



Accidental Innkeepers

By Karen Ott Meyer / Photography by Donna Timmers

INSOMNIA CAN STRANGELY AFFECT THE SUFFERER. FEW INSOMNIACS, HOWEVER, EVOLVE INTO AN INNKEEPER AS A RESULT OF LATE-NIGHT, SLEEPLESS WANDERINGS.

One night a few years ago during a visit from their Las Vegas home, Joel Bennett couldn't sleep so he decided to drive around Ripley. That's when he rediscovered the former Ripley Feed and Seed Store: "I remember coming into this building as a young boy and looking up into the circle in the ceiling and up into the second floor where they stored all the seed."

Joel and wife Donna had little intention of becom-

ing innkeepers when they purchased the building that is now Inn on the Square.

"I was looking for a space to renovate for my mother Mona Griffin to live in," says Joel. Built in 1903, the shotgun-style building comprises 5,000 square feet.

The day after his late-night tour, Joel returned to the venerable building with Donna; dilapidated and packed to the hilt, the place made a sad impression. The flat roof had been repeatedly patched and covered. The broken glass of the windowed cupola at the rooftop leaked water, damaging the floor below.

They bought it anyway, intent on renovating



upstairs for Griffin. The initial step of having the building rezoned from commercial to mixed-use resulted in all the properties around Ripley's town square being similarly rezoned, allowing other owners to create living spaces above businesses.

During the next 13 months, the building was gutted and renovated by Blue Springs-based contractor Jerry Bramlett: "There was plaster on the bricks and (workers) spent hours cleaning them. It looked like an orange dust cloud in here," recalls Donna.

The couple retained the structure's character when possible. The original wrought iron fencing around the front balcony was saved, with new pieces replicated inside.

While saving the downstairs floor was a goal, one phone call changed that: "Jerry (Bramlett) called and said they had been piecing and trying to save the floor, but it was just too damaged and would have cost a for-

ture to repair," says Joel. They opted to replace it.

Fortunately, the loft's original heart pine floors were in near mint condition; countless hours of caulking saved the beaded-board ceiling.

Upstairs, Joel knew he wanted to break up the long, open space so he designed and redesigned the area on his computer. He laughs when he remembers Bramlett's reaction to one of his designs.

"I'm no architect, but I thought it wasn't bad. Jerry called me and said he didn't know how we designed out in Las Vegas, but in Mississippi people normally didn't put a wall through the bathtub!"

By angling walls in the large space, the feeling of separate rooms was created. Guests walking up the rear stairwell find themselves in a master bedroom area with a view through the entire building to the front balcony. The kitchen is located in the center of the room, just below the glass cupola.

(Left) Contemporary beauty begins at the front door of Inn on the Square. The exposed brick, rich color scheme and eclectic furnishings add a touch of drama to the inn's lobby area. (Below) The Bennett's luxurious apartment is well appointed with plasma televisions, plush sofas and designer gas fireplaces.





"My mother likes to cook and I wanted the kitchen open and not isolated," says Joel. Glass transoms at wall tops filter light in from the front of the building.

The doors to the Bennetts' bedroom came from Mallard's Bar in Memphis' Peabody Hotel, installed as sliding doors because of their weight.

A black doorknob on a bathroom door also has an interesting story: "We were out in California in an expensive salvage store. I joked with Donna that doorknobs were all I could afford.

"As we were buying them, the owner said that the doorknobs were recently removed from Rod Stewart's home during a renovation," says Joel, adding that everyone always wants to touch them.

Seasoned international travelers, the Bennetts passed time during long flights designing the ideal room. Their attention to detail is apparent.

"I wanted the showers designed where (guests) could turn on the shower without having to stick their arm in water," says Donna.

The Inn on the Square also boasts an elevator, heated travertine tile floors in the bathrooms, a library, double steam showers, flat-panel televisions, a gourmet kitchen upstairs, wireless Internet and a balcony overlooking



the square.

A small flashlight next to the bed, a scale and phone in the bathrooms are more of the niceties. Guests will also find by their bed a piece of caramel cake made by Joann Ohler, Joel's aunt.

The three downstairs rooms were actually built to fulfill zoning requirements. Slowly, however, people have been discovering the getaway as the Bennetts have welcomed more and more guests.

"We have people celebrating an anniversary or women having pajama parties. We think of it just as a home away from home," says Donna. The couple recently bought a similar building in New Albany that they also intend to renovate. ■

(Opposite page) The open kitchen area makes it easy to prepare a meal while entertaining guests.

(Below) Business travelers will find luxurious touches that are mostly found in the finest hotels.



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