

preservation

The upstairs bedroom, part of the historic core of the house, looks into the addition, where glass, steel, and mahogany lend a modern flair. BELOW AND RIGHT: The 18th-century Charleston warehouse underwent a three-year renovation in the hands of owners Sarah ("Miss Ray") and James Coker.



In our continuing series with the **National Trust for Historic Preservation**, see how innovative restoration doesn't require freezing a place in time—even within the context of one of the South's most famous historic districts

SARAH COKER HAS BEEN CALLED MISS RAY SINCE CHILDHOOD, which alone implies a certain authority in matters of regional vernacular. If she needed more credentials, her hometown supplied them.

Miss Ray grew up in the historic Charleston neighborhood where she and her husband, James, also a South Carolina native, undertook a three-year renovation on a residence that began its life in 1781 as a warehouse. As a child, she says, "I knew every brick wall, every little back alley" within a few blocks of the warehouse. To come of age here was to acquire by osmosis a respect for Charleston's traditions and architectural heritage.

When Charlottesville architect W. G. Clark proposed a passionately modern rendition of the 18th century for the residence, imagine the transformation that had to take place—first in the minds of the Cokers, who describe themselves as admirers of all things classical, then in the attitudes of Charleston preservationists.

The Cokers spend part of the year in a larger house in Connecticut, where they have ample interior space and outdoor gardens. Back in

BY BEN BROWN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY J. SAVAGE GIBSON



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The integration of glass and steel into the historic structure's addition was one of the more controversial choices. But combined with the reflecting pool and the minimalist landscaping, it is a confident yet soothing gesture.

Charleston, with their four children grown, the couple sought intimacy and simplicity. "We were looking for something small, and I had always admired the property," says Miss Ray. "I liked the coziness of the place."

In the 1990s, the bones of the warehouse were disguised beneath a previous conversion that included nine interior walls. The three bedrooms upstairs seemed about right at the time. James remembers thinking that they would just spruce up the

kitchen a little. "There were no plans for a major restructuring," he says.

Then along came Clark, who the Cokers "fell in" with early on. "We must have had a sense of the space and its possibilities, if only subconsciously," says Miss Ray. They were intrigued by the modernist architect and his design team's vision for opening up the floor plan. "They started using the word *transparency* immediately," she says, "and we loved the idea of bringing the outside

what the cokers learned ...

The couple initially planned a much less dramatic renovation for the 1781 warehouse that had become a typical Charleston single house in the 1920s. Here the Cokers share the lessons they learned along the way.

- **Get the best architect you can find, someone you trust.** Architect W. G. Clark, a professor at the University of Virginia, became their teacher, ally, and the creative force behind options they had never considered. "Through him we were led to appreciate contemporary architecture," says James. Clark even explained their vision for the house to review boards.
- **Stay open to possibilities while training your eye.** "Once we began to consider this contemporary approach," says Miss Ray, "every time we traveled we saw something that confirmed our decision."
- **Take the structure down to its original profile, even if just schematically.** Consider how it works. Do subsequent additions add or detract? Once they began demolition and the space was stripped down to its bare bones, says Miss Ray, the original proportions called out to them, and they scrapped plans to add the requisite guest room upstairs.
- **Have a first-class engineer work through the utilities.** "You're dealing with a structure that wasn't designed to have some of our modern conveniences, so you have to ensure that it all works," advises James.