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A Dream Deferred

By Brenda Rees

For nearly a century, a certain home on the arroyo, near the border between Pasadena and South Pasadena, has cheated death more times than a wily feline. The once-glamorous mansion has escaped demolition and survived bisection and persistent neglect. And now it is finally off life-support, thanks to one couple's quest for an urban oasis.

Originally called "Mi Sueño" (My Dream), the house is the only residential building in the Los Angeles area designed by Bertram Goodhue, the prominent neo-Gothic architect behind the stately Los Angeles Central Public Library as well as the master plan – and several buildings – for the Caltech campus of the early 1900s.

When Mi Sueño's current owners, Gary and Norma Cowles, were house hunting in 1998, they weren't in the market for a historic home. Norma says the couple – then newlyweds — were "just looking for a Spanish fixer-upper. We had no idea of the historical nature of the house – we just immediately fell in love."

The house proved much more than a simple fixer-upper for the Cowleses, who spent about 3 1/2 years lovingly restoring and revamping this once-grand structure. The rebuilding process from wreck to relic sent them on a fascinating journey which gladdened preservationists.

The result is accessible to the privileged few: The couple opens the home to the outside world only occasionally — for a few guided tours, as well as the Pasadena Conservancy of Music's Mansions and Music concert series. Most of the time, it's a private retreat occupied by Norma and Gary – a retired contractor who has become an avid student of local history – along with their large poodle and yellow Lab.

When Mi Sueño was completed in 1915, the house was part of an enormous estate, whose owners hosted elaborate parties and entertainment for the local elite. The residence was divided into two buildings in 1950, and the larger, 10,000-square-foot home saw a succession of owners who remodeled it, updated it and added architectural elements – some of questionable taste. Previous lords of the manor include actor Robert Reed and music producer Phil Spector.

When the Cowleses finally encountered the house, they found an asbestos-laden swimming pool, burnt grass and rats making nests in the air-conditioning ducts. "The whole north wing was carpeted with dreadful, bilious lime green shag," recalls Erik Evens, principal at KAA Design House in Marina del Rey, who worked on the project. While the residence had come to incorporate some "hilariously bad" elements, it still had "good bones," says Evens. "But we had to bring everything back to square one."

After doing a complete seismic retrofit (which meant replacing the original hollow clay tile of the walls with contemporary materials), Evens oversaw the gutting of the house, the laying of groundwork for the overhaul and the repurposing of nearly every room, wall, hallway and closet.

The only room that wasn't physically altered is the once-grand dining room, which became the living room. The proportions of the cavernous chamber – 50 by 20 feet with a 12-foot-high ceiling – provide wonderful acoustics (Goodhue also designed massive churches). At the far end of the room – sandwiched between his-and-hers safes – is a walk-in fireplace lined with Guastavino tile (named after the 19th-century Spanish architect who patented it). Charmed by the tiles, Norma had one of the designs reproduced for the kitchen backsplash. She can still gaze upon the living room's original Chinese-slate-and-marble-checked floor and the gilded, hand-painted, coffered ceiling – now cleaned and restored – which touched off her romance with the house.

During the remodeling process, the Cowleses learned much about Goodhue's romantic vision, and his late-career passion for the sensual architecture of Spain and northern Africa. Inspired, the couple brought a bit of Morocco into the kitchen, bathrooms and guest rooms with cabinetry accents and sliding doors of mashrabia (ornamental wooden screens).

The crown jewel is the master bathroom, where intricate walnut grillwork serves as a canopy for the tub. A small camel figurine lounges there near a luxurious chaise. Overhead, a star-shaped light fixture gently reflects the stunning handiwork of New York-based Moroccan tile artist Mohammed Benslimane. When Benslimane first visited the job site, the KAA team sat down with him to choose tile colors, motifs and patterns, recalls interior designer Chris Barrett. "He came to L.A. with a big bag of tiles, and we went down in the sand to play," she says. Later, the group collaborated on drawings for the decorative patterns.

With tiles hand cut in Morocco, Benslimane and a team of artisans spent three months on installation, using traditional techniques. Each tile was positioned by hand on 4-by-7-foot panels, which were hoisted up and then mounted on the walls. The result: a romantic room saturated with rich blues and gold flecks. "It's our little retreat," says Norma.

The house has a long history as a refuge from the ordinary. The original occupants were New York financier Herbert Coppel and his wife, Georgia, who paid \$18,000 for the 4.6-acre site on which it now sits. They wanted a winter home in Southern California, lured here by not only the balmy weather, but also the warm social circles. The Coppells were impressed by Goodhue, whose interpretation of Spanish Colonial architecture was showcased at San Diego's 1915 Panama-California Exposition, for which he served as principal architect. (In 1896, Goodhue also created the Cheltenham typeface, which the New York Times came to use in its headlines.)

At the time, Goodhue had just dissolved a business partnership with architect Earl Cram; after 25 years of designing neo-Gothic churches and traditional buildings on the East Coast, Goodhue was eager to explore the exotic aspects of Mexican – as well as Persian – architecture.

"Goodhue was a romantic at heart," says Romy Wyllie, author of "Bertram Goodhue: His Life and Residential Architecture" (W.W. Norton; 2007). "He had studied Gothic architecture, but there was something very appealing and lovely about the Spanish architecture. He wanted the freedom to express himself. He wanted to mix things up, to blend and reinterpret."

With the Coppells' commission, Goodhue spent three years overseeing the creation of their 16,000-square-foot, 28-room mansion. The main entrance was fancifully framed by Churrigueresque (elaborate architectural ornamentation in the Spanish Baroque style) decorations, a Persian-style reflecting pool with an arroyo stone walkway and a separate garage — which could accommodate 12 cars — with a turntable and washing platform. "He was very proud of the house," says Wyllie. "He once wrote that it was 'quite the palace.' He even compared it to how the Medicis might have built [a residence] on the outskirts of an Italian city."

With the death of Herbert Coppel in 1931, the house began its slow demise. It was passed on to the Coppells' only son and then to other owners until 1949, when it became vacant. The market had shrunk for such grand estates, so a local real estate company decided to break up the property. "The land itself was easy to do, but the real challenge was what to do with the house," says Wyllie. "After consulting with architects, they decided to make it two houses."

Cutting the residence in two, however, meant removing the magnificent entry as well as a marble staircase – a stunning blow to the architect's original design. But in current hands, time and care have restored the home's great sense of style – and fun. Indeed, as the Cowleses walk up to their front door, the first thing they see is a statue of Pan atop a long shallow channel of cascading water. "We put this here to let everyone know that this is going to be a house of fun and music," says Norma. "Is this still *Mi Sueño*? Oh, for me it is. Every day."