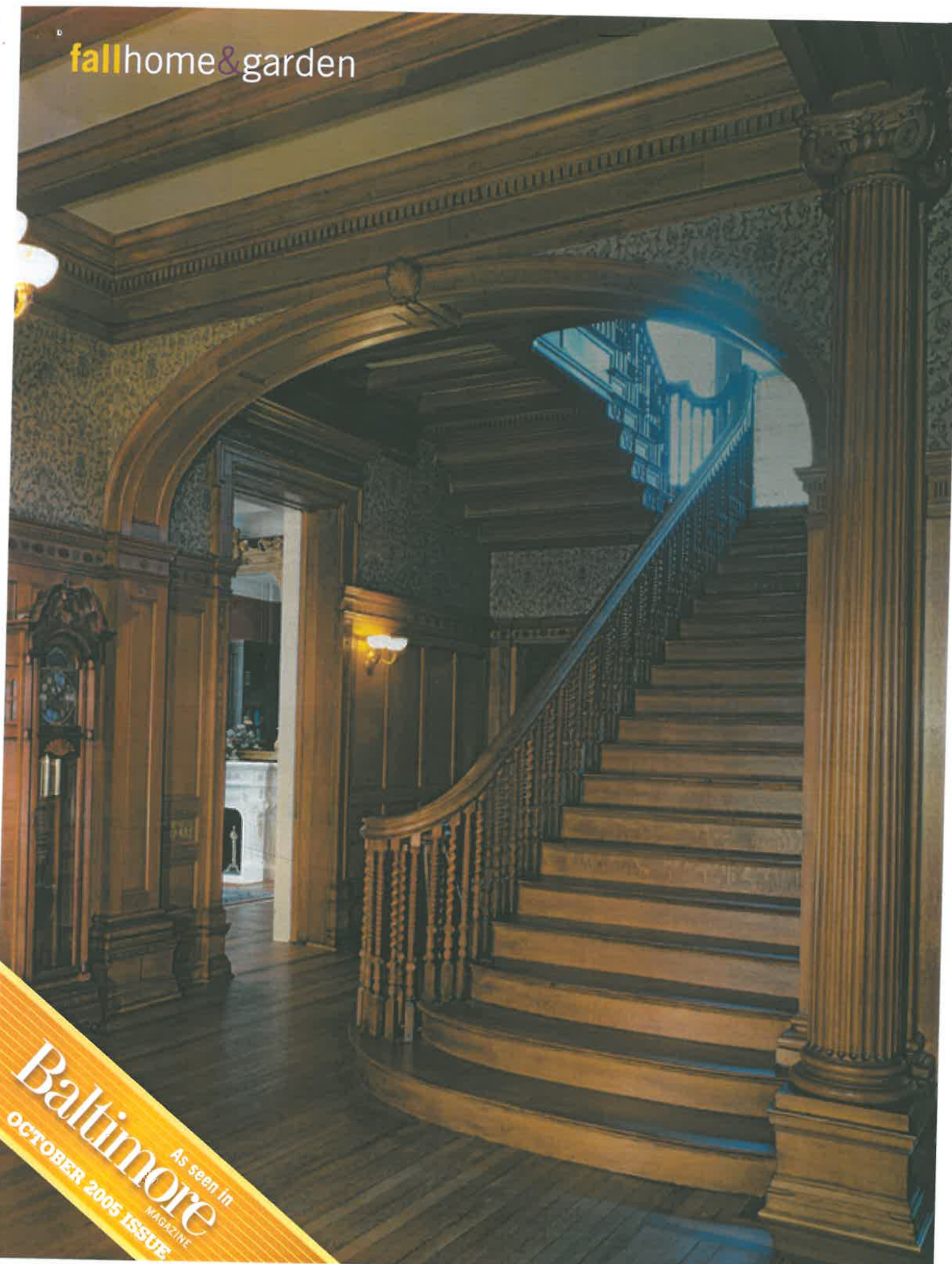


fall home & garden



As seen in
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a mansion restored

A BUSINESS DEAL BECOMES A CALLING FOR THE OWNER OF THIS 1892 TOWSON HOME

Once a stately home built by one of Baltimore's famous families, then a school for 50 years, the Ridge Mansion in Towson is now a labor of love for Baltimorean Marc Munafo, who has spared very little expense to restore virtually every original detail of this historic property.

By Suzanne Molino Singleton

The grand foyer, left, and the living room of the beaux-arts-style Ridge mansion, built by the Abell family.

And now, three years later, he can't bring himself to resell the house, as he had once intended.

Built as a 12-room summer retreat in 1892 by the Abell family—then owners of the *Baltimore Sun*—the house was donated to Baltimore County in 1955 and transformed into The Ridge School for disabled children.

After the school relocated to Charles Street (and changed its name to The Ridge Ruxton School), the structure went up for auction three years ago. Munafo rescued the property with a bid of \$2.2 million, intending for his award-winning restoration company, CAM Construction, to refurbish and resell the structure.

"It became an obsession," he admits, adding that some unusual coincidences bonded him to the project.

"There were a lot of little tie-ins," he explains. For example, the day George Abell settled on the house was March 5, Munafo's birthday. In addition, Munafo's own father, then owner of CAM, had been commissioned to triple the size of the school. He completed the addition in March 1965, the same month and year Munafo was born.

Soon, however, the dreary 33,000-square-foot appendage will be demolished. "That makes Marc a bit sad since his dad built it," says Martha Elliott, director of CAM's business development.

But it's unsightly, dysfunctional as living space, and "it's a school structure now attached to the side of my home," says Munafo. "It just doesn't belong." Plans are to subdivide and sell the remaining acreage into 13 lots for new home construction to help pay for the lofty cost of the restoration project.



Wood trim that was covered by coats of old lead paint, *right*, was stripped bare, revealing the original wood detail, *above*. Dental picks were used to remove every trace of the paint.

The beaux arts-style mansion is "architecturally important," says Elliott, "the last of its type in Baltimore County. It's the only fully developed beaux-arts manor still standing."

Beaux arts combines classical Greek and Roman architecture with Renaissance themes and was once the favored style for grandiose public buildings and homes of the very rich. Characterized by symmetry, formal design, and elaborate ornamentation, the beaux arts era spans 1885 to 1925. Swags, medallions, flowers, balustrades, balconies, grand stairways, and other lavish features typify this style.



Munafo's vision was to reinstate The Ridge's three-story splendor—all 15,000 square feet of it. Original house plans were lost, so Munafo's detective work was limited to scouring the school's blueprints. As he peeled away classroom after classroom to uncover the house beneath, surprises lurked in each corner.

"My fixation was about doing everything historically correct," he

recalls. "Yet there wasn't anyone to show or tell me how it was supposed to be done. I did a ton of research."

One surprising discovery was interior pocket shutters hidden inside the walls at each window. These had been stored, sealed, and almost impossible to notice. Once discovered, 600 individual panels were extricated, removed, sanded, painted, and each piece of hardware restored—a mammoth project in itself. Now each window boasts handsome white shutters to block the sunlight or to be stored inside the walls.

Another feature was the Monticello-style walk-out windows throughout the first floor—ceiling-to-floor windows, which, when open, transform into doors leading onto the wraparound porch.

"Many of its design elements were uncommon for most homes back then," he says. "This indicated the family's wealth." Also very unusual for that era was the fact that the house had electricity and gas.

Every repair made was for a reason, mostly to preserve the historic aspect of the house. If a piece of moulding or bannister was missing, CAM's craftsmen worked under Munafo's personal direction to create a new one that matched.

Most of the 30-plus rooms in the house were used as classrooms for more than 50 years. Every plaster wall in every room was covered with tack boards, chalkboards, bookcases, and other school paraphernalia. Vinyl tile hid beautiful hardwood floors. Fluorescent lights hung from ceilings; crown molding and baseboards had miles of fire alarm, public address, security and electrical cabling attached to them. Hazardous material had to be removed.

Only when the school equipment was removed did the extent of the plaster deterioration reveal itself.

Decades of grime covered eight marble fireplace mantles, now scrubbed to their original luster. Twelve-foot-high, thick oak pocket doors between grand first-floor rooms refused to roll closed; new tracking now allows them to slide. Many of the leaded glass windows and doors were hopeless but workers disassembled and restored all of them, installing historically accurate wavy glass.

Fifteen thousand dabs of glue used to adhere '50s-era acoustic tile were scraped off by hand with chipping guns. Wood trim was covered with ancient coats of lead paint, some of its detail so intricate (like the wainscot in the dining room), it took dental picks to scrape out every trace of the old school blue paint and reveal the original wood pattern.

Other refurbishments included restoration of magnificent stained-glass windows, removal of a fire escape, dismantling a metal and concrete portico that covered the main entrance, and restoring the gold leaf of several antique mirrors.

One grand mirror was found elsewhere in the house, yet Munafo determined its original position and after its restoration, it hangs on its rightful wall in what is now the game room.

Unluckily, pieces of the stained glass windows initially set in the stair landings overlooking the back of the property were stolen; Munafo is replicating them. "I did everything I could to get them back," he says. The remaining windows were removed and restored to their original design.

Restored transom operators allow the small windows above the bedroom doors to open for air flow. Says

Munafo, "You can't find transom operators nowadays, so I had no choice but to restore them if I wanted them operable."

He even hung artwork using picture wires attached to picture molding at the top of the walls. "They didn't put nails in the wall back then," he says. The walls have been painted with historic colors such as creamy yellow, peach, off-white, soft green, blue-gray, and dark red, and blue.

Other replications include the outside white railing around many parts of the house, changed to imitate the swag motif of the original. Radiators were left intact and are functional. They offer not only heat, but also another bit of numerology that inspired Munafo to keep this house. The bottom piece of each radiator is stamped "September 22, 1874" by the Griffin Iron Company. "That happens to be my wife's birthday," says Munafo. The top piece is stamped "July 28, 1885," which is both his mother-in-law's and his son's birth date.

A furnace and air-conditioning system has been installed, replacing the natural heat and air flow system "which was very unusual for its time," says Munafo. He describes how basement tunnels filtered natural air into the house to keep it warm or cool, and how the overhang on the wraparound porch functioned to shade the windows.

Original marble bathrooms were cleaned and restored as plumbers recreated parts to bring tubs, pedestal sinks, faucets, and vanities to usable condition.

He is proud that only two walls were removed and two added in the entire house. The breakfast room is now a combination of one small room and a long, skinny pantry. "The wall had no

purpose structurally," he says. A heated tile floor adds to the kitchen's cozy comfort. Much of the built-in cabinetry has been restored throughout the dining room and kitchen.

Walls were reconstructed upstairs next to the master bathroom in what used to be a series of small servants' quarters. The space now boasts two hefty walk-in closets and a toilet cubby nearby. "Design-wise, this is one of my favorite parts of the house," says Munafo of the master bath, with its original red brick façade left intact surrounded by black and white floor tile.

All the work was done by CAM staffers, and Munafo got a lot of help with historical paint choices, lighting fixtures and design from his wife, Victoria, who worked with Carol Crampton, owner of Crampton Lighting. Restoration efforts have since received two awards, one for window and wood restoration from The Building Congress and Exchange, the other from Associated Builders and Contractors for excellence in historical restoration.

Besides footing the massive bill (which Munafo will not disclose), what was the biggest challenge of this restoration project? "The original builder made everything on site," says Munafo, "so many pieces in the house, such as doors and hardware, do not match." Also challenging, he adds, was the installation of phone, cable, and internet wiring in such a tall house.

"I won't say what I spent," he says, "but to put it in perspective, a six-foot piece of molding cost \$3,000 to restore because of the process and patterns involved, and because the skill involved is a dying trade."

This house is a kid's dream for a long game of hide-and-seek: Nooks,



Extra bedrooms of the once-12-room home have been transformed into an office, playroom, and even an extra kitchen on the upper floor, *top*, in what was once a classroom, *right*.

crannies, hallways, and stairs go every which way, including the skinniest of steps inside a two-story observatory that leads up to the widow's walk at the top of the mansion.

Although the house actually is designated as a 12-bedroom home, Munafo utilizes it as a five-bedroom residence with five full baths and two half baths. Extra bedrooms have been transformed into a video room, office, playroom, exercise room, and extra kitchen on the upper floor. A number of spare rooms are not used at all.

The Ridge Mansion is plenty of house for only four people—Munafo, his wife and their two boys. "You can feel overwhelmed by the size, but not by its style," he says. "It's not over the top; instead it conveys warmth.



We wanted to keep it simple." ❁