

LARKSPUR HONORS RESTORATION OF ONE OF ITS OLDEST HOMES

By Jack Wilson

The house at 55 Walnut Ave. in Larkspur was showing its 100-plus years when Jon and Carol Knorpp bought it in 2005. Built in 1895-96, the Italianate-style Victorian house had been owned by well-to-do families but never received the kind of care its history warranted. The hand-laid brick foundation needed strengthening, the old plumbing and wiring didn't meet modern building codes, and some rooms were cramped and dark. "It had great interior bones," Jon Knorpp recalls, "but it had huge issues."

Fortunately for Larkspur's inventory of historic treasures, the Knorpps were willing to invest the time, money, and patience required to restore the house to its former grandeur. The Larkspur City Council recently recognized their efforts with the first Heritage Preservation Award given for restoration of a private residence. The award, given last year for work on the Lark Theater and a commercial complex at 465-467 Magnolia Ave., recognizes extraordinary accomplishments in preservation of historic structures listed on Larkspur's historic resources inventory.

According to "Larkspur Past and Present," the history and walking tour book recently updated by the Heritage Board, 55 Walnut was the first home built on the Walnut/ Palm hill above Dolliver Park. It was built by the architect Henry Craner and his wife Delores Carillo Jackson Craner, the wealthy descendant of early Spanish settlers of California. Mrs. Craner's nephew, the actor Leo Carillo, was a frequent visitor to the house on the hill. In the 1960s the house was purchased by restaurateur Victor Bergeron of Trader Vic's fame and his wife; members of the Bergeron family remained in the house until the Knorpps acquired it.

The challenge for the Knorpps and their architect, San Francisco-based Ken Linsteadt, was to retain the classic exterior architecture of the house while adding space and light to the interior. According to Richard Cunningham, chair of Larkspur's Heritage Preservation Board, the board "especially appreciated that the Knorpps were able to preserve much of the interior at the front of the house while adding space at the rear. They did this without affecting the appearance of the home as seen from the front or side streets."



The home at 55 Walnut Avenue following its restoration. Photo: Helen Heitkamp.

The Knorpps were uniquely equipped to take on this challenge. Jon Knorpp has over 30 years of experience as a real estate developer and advocate for historic preservation. He is a director of San Francisco Architectural Heritage, the largest non-profit advocating for preservation of the city's architecture, and he currently manages the mixed-use Mission Rock redevelopment project next to AT&T Park. For her part, Carol Knorpp operates an interior design business and had devoted 18 years to the restoration and modernization of another older Larkspur home, where the couple raised their two sons. "We seem to move from old to old," says Jon Knorpp.

Restoration of 55 Walnut was aided in part by Larkspur's use of the statewide special building code for structures on the city's Historic Resources Inventory, which provides flexibility for meeting building standards. And the house was granted property tax reductions under the Mills Act Contract Program, which supports restoration and maintenance of historic resources.

Together with their architect the Knorpps were able to retain the 12-foot ceilings and wooden sash windows that defined the historical character of the living and dining rooms at the front of the house. At the same time, they opened up the rear of the house to bring in more light and add to the living space without impacting front or side exterior views of the home. This was a critical issue for Heritage Preservation Board in making the award. "This is not a fancy house but a modest one compared with others on the city's A List of historic resources," says board member Helen Heitkamp. "It would have been cheaper for the Knorpps to tear it down and build a mega-mansion on their big lot. They elected to expand within the existing house footprint, with the addition done at the rear, out of the public view of the house."

In the end, the Knorpps were able to satisfy both their need for a livable home and their appreciation for Larkspur's historic character. "We feel very lucky to be stewards of this house," says Jon Knorpp. "It's important to both of us that one of Larkspur's defining features is its historic resources."

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