifice they surround. Designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., the gardens feature plantings based on Christian myths and legends, while others are included because they are native to the United States.

Walking through the small herb garden and continuing south, you pass through the Norman Court to enter one of the city's loveliest garden spaces, the Bishop's Garden, with its rose garden, a medieval herb garden, boxwood, magnolias and a stone gazebo. Wagner Roofing employees Randy and Louie Herald recently finished waterproofing the 12th-century arch in the Norman Court. Lead-coated copper was used as an alternative to lead because squirrels are eating the lead: Their damage can be seen on the replica Norman arch leading to the gardens and on the Cathedral downspouts.

Visitors may take self-guided tours of the gardens, which are open daily until dusk; group tours can be arranged through All Hallows



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Washington National Cathedral

Guild, founded in 1916 to maintain and beautify the gardens and grounds (phone 202/244/0568). Photos of the gardens can be viewed at www.cathedral.org. ●

In the Works

These Wagner jobs are in progress or recently completed. To discuss or visit these or other projects, call Chuck Wagner or Sheila Wagner at 301/927/9030 or go to www.wagnerroofing.com. (Unless otherwise noted, jobs are in Washington, D.C.)

- Earth Conservation Corps, First St. & Potomac Ave., S.E.:** Repair roof at the Corps' Old Capitol Pumphouse
- International Eastern Star Temple, 1618 New Hampshire Ave., N.W.:** Restore skylights; paint vaulted ceiling
- Tudor Place Historic House and Garden, 1644 31st Pl., N.W.:** Restore decorative wood molding and maintenance on slate and metal roofs

General Contracting Jobs

- Embassy of Romania, 1607 23rd St., N.W.:** Painting, stucco repair and roofing
- Hagner Management—The Folger Building, 727 15th St., N.W.:** Exterior—repair and clean facade, caulk and paint. Interior—renovate fourth and ninth floors
- Opus Dei's Longlea Conference Center, Culpeper, Va.:** New shingle roof on library; new slate on 1930 manor house

Our Customers Say...

"I would like to thank you and your mechanics for the extraordinarily prompt repair to our chimney and cricket. Your employees were courteous and enthusiastic, sharing your talent for honesty, dedication and fine service with a high degree of professionalism. They managed to fix, in one clean shot, a problem that has been a continuous source of irritation since our house was built some eight years ago."—Glenn Fong, Custom Design Concepts Architecture

JOHN F. KENNEDY SLEPT HERE ►

The President Madison apartment building at 1908 Florida Ave., N.W., was President John F. Kennedy's first residence when he came to Washington as the U.S. Representative from Massachusetts in 1947. Wagner Roofing is restoring the structure's Spanish tile roof.



◀ REPAIRS AT TREASURY

Wagner Roofing is covering the sandstone cornices at the U.S. Treasury building's north and south interior courtyards with lead-coated copper. The impressive Greek Revival structure's Pennsylvania Avenue site was chosen by President Andrew Jackson, and construction took place over 33 years, including delays during the Civil War.



CAROL M. HIGHSMITH (2)

Back When...



When Jack Wagner, Sr., left to serve in World War II, his wife Evelyn stepped in to run the family roofing firm. "According to family folklore," says Chuck Wagner, "she always rounded up the bills for Wagner services. For example, a \$43.50 charge became \$44." When Chuck's father returned, the customers greeted him with, "Thank God you're back, Jack. We couldn't stand Evelyn's 'high' prices much longer." Now 80 years of age, she's still working—these days as a White House volunteer.

Who We Are

Chuck Wagner
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