



## UPTOWN RENOVATION

### PROJECT PROFILE

#### Infusing the New with the Old

A fixer upper is generally defined as a house in need of extensive repairs before it can be habitable. Certainly, there are plenty of television shows that give glimpses into the renovation process of these types of homes. But the renovation undertaken by Frank Quinn and his construction crew of a long-abandoned building in the Uptown district of Pittsburgh may very well have redefined that terminology. After 16 months of labor, Quinn and his dream team have transformed a crumbling house of cards into a sturdy home sweet home for a local couple.





"This place was so incredibly decrepit; not many builders would want to take this project on because many people would think it was too far gone," said Quinn, who has owned Frank Quinn Construction Company for 40 years. However, Quinn, whose company won the Renovation Inspiration Contest sponsored by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette last summer, had no such qualms about taking on a project of this scale.

The three-floor rectangular home was built in the 1890s and had not been lived in for at least 40 years, and it showed: the roof was dilapidated and caved in, and the floor was crumbling. In fact, the builders could barely get inside the space to begin the project.

Still, Edward Slayden and his wife Ally saw beyond the decaying interior.

"It was the exterior of the building that really caught our eye. The first time we drove by it, we were quite taken with it. The brickwork, the tall arched windows and high ceilings appealed to us. We also loved the proximity of the

neighborhood to Downtown," he said.

Like some other Pittsburgh neighborhoods, Uptown is undergoing a renaissance of sorts. Not only are people like the Slaydens snapping up homes in which to renovate, but new upscale construction in the area is ongoing.

The Slaydens bought the house and property for \$60,000 and proceeded to hire Quinn to help reconstruct, reconfigure, remodel and revamp the interior.

And revamp they did.

"This isn't just work for us," said Quinn. "This is manual art."

#### **PRESERVING HISTORY**

Despite a massive interior renovation, the Slaydens wanted to keep the exterior as it was to preserve the home's historical integrity. After all, pointed out foreman Gary Welsh, it was obvious that a mason built the home, evidenced by the pattern of the brickwork.

"There were several key features that we wanted to preserve to celebrate the history of the building, particularly the facade, the ghost print of the house that once stood next door and the elevator mechanics in the master bath which were refinished and encased by a clerestory," said Slayden.

Original wooden beams from the floors were repurposed to become part of the custom fireplace mantle in the main living area, another way that the crew was able to meld old and new.

Quinn agreed that the historical integrity should be preserved as much as possible. "You can preserve the past through its architecture; it shows the pride, the work ethic of the city, but it also shows how the future can develop," he said. He likened this project to Pittsburgh itself.

"We took a house that was decrepit and rebuilt something that has value. The same thing goes hand in hand with Pittsburgh---Pittsburgh has rebuilt itself. It still has old values and ethics, and the product here shows it. People



# PROJECT PROFILE





really love the city; my guys put pride in their work, and that is why it turned out the way that it did,” said Quinn.

“Outside, we preserved Pittsburgh history, but inside, it’s their dream,” he added.

## CHALLENGES

For Quinn, the main challenges, at least on the front end of the project, was safety. The dilapidated interior made getting around pretty dangerous. Originally, they could only get in to the first floor, but barely, and no one could get upstairs in the beginning. They ended up having to build the home from the ground up, which Quinn said is a dangerous way to do things. Demo alone took about four months.

“We had an architectural plan, but it was just basic. We took it and improvised as we went,” said Quinn. Between his team’s ideas and the clients’ ideas, everything eventually came together, though the final picture gradually unfolded as they went along.

## INSIDE

The narrow exterior of the brick home belies its true interior size. The house is 110 feet long and 25 feet wide, but

inside, it is surprisingly spacious.

The original home sat on a 4,000 square foot lot; Quinn and his crew of artisans built an 1,800 square foot adjacent mother-in-law suite to the left of the main house, which will contain a wet bar and kitchenette. Until the house was ready, the Slaydens were living in an apartment on the lower level of the house that Quinn had previously renovated; a space that they plan to lease.

“We wanted the layout of the house to be a hybrid between a Victorian row house and open loft. We love the concept of loft living, but we also really enjoy privacy and rooms with doors, which can be absent in lofts. We wanted it to feel lighter and more elegant, as opposed to heavy and industrial. So, no exposed ducting or brick walls that you typically see in lofts,” said Slayden.

The living space on the first level will be an open concept floor plan and will include a kitchen, living room and dining room along with a built-in fireplace. A Harry Potter-esque closet sits under the main stairs, just one closet in a house filled with them in abundance.

Ally Slayden, a professional pastry chef, personally designed the area to maximize functionality as well as be the center for entertaining. The large kitchen has custom cabinetry made by Sonenblum Woodworking, energy-efficient appliances, and an all-marble countertop that is black with white veining. “Natural light pours into the kitchen area, giving it both an openness to entertain and the light to be creative in the kitchen,” said Quinn.

Two guest bedrooms are located on the second floor on either side of a Jack and Jill bathroom; an antique dresser was converted into a vanity with a sink on top.

A laundry room is off the master bedroom, and a Juliet balcony, which Quinn refers to “a romantic manifestation of who they are as people,” was built off the spacious master bedroom on the third floor.

The custom master bath features Carrara marble countertops and Carrara marble tile in the walk-in shower and platform for the soaking tub. The floor is a continuation of the natural oak floors throughout.

When you’re working on an old home



that hadn't seen the light of day in decades, there's a good chance that you might stumble upon some surprises—including an unexpected elevator shaft that was used in the building in the early 1900s. Quinn and his team preserved the old gears and cable runs and sprockets of the pulley system.

They also added windows above the elevator shaft, so that now, it operates as a 24-foot modern skylight in the master bathroom. "It keeps the spirit of the building. Not only does it infuse the new with the old, but it keeps the old intact," said Quinn.

"The master bathroom is the most beloved room. We actually planned the house around it. Oddly, it's a social

space for us. We even prepare our morning coffee there. In fact, we had a third sink installed in the bathroom for use as a coffee station," said Slayden.

The upstairs balcony area runs along the length of the entire floor, providing complete visibility to the lower level, and at the opposite end of the master bedroom, the Slaydens can see one-of-a-kind stellar views of the skyline.

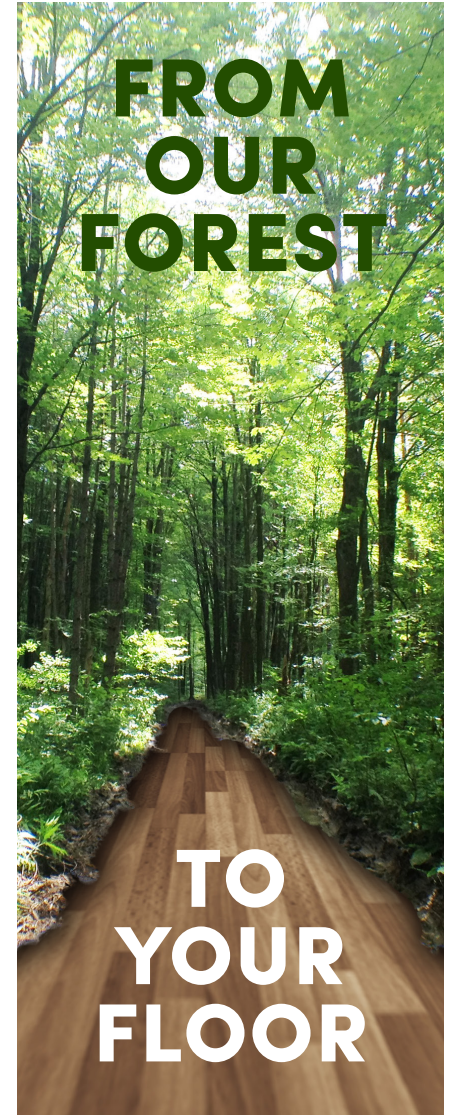
The balcony was cantilevered, giving the illusion of it hanging without any support.

"Everything was built with rectangularity and angles to add to the perspective of the entire space," said Quinn.

For example, Quinn installed transom windows on either side of the master bedroom, which allows an abundance of light to stream in.

The horizontal rectangular transoms provide a shapely contrast to the vertical rectangular windows throughout the rest of the home; the vertical windows are all original to the home, another way that the historical integrity is being honored. And the vertical rectangular notches in the upstairs railing all along the catwalk mimic the windows. Even the angles of the flooring run in different ways; these lines add to interpenetrating spaces and to psychological perspective, Quinn explained.

Not only can you see the skyline from indoors, an outside deck rewards the homeowners and



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## 88 Roberts Street Pittsburgh

Frank Quinn Construction Team  
 Frank Quinn, president  
 Gary Welsh – master carpenter foreman  
 Brian Kolter – carpenter artist  
 Greg Adams – mason  
 Steve Elliot – carpenter/painter  
 Dane Welsh – carpenter  
 Shayne Murphy – journeyman carpenter  
 Gary Welsh, Jr. – journeyman carpenter  
 Corey Carter – roofer/carpenter  
 Richard Benz – carpenter/painter  
 Susan Larkin – materials sourcing  
 John Francona - architect

### SUPPLIERS

Allegheny Hardwood Flooring - Log sawn white solid oak flooring

Sonenblum Woodworking - Kitchen Cabinets

Allegheny Woodworks - Solid mahogany and popular custom height door

Architectural Clay Products - Porcelain and marble tile

Kitchenrama - Cabinets and carrara marble countertops

ThermoTwin Windows - Custom windows

B.S. Fitz Roofing - Roofing

Climatech Heating - HVAC unit

Wade Heating & Cooling - owner unit HVAC

Ron Eichey Plumbing - Plumbing

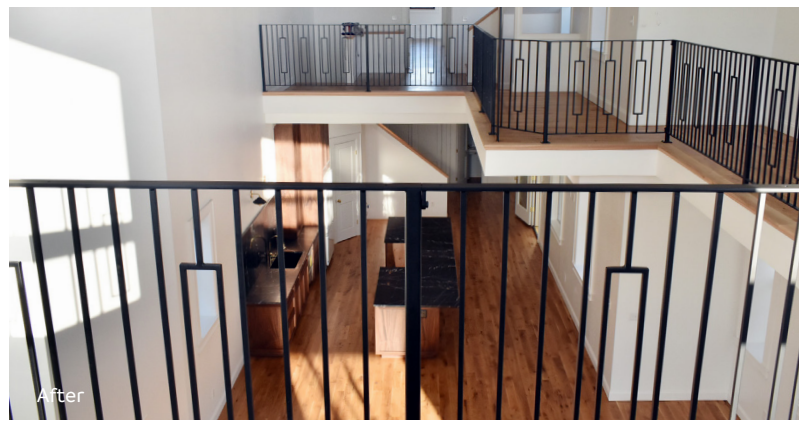
Dave McIntyre Electric - Electric

Schultz Ornamental Iron - Iron railings

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### MATERIAL

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their guests with a 360 view of Pittsburgh, from Downtown to the South Side to Mt. Washington.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

"We're absolutely delighted with the outcome. It's feels very open and grand in the main living area, yet still quite cozy in the bedrooms and nicely balanced between modern and traditional. The crew was incredibly talented and creative, specifically Gary Welsh, foreman, whose ingenuity brought the vision to reality," said Slayden.

Quinn can't praise his team enough, saying that they built the home with Pittsburgh pride.



Frank Quinn

Quinn views the house as a masterpiece, as a work of art. "It's almost spiritual. You're creating something almost from nothing, and through the creative process, we built something like this. We love it; we love the people we work for. You just can't come to work and do this; it has to be in your heart and soul." **NH**