



Rita Danielle Steele's home maintains its architectural integrity while having modern touches

## Turn the Page

### One visionary homeowner starts a new chapter for the Rumford Library

When an eight-year-old Rita Danielle Steele declared she would one day own a library, her parents simply chalked the statement up to one of those childhood musings millions of kids make from time to time. So when an all-grown-up Rita, armed with a law degree and fueled with a passion for restoring historic properties, tossed her hat in the ring after the City of East Providence put The Rumford Library on the real estate market, she had a shot at making her childhood prophecy a bonafide truth.

"There was a substantial amount of interest in the property," Rita explains, and unlike more typical real estate transactions, there was a lengthy process which included going before the East Providence City Council, having the 108-year-old building property structurally evaluated and taking into consideration the budget she would need to transform the space into a residential respite.

"It was a commercial space in a residential neighborhood," Rita explains.

"The angle was that someone would take it and convert it to a mixed use space or a single family home." After pleading her case, a role in which she undoubtedly has plenty of experience, the historic library was hers for \$230,000 along with a deed restriction that ensured the structure would not be adapted into commercial space.

The project soon became both a personal and professional affair. "My company specializes in historic restorations... We focus on unique properties that don't make straightforward sense to other contractors," says Rita. Instead of being a daunting undertaking, she says, the project was an exciting opportunity. "It's the kind of project we thrive on."

With years of restoration experience under her tool belt, Rita knew to expect the unexpected. In this case, those included a few gaping holes in the stone foundation and other "surprises" common to renovations. What she didn't expect was the emotion that accompanied the project. "The

construction started, and this is what I do as a profession, but this was for *my home*, and that completely changed the perspective," she concedes.

Friends and family supported Rita with seemingly everyone playing some role in bringing the building, which has last been updated in the '70s, back to life. Rita worked with her grandfather, an architect, to bring the building into the next millennium without compromising its architectural integrity. "The property is so unique and there was only so much I wanted to do to the layout," she explains. "I didn't want to compromise the original design." Another instrumental advisor throughout the project was her father, a proficient stone mason. "And thank God because it's a brick building," she adds, which had its fair share of neglected walls the two exposed.

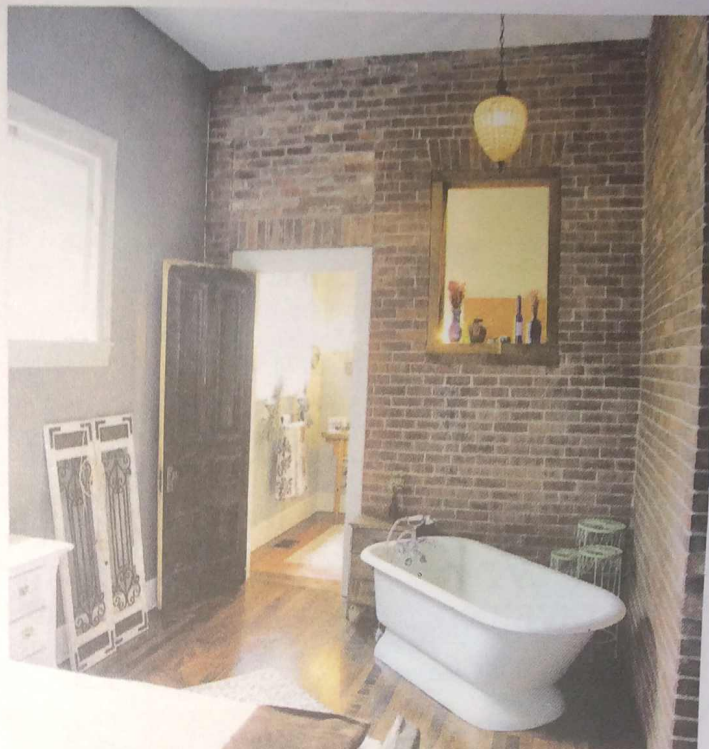
As Rita was choosing pieces to make the house a home, she felt that now familiar "personal meets professional" swirl of emotions. "I think just on the

business side of things, every project I have done, it has to appeal to a wide market of consumers... It was very exciting to tailor it to my personal taste, which I never had before." Favorite finds she had acquired through the years from various projects, including light fixtures, were all incorporated into the finished product. "Pieces from every part of my life are in my home," Rita says with pride.

Like many century-old properties, the intact design features throughout were stunning, but many more were uncovered long after the transformation was underway. "The building had gorgeous detail all covered up by carpet and drop ceilings - it was a mess, but everything was there and preserved. You just had to get to it," explains Rita. For other components she had to bring in, like pieces for her bathroom, Rita intentionally sought out ones with a history akin to her new home. She explored places like New England Demolition & Salvage in New Bedford, which buys and sells



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existing architectural building materials like clawfoot bathtubs, sinks, doors and windows, millwork, columns, mantles, hardware, radiators, ironwork and other unique vintage materials.

Her discoveries during the process, both architectural and decades-old items turned objets d'art, became an unexpected treasure hunt of sorts. Pieces of the past were found throughout. "They left behind so many items. I packaged like ten containers of things," Rita says. "Filing cabinets full of historic newspapers, pieces of art, arts and crafts materials, card catalogs... the basement

town hall, so the location has some interesting history," she says.

Rita began work on the building in October and moved in April of this year - two years to the month the library was forced to close its doors for the last time. The home was technically move-in ready by then, but there was a lengthy to-do list of uncompleted tasks. "When I moved in, there was a lot that wasn't done... I have some ambitious landscaping plans but they will have to wait a while," she laughs.

Naturally, friends and neighbors in the surrounding Rumford neighborhood

were curious about Rita's renovation project. For them, and friends and family, she launched a blog, [www.rumfordlibraryproject.com](http://www.rumfordlibraryproject.com), featuring images and entries all about this ambitious adventure. Soon, former library employees, trustees and those with fond memories of the library, as well as neighbors and well-wishers, were supporting Rita with comments along the way.

Today, the two bedroom, 2,900-square-foot one-story home boasts enviable oversized windows that invite natural light to fill seemingly the entire space, original and reclaimed wood floors in a rich, dark, glossy finish, built-ins and naturally, countless bookshelves throughout. Good thing she hung on to that vintage rolling library

ladder she bought years ago, albeit without a space in mind at the time. "I had been holding on to it... I'm an antique collector of unusual objects," she says with a laugh. "Everything is from something or somewhere different. It's fun though - it's like a treasure hunt."

And everything took a village, which means Rita isn't the only one who's enjoying the spoils of hard work. "Everyone comes to visit and everyone played a role. All my friends can come down and see a little something they did," she says.

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