rescued from ruin
A Georgia couple scraps new construction plans in favor of restoring a sinking marshfront cottage once owned by auto magnate Henry Ford

When Vanita and Harry Morgan travel, they prefer to stay in historic B&Bs rather than in new hotels, and they frequently tour landmark homes. They love to visit old relics, but that didn’t mean they wanted to live in one. At least that was their thinking until they saw a rundown, 800-square-foot, late-1920s cottage that once belonged to auto pioneer Henry Ford. It sat in a watery depression at the perimeter of a lot they were considering for the site of a new house. Visiting from Atlanta, the Morgans were touring the Ford Plantation, a private sporting club and development near Savannah, Georgia. They were told the building would be torn down; the place had been sorely used, and the wood was riddled with rot. “It was in terrible shape, but it tugged at my heart,” says Vanita. “How could we let one of the structures Henry Ford built be torn down?” The house had more than mere history on its side. With its terra-cotta roof, board-and-batten siding, and livable floor plan, the little place oozed charm. All it needed was loads of TLC: updated fixtures, fresh (not decaying) siding, a little more space. So the couple scrapped their plans to build from scratch and, instead, decided to rescue the historic cottage. >>

BEFORE The tiny farm manager’s cottage, one of only four original structures from Henry Ford’s 1930s plantation, sat in a low, wet area and was used for storage before the Morgans saved it.

AFTER Charmed by the home’s history, cozy size, and unusual combination of board-and-batten siding plus tiled roof, the Morgans renovated the house after relocating it to higher ground (atop brick piers) with expansive marsh views.
The first step was to determine if the impulse to save the house was realistic. The Morgans’ friend Jim Strickland, founder of Atlanta architectural firm Historical Concepts, examined the structure for soundness and approved of the plan with some qualifications—including moving the cottage to higher ground, on new brick piers that raised it 3 1/2 feet to protect it from flooding. Extensive rot had ruined the original cypress siding, which all had to be replaced. Many of the terra-cotta roof tiles were broken, so Vanita tracked down a place in Ludowici, Georgia (where they were made in the early 20th century) for replacements. Vaulted ceilings in the master bath and kitchen give the once-cramped rooms an airier feel; a new bath off the guest room and a new screened porch make the tiny home much more pleasant when Vanita and Harry entertain.

In overseeing the details of the renovation, Vanita learned some hard lessons, starting with the extent of the cottage’s water damage. “Expect the unexpected; it’s usually worse than you’d guess,” she says. “The only silver lining about replacing all of the siding was that it gave us a chance to spray in foam insulation, which makes the house much more energy-efficient.” Vanita also discovered how useful the Internet can be when it comes to finding havens shack to chic

ABOUT THE HOUSE

STYLE Late-1920s board-and-batten farm cottage with handmade terra-cotta roof tiles

SPACE 1,150 square feet, which includes the guest bath and screened porch added by the Morgans, the kitchen and master bath added in the 1940s, and the cottage’s original four rooms

SETTING The Ford Plantation, a private residential and sporting club 20 miles south of Savannah on the Ogeechee River where Henry Ford owned a farm in the 1930s

VIEW Ducks flying over wild rice marshes and making skid landings on Lake Clara, which feeds into the Ogeechee River
BEFORE The cramped master bath was full of rotten and dilapidated fixtures.

AFTER Vaulting the ceilings and lengthening the room by three feet gives a light, airy feel; the claw-foot tub lends old-school appeal; new windows. For a similar tub, try Waterworks.

space-saving specialty products, such as large-capacity dishwasher drawers, creative planning, just moving the range and even to a kitchen island so that she could have a long stretch of countertop and cabinetry storage. Harry allowed Vanita to make the most of her limited square footage. After she treated the original interior poplar-paneled walls with a nontoxic borate spray to rid them of borers, she worked with two helpers to strip and scrape the boards of more than 70 years of paint layers in different colors. Not settling for the quick fix required patience but gave her the look she wanted. “Every now and then we'd stop and look and I'd point out an area and say, ‘This is it!’” says Vanita. “The process was incredibly tedious, but essential for the patina I was after.”

how they live now What started out as a leap of faith—making a coastal landmark livable in order to save it—became a lesson in devotion. And for that, Vanita and Harry are richly rewarded. “Our friends and family enjoy it as much as we do, especially because it’s a reminder of how people from earlier times worked and lived,” says Vanita. “And when the sun sets, the reflection of golden light on the walls’ mottled colors is like artwork.”

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The new 264-square-foot screened porch added extra living space (read: the kids’ table!) and a sitting area that helps the cottage live larger when extended family visits.

The Morgans swapped out a window to create a doorway leading to the new 6- by 8-foot guest bath.