

Blueprint

Design in
all its many
forms

In Esmont,
a historic
building
becomes
a home

RENOVATION

Take it to the bank

By Erika Howsare
Photography by
Virginia Hamrick



Like many people on the hunt for real estate during the housing bubble of the last decade, Mark Otis was being priced out of the market. So when he saw the old Esmont post office come up for sale on Craigslist in 2007, he took notice—both because it was a rare property he could afford, and because it was a bit of a landmark from his own past.

“Tim and I used to come down and swim in the quarry,” he says, referring to his friend Tim Rausse, “and we’d park at the post office.” He asked Rausse if he’d like to come tour the building—a two-story brick structure, originally the First National Bank of Esmont, built around 1903. The postal service rented part of the first floor, and it also held two apartments.

Both thought it was an interesting investment, and they decided to buy the building together. As a historic structure in a once-bustling village, it had plenty of character—it came with more than its share of challenges, too.

The trouble started with deadbeat tenants and continued with a horribly inefficient boiler system, “like a Volkswagen in the basement,” Otis remembers. The first winter he and Rausse owned the building, they paid \$7,000 in heating costs. “We were counting quarters to fill that tank,” he says. Then a tenant called him and innocently asked, “Is it bad if the boiler shoots a big old fireball out the side every time it comes on?”

Thus the renovation started with installing an updated HVAC system, along with replacing the



electrical and pulling down unstable chimneys. Over the years he’s owned the building, Otis has mastered the art of repairing plaster, repainted exterior moldings, redone kitchens and bathrooms, built decks, and installed fences—among other tasks on a neverending list. “This was like having a child,” he says.

The post office still occupies its downstairs spot, and the apartments have seen various tenants and friends come and go. Since 2011, Otis has lived here himself, with his wife Esther Lozano. They live upstairs under soaring ceilings, with tall windows and a generous staircase leading down to the shared foyer, where Otis has posted a historical photo of downtown Esmont when it hosted an active railroad depot.

The onetime bank “was never meant to be a domicile,” says Otis. “As much as I want to preserve its historical nature, you have to change some things. If it’s going to survive, it has to adapt.”



Though the onetime bank and current post office was “never meant to be a domicile,” says its owner Mark Otis, he and his wife have made various changes to the property over the years. A room that once housed a ping-pong table now serves as a nursery for the couple’s daughter; in the kitchen, they added a soapstone backsplash, glass-front upper cabinets, and a window seat.

He's tried to respect the structure while making the apartments as appealing and comfortable as possible. This has meant tackling long-deferred maintenance, like fixing plaster walls that crumbled at a touch ("In certain places, we had to put three inches of plaster," he says). And it has meant adding certain conveniences, like closets, that weren't part of the original program for the building.

A wall between the living and dining rooms of the upstairs apartment just came down a couple of years ago, creating a great room that also includes the kitchen. Here, Otis and Lozano tore out what previous renovators had built and designed a kitchen for their own taste: soapstone backsplash, glass-front upper cabinets, and a window seat where the sink had previously blocked the view. While some trim details couldn't be perfectly matched with the originals, Otis thinks of those variations as his own contribution to a long series of modifications to this building. "I like the fact that it's not perfect," he says.

In the bathroom, Otis added stained-glass panes to the window for privacy and commissioned Corey Blanc of Blanc Creatives to fabricate a curved shower curtain rod. One of the latest additions is a rear deck that connects the upstairs apartment more effectively to the backyard, a shady and level space.



There have been times when Otis was grateful for the ways in which the building had been neglected; lack of attention helped preserve some details, like brass doorknobs and fireplace screens. Surfaces had only a few coats of paint rather than dozens. And some elements that had been removed were still around—next door or, in the case of the vault doors from the old bank, shallowly buried in the yard. Otis salvaged and reinstalled what he could.

The project has taken Otis through several life stages, from the days when a certain upstairs room held a ping-pong table to now, when it serves as a nursery for the couple's daughter. And he's become invested in Esmont as a village, purchasing a small nearby house and the former general store next door to the post office—an even older building, dating to 1889 or 1890, which has an Esmont slate roof and the original long wall of merchandise shelving behind the counter.

"This has become such a part of who we are," he says. "I love it."

"As much as I want to preserve its historical nature, you have to change some things. If it's going to survive, it has to adapt."