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THIS PAGE: The small oval swimming pool adds a note of luxury to the urban setting.
OPPOSITE: The elegant three-story Georgian Revival occupies pride of place in Lowry Hill.



FACELIFT for a **BLUE LADY**

Designer Michelle Alton brings new life to a Lowry Hill landmark.

BY MELINDA NELSON
 PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE HENKE

For an 1898 home in Lowry Hill, 2009 was the worst of times and the best of times. The worst, because the stately three-story Georgian Revival had sat vacant for a year and a half in foreclosure, helpless while thieves stole light fixtures, appliances, plumbing, cabinet doors, interior doors, and the garage door. But, fortunately for this grande dame, it was also the best, because designer Michelle Alton came to the rescue with patience, courage, and a plan. “The bigger the project, the better,” Alton says. “That’s what I do best.”

Alton’s portfolio includes five Redstone restaurants and commercial and residential projects in several states. Alton be-

lieves she inherited her design sense from her father’s mother, a grandmother she never knew. As a child, she remembers sitting and drawing architectural plans. “It’s not normal, I know, but I used to draw houses and all the furniture,” she says.

When Alton first saw the Lowry Hill house in the summer of 2009, it smelled bad, and there were holes in the kitchen, but she loved the floor plan, the scale of the rooms, and the beautiful woodwork. “I could see the potential, but when I factored the price, the cost of remodeling, the maintenance, and the taxes, it didn’t make sense.”

The house was sold twice that summer, and each time, the deal fell through. Because the home was in foreclosure, the



The living room is Alton's favorite spot for hanging out with her children, her fiance, and her two dogs. Rather than re-panel two existing doors, Alton simply hung antique sconces on them.

“I LOVE MAKING HOMES BEAUTIFUL, BUT THAT’S NOT ENOUGH.... I’M ALL ABOUT APPRECIATIONS THAT ADD VALUE TO A HOUSE.” –MICHELLE ALTON

price continued to drop every 20 days until it reached a point where it finally made sense for Alton. She bought the house in August, only to find that it was actually a condominium because of the carriage house next door.

While searching for the condo documents, Alton found Doug-

las Durr, an architect who wrote his dissertation on the house while living there in the 1980s. Durr gave Alton a copy of the document, which proved to be an invaluable resource, as it contained historical photos and transcripts of interviews with people who had lived in the home, along with cooks, second maids, laun-

dresses, governesses, nursemaids, night watchmen, and other staff required to manage a house of such size and stature.

The house was designed by the Long and Long architectural firm for Minnesota State Senator Edwin Potter and his family. According to the original 1898 permit, the estimated building cost was \$6,000. The carriage house was a barn, and Governor John Lind lived next door.

In 1960, C&M Realty converted the house into a duplex by

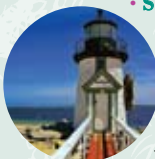
walling off archways and a front room, transforming a butler's pantry into a kitchen, and a music room into a living room, and creating another entry. A subsequent owner removed a rear stairway, converted a bedroom into a library/study/TV room, and added a small oval swimming pool between the house and the carriage house.

To help transform the two living spaces into a spacious, modern single-family home, Alton hired architectural designer



A Few of Michelle Alton's FAVORITE THINGS

- **FRAGRANCE:** Jasmine
- **FLOWERS:** Peonies and hydrangeas
- **MUSIC:** I'm a Top 40s girl—I never grew out of it!
- **COLORS:** Light blue with chocolate brown, ruby red, raspberry, or olive green
- **COCKTAIL:** Bombay Sapphire Cosmopolitan with a squeeze of fresh orange
- **ERA IN HISTORY:** 18th century
- **GIFT SHOP:** Blanc de Blanc in Wayzata and Amper-sand in the Galleria
- **SPLURGE:** Fine linens
- **VACATION:** Nantucket. The beaches and marinas are so romantic, the restaurants are fabulous, and the shopping is great.
- **PAINT:** Benjamin Moore Philadelphia Cream is my favorite neutral. It has a hint of yellow, which is warm and happy during the day and glows like candlelight at night.
- **ANTIQUÉ SHOP:** Antique Manor at International Market Square and in Wayzata. If you have the patience, you'll find treasures!
- **ART GALLERY:** Water Street Gallery in downtown Excelsior
- **FURNITURE STORE:** Room & Board—it's contemporary, chic, fun, and affordable.
- **DREAM PROJECT:** Converting a mansion to a multi-family home would be a fun challenge.



Alton demolished four rooms, a hallway, a bathroom, and a coat closet to create the spacious, light-filled kitchen.

Jeff Lindgren of Jalin Design (jalin-design.com) on a friend's suggestion. "I needed someone who was reasonable, fast, and would respect my vision," Alton says. "I was on a tight budget, and I was paying rent on my other house, so I wanted the house to be finished by Christmas."

The economic downturn continued to work in Alton's favor, as contractors and craftspeople were readily available and willing to work at dramatically reduced rates. "I'd ask for bids, and everyone wanted to start that same day," Alton says. By the end of August, four rooms, a hallway, a bathroom, and a coat closet

had been demolished to create a large, light-filled kitchen. The biggest challenge was the master bathroom, which Alton created by consolidating two half-bathrooms, a bedroom, a laundry room, a porch, and a hallway. "With all those rooms, there were several changes in ceiling height, and I didn't want to eliminate any windows, so I just handed Jeff my drawings and said, 'Good luck with this!'"

Lindgren rose to the design challenge, and the result is a large, sunny, boutique hotel-style master bathroom, with two marble-topped vanities, a shower, a tub, and two large walk-in

closets. "For a house of this size to work for today's lifestyle, it has to have all the amenities," Alton says. "So often, you walk into an older home and think, 'Well, it's nice, but that bathroom is too small, or that room is really weird.' With this house, I didn't want there to be anything weird about it."

The rest of the renovation proceeded according to plan, and Alton and her family moved in on December 22, just in time for Christmas. "With any project, the big thing is you can't keep changing your mind. You just have to have a plan and stick with it." Now that the house is finished, the living room

is Alton's favorite spot for hanging out with her children, her fiancé, and her two dogs.

Alton's project has caught the attention of her neighbors in Lowry Hill, and she's now hard at work renovating another historic home in the neighborhood. "I love making homes beautiful, but that's not enough. I understand what's required for resale, and I'm all about appreciations that add value to a house."

Poised on a hill overlooking downtown Minneapolis, all dressed up in a new coat of bright historic blue, this elegant Lowry Hill lady appears to be delighted with the results. ♦