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February 21, 2015 12:01AM

## Renovation turns former Rumford Library into a private residence | +Gallery

EAST PROVIDENCE, R.I. — When Rita Danielle Steele was a kid, she spent so much time in her hometown's library that she told her family she was going to live in one someday.

That childhood fantasy recently became a reality with the completion of her project converting the former Rumford Library into a private residence. Steele, the managing broker of Providence real estate and restoration firm Geo Properties, has preserved the historic character of the 1905 brick building while transforming it into an airy home with modern amenities.

When she first viewed the property in the spring of 2013 at the urging of her business partner, the 2,900-square-foot space looked much different than it does today.

"It was a disaster," she said. "It was very moldy. It was very dirty. Everything was very brown. And there were fluorescent lights everywhere. But it wasn't hard to see the potential."

That fall, she purchased the Pawtucket Avenue property from the City of East Providence — which had closed that branch of the library due to budget constraints — for \$230,000. From October 2013 through April 2014, Steele worked tirelessly to make the space inhabitable.

"I'd be here painting by myself until midnight and thinking, 'Why did I decide to do this?'" she said.

She hired outside contractors only for major work, including electrical and plumbing jobs. The rest was done by Steele, who has long been interested in home restoration, with help from her family and friends.

"As a single woman, I feel this was a very empowering project to take on by myself," she said. "To look around and see that I did it with my hands is very fulfilling."

Tasks included ripping out carpet to reveal the original wood floors, demolishing an old bathroom and installing new tile work. Steele decided to preserve most of the existing layout and structure, including two original fireplaces and rows upon rows of built-in bookshelves.

The grand front room, where the checkout desk used to be, is now divided into a spacious open-floor-plan kitchen, living room and dining room. The single-level home also includes an office, bathroom, master bedroom with a bathroom, and a second bedroom.

Steele's work with Geo Properties involves renovating houses with the intention of selling them. This project, a home for herself (and her dog, Cookie), gave her the opportunity to make some unconventional choices.

"I decided to just have fun with it and only include things that I love," she said, pointing to the bold turquoise walls in the front room.

The resulting look is eclectic and feminine. The house is filled with items Steele has purchased from salvage yards and antiques stores over the years, including several lighting fixtures, rustic barn doors and a rolling ladder that rests on bookshelves in the kitchen.

"There's just so much character and detail in this old stuff that you can't find in things made now," she said.

The master bedroom is the most girly part of the home. It includes a walk-in closet with boot racks, a canopy bed made using birch trees from her sister's fiancé's Vermont property and an antique bathtub from New Bedford's New England Demolition and Salvage.

"If I was going to sell this place I wouldn't have put the bathtub into the bedroom, but it works for me," she said.

Steele still has tasks on her to-do list, including making the library's old card catalog into a pantry spice rack, landscaping the yard and removing the commercial parking lot. She is hoping the exterior changes will offer some visual clues that the old public library is now someone's private home.

For now, she's OK dealing with its minor inconveniences, including a steady flow of overdue books coming through the slot in the front door.

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Rita Danielle Steele, with her dog Cookie, in the kitchen of her house, the former Rumford Public Library in East Providence. When she first viewed the property in the spring of 2013, she says it was "a disaster" but "it wasn't hard to see the potential." The Providence Journal / Kris Craig

