

midwest home

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Monthly

winter
warm-up
A New Orleans haven

A photograph of a courtyard with a brick wall, a fountain, and a house in the background. The scene is lit with warm, low-angle lights, creating a cozy atmosphere. The brick wall is the central focus, with a fountain set into it. The house in the background has a balcony with white columns and a railing. The ground is paved with bricks in a herringbone pattern. A wicker chair is visible in the bottom right corner.

French Quarter *vivant*

A Minnesota couple builds a second life
that recalls their southern roots.

BY JAMES WALSH PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF JOHNSTON





ABOVE The luxuriant library is a true male retreat, with its rich leather, wood, and toile finishes.

RIGHT French doors in the bedroom can be opened to views of the courtyard and guest house.



It was a cold Minnesota morning. Dogs romped in the yard of a sprawling house on Lake Minnetonka. Inside, stacks of boxes were scattered about, awaiting a move to a warmer climate—a new dream home at the heart of New Orleans' historic French Quarter.

A dream home, yes. A vacation home? No. The Minnesota couple with deep southern roots didn't build their French Quarter row house for occasional getaways. It's a real home—their 'city home,' as they call it. Their Minnesota residence has become their lake home.

The homeowners lived in New Orleans for 17 years, where they formed lasting friendships and had two sons and a daughter. Their house, located in the Crescent City's historic Uptown area, predated the turn of the twentieth century and gave them an appreciation for a depth of history in homes and furnishings.

In 1988 a job transfer brought them to Minnesota where they made new friends, but never denied their longings for the South. Frequent visits to friends in New Orleans stoked the fire to return. Then, the chance came: a phone call from dear friends telling them of a rare vacant lot in the Quarter—a district in which centuries-old homes are nourished, never torn down.

The couple jumped at the opportunity. "We didn't even go down to look at it before we said 'Yes,'" the female homeowner says.

The journey to a finished home didn't happen so quickly. The plan was to build a

side-by-side duplex with the friends who first spied the space. But you don't just build something in the French Quarter, where architectural review boards and neighborhood groups closely guard the history and the integrity of the vernacular architecture. "They don't want that changed," the homeowner says. "The residents of the quarter certainly do not want the area to become a Disneyland, and so any new construction immediately sets up a red flag."

She and her husband first sought approval through New Orleans's Architectural Review Committee.

"I would say that's one of the toughest review boards in the nation," says Twin Cities interior designer Carol Belz, who designed the New Orleans row house.

The homeowners also went before the Vieux Carré Commission (a historic preservation group) and the city council. The design approval process stretched over two years and required multiple revisions and reviews.

Ultimately the couple received approval for a Creole town home with a subtle stucco exterior that blends with its venerable neighbors, and they broke ground in June 2003. They spent roughly the next year-and-a-half moving back and forth between Minnesota and New Orleans, working with a Louisiana architect and a Mississippi builder. The home was completed in time for the 2004 holidays.

In the French Quarter, the homeowner says, homes are built "property line to property line." The couple's 2,600-square-foot town home butts up against a mid-nineteenth-century building on one side and a Creole cottage on the other. Every inch of the lot is utilized, and features a courtyard lined with reused New Orleans soft red brick. Water flows from a dolphin into a shell and cascades into a fountain below. The fountain is a tribute to the homeowner's mother, who loved the beach and said that if she were ever reincarnated, she would come back as a dolphin.

A brick wall separates their courtyard from their friends' property, while a wooden door in the wall allows for easy visits. Guest quarters at the back of the courtyard welcome the couple's grown sons, teenage daughter, and scores of friends from around the country. Each of



its two floors, one painted a vivid Cajun red, the other a robin's egg blue, includes a bedroom and a full bath.

Inside the main house, Belz created a look that is thoroughly modern, yet authentically New Orleans. She collaborated closely with her client, and together they filled it with contemporary art, antiques, and exquisite touches of color and light.

The main floor is home to the living room and kitchen, separated by a wide, graceful arch painted the same buttercream shade as much of the woodwork. The walls are coated in a color that falls between muted sage and peaceful celadon. The floors are made from pine recycled

The pine used to cover the main floor was reclaimed from the floors and beams of an old sugar mill. It came by its rich tones naturally; no stain was required.

OPPOSITE A view from the library shows the new home's historic neighbors. **BELOW** The homeowner's contemporary art collection gives a modern edge to a comfortable mix of antique and new furnishings.





from the rafters and beams of an old sugar mill. "You can't find flooring like that now," Belz says, noting the rich, varied colors of the wood. The honey-hued planks are not even stained, just coated with sealer.

The kitchen is open and modern, brightened by cream-colored cabinets with a glaze finish. Honed marble clads the countertops throughout. The expansive layout gives the couple plenty of room to indulge their passion for cooking down-home dishes. The husband, in particular, enjoys creating southern specialties in black iron skillets on the Wolf range.

Newly produced but classically styled Turkish rugs soften the floors in the living room and the library. A wooden mantle wraps around the living room's extended fireplace, topped by an oversized mirror that reflects an Italian crystal chandelier above and a large abstract of a woman hung on the opposite wall. The furnishings—many of which were already in the couple's possession—are a mixture of antique and reproduction occasional pieces and new, comfortable upholstered seating. "I didn't want it filled with antique chairs that were just going to sit and be pretty and not sat on," the homeowner says.

Belz says her client has an eye for art and design—a skill expressed in her collection of contemporary art, which she brought to New Orleans from her Minnesota home. Prints, oils, and lithographs give a modern edge to the traditional furnishings and historic surroundings.

The second floor features the master bedroom, painted a soft apricot, where French doors open to the private

courtyard. Dramatic floor-to-ceiling draperies are trimmed in silk and lined to block exterior light.

There are no windows anywhere in the two-story town home, only French doors that let in streams of light and views of the quiet street in front or the private courtyard behind. The doors in the library open to a small balcony where a certain someone can smoke cigars. A true male sanctuary, the room features a fireplace surrounded by gorgeous Cyprus paneling and cotton toile window treatments that depict a hunting scene. "It's a great guy's room," Belz says. A sleeper sofa and adjacent full bathroom provide room for visitors who outnumber the guesthouse.

The French Quarter townhouse provides its owners a warm escape from Minnesota winters. A snowbirds' retirement to the beach or to some dewy gated community wouldn't have resonated. The couple loves to golf, and never relinquished their membership at the New Orleans Country Club, but more so they wanted access to their hometown's arts and storied food.

So, their lives now will be split between the call of the South and their life in the North: Christmases and summers in Minnesota; New Year's Eve, Mardi Gras, and other more spontaneous occasions in the French Quarter.

"It's just a natural," says the homeowner about her family's return to a place their hearts never really left. ■

Jim Walsh is an education reporter with the *Star Tribune*.

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