

Marin

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Renovations and Magical
Transformations



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Saving the Past

Remodeling, restoring and repurposing some of Marin's most historic properties.

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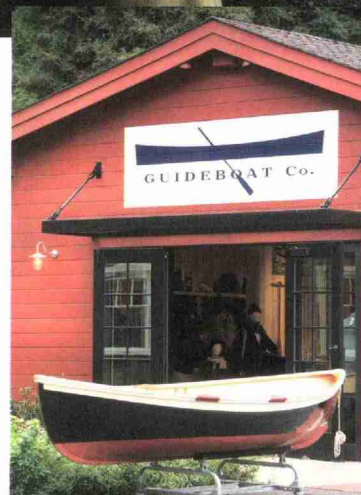
POP QUIZ: HAVE you ever set foot in the Mill Valley Lumber Yard? If not, join the crowd. Even though this spot was once home to the mill that gave Mill Valley its name, it's generally been the much-loved landmark that everyone drove past and very few entered. No longer.

Since purchasing the property in 2012, longtime Mill Valley residents Jan and Matt Mathews have been transforming the former True Value hardware store site into a community-based pedestrian village where micro-retail abuts artists/entrepreneur studios

and where Marinites will one day be able to enjoy a meal while soaking in Tam views.

The Mathewses are performing something of a rescue operation. The property in the center of Miller Avenue had been zoned multifamily residential and looked like it was headed more toward condos than tastefully restored lumber sheds. "Our thought was that none of these buildings are protected, so they would probably be torn down," says Jan. "We wanted to do something better with it, turn it into a community spot."

Since purchasing the 1892 property, the couple has turned two buildings from the



TIM FORTER

former hardware store into the Guideboat Co., the latest venture of Restoration Hardware founder Stephen Gordon. They've outfitted an old railcar with small boutiques like Ambatalia and Bloomingayles. And they're now working on bringing in some kind of cafe. When finished, the Lumber Yard promises to be charming and funky and very old Mill Valley.

Like many Marin property owners, the Mathewses felt that history was worth preserving. Though Marin boasts a lot of mid-century architecture (see: Terra Linda) and

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more than a few unfortunate 1970s-era structures (see: nearly every apartment complex in the county), it's also filled with buildings that predate 1900. Many of these are still being used, or repurposed, in interesting and beautiful ways. All of Larkspur's downtown area, for example, is a designated historical area. And Fourth Street in San Rafael is lined with old buildings, including the 1878 Opera House, which now houses Art Works Downtown.

There's a reason Marin is so rich in pre-1900 architecture. According to Jocelyn Moss, librarian for the Marin History Museum, Marin underwent a building boom shortly after the trains were built in 1875. Wealthy city dwellers would ferry

to Sausalito and then catch a train to San Rafael, Belvedere or Ross, where some of the most lush summer homes were built.

One of those homes was Sausalito's Casa Madrona, now a luxury hotel consisting of several different properties. Its jewel piece, the Mansion, started out as a family home built in 1885 by William Barrett, the secretary-treasurer of the San Francisco Gas and Electric Company. Barrett might be a little surprised by how it looks now; after a recent renovation, the Mansion includes the contemporary 5,000-square-foot Alexandrite Suite, complete with personal fitness center, private office and nine-panel media wall (renting for a mere \$10,000 a night). But even amid the sleekness, elements of the stately home shine through: the Mansion's original wood staircase, the high ceilings and elegant moldings, the mosaic-tiled back entrance.

The brown stucco building next to the Mansion tells an equally interesting story. At one time it was a parking garage, where these same wealthy San Franciscans kept their Model Ts, so they could skip the train (sniff!) after alighting from the ferry.

The Left Bank building in Larkspur was also once a hotel, and one with a colorful history. Built in 1895, it was a simple wooden structure called the Larkspur Hotel; in 1910, the owners replaced the inn's wooden hitching posts out front with the heavy stone columns that now ring the Left Bank's outdoor eating area, renaming it the Blue Rock Inn. This inn too was popular among summering San Franciscans, but for more nefarious reasons: during



Opposite: Jan and Matt Mathews; Guideboat Co. This page: The Mansion at Casa Madrona.

Prohibition, it was a speakeasy that doubled as a brothel. “The stories are that the traffic would get so busy along Magnolia Avenue that people sitting in their Model Ts would have enough time to go into the Blue Rock, get a drink and come back to their car,” says Ed Levine, co-owner of the Left Bank. When Levine and his business partner Roland Passot took over the space in 1992, they removed the abandoned stairway that had led to the brothel.

It’s hard to imagine this family-friendly county as a former brothel hotbed, but at the San Anselmo Inn in downtown San Anselmo, several guest rooms still have bells above the door, from its days as a cathouse. “The woman sitting at the front desk would ring a bell if the cops were coming,” says current inn owner Benedetto Cico, “and everybody could go out the back door.”

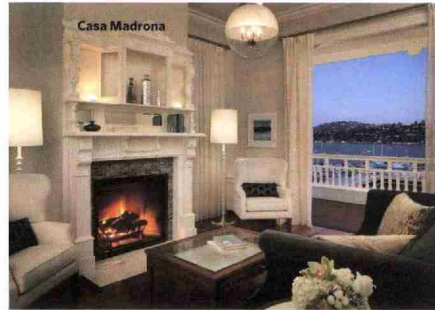
Before these wayward days the inn had been the railway building, located where Wells Fargo now stands. It held rail workers’ housing, a saloon and a pharmacy. In the 1920s, Cico says, the building was put on rollers and moved across the street to where it now stands, next to Comforts cafe.

The Italian-born Cico and his wife, Anna, are slowly returning the building (French-themed when they bought it in 2011) to a more Northern California style. They’re peeling

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back paint to reveal original wainscoting, restoring the slanted redwood floors and refurbishing rooms with an emphasis on reclaimed wood, some of it from local sources. Even while it’s under renovation, it’s bustling with mountain bikers visiting from Germany and Switzerland. Writer Walter Isaacson stayed at the inn just before his Steve Jobs biography came out, when he didn’t want to be seen around Silicon Valley.

The inn also had a stint as a halfway house and a drug hangout, reflective of Marin’s other recent history. *Casa Madrona* likewise saw its share of anti-establishment behavior, with visitors like Janis Joplin, Cher, Warren Beatty (when



he was still a playboy) and Pink Floyd (which posed for a famous *Rolling Stone* photo shoot here) hanging out in the hotel or restaurant.

If you’re looking for a reminder of Marin’s more genteel past, few places can compete with the Falkirk Cultural Center. Built in 1888 along San Rafael’s “Mansion Row” for Ella Nichols Park, it’s a stunning Queen Anne Victorian in the Eastlake style (so named because most of the interior features, from fireplace mantels to parquet-inlay floors, were purchases from the Eastlake catalogue, popular with New Englanders; only the redwood ceiling of the dining room and the Sierra-pine doorjambs are of local wood). The home is lovely, with a two-story stained-glass window, original Belgian tapestry wallpaper, and an old-fashioned multisection icebox so big it would put any modern Sub-Zero to shame.

In 1906, philanthropist and lumber/ship-ping magnate Robert Dollar (also the first owner of the Mill Valley Lumber Co., then called Dollar Lumber Co.) bought the home; the city of San Rafael purchased it in the 1970s. The place now plays host to a monthly poetry group, a children’s art workshop, Victorian holiday parties and Marin’s Master Gardeners. It’s also open to the public, as a museum and art gallery, five days a week.

Like any building its age, Falkirk requires constant maintenance: it recently had a paint job, the roof needs ongoing attention, and even the sprawling, magnificent oak tree to the right of the house’s entrance is held together with a series of ropes. That’s not exactly a surprise: “I’ve been told,” says Margaret Farley, president of Falkirk’s Cultural Affairs Service League, “that it’s 600 years old.” **M**