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10 Judith St. was fixed up before it fell down

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The grand Charleston home at 10 Judith St. typifies one counterintuitive notion about the city's preservation: Sometimes a little neglect does no harm.

At least as long as the neglect is arrested before the place falls in.

When David and Monica Elder first saw the house, they realized it was about to fall in, beginning with the two story piazzas across the front. It was peeling away from the front wall.

But they weren't scared off.

"We sort of felt like we had something pristine to work with, and we were very careful not to make any changes that wouldn't be consistent with the house," he says.

The house was built around 1814 by John Robinson, who might have designed it, too. A few years later, he would build the even grander house at the corner of Judith and Elizabeth streets (known today as the Aiken Rhett House, a museum property).

With help from architect Randolph Martz, contractor Mark Regalbuto of ReNew Urban Charleston Inc., the Elders began stabilizing the piazza.

Like often happens, the columns' lower portion had rotted, as water trickled in from where the handrails were inserted.

Some rotten sections had been replaced with telephone poles.

Regalbuto salvaged the upper portions of these columns, having a carpenter make lower sections of Spanish cedar and seamlessly attaching them together.

During the work, some improvements could be added so they're not seen, including cavities

to run the main electrical wire from the eaves of the piazza down to the ground level and a moisture barrier under the upper piazza's floorboards.

Regalbuto also pulled metal sheets away from the sides of the dormer windows and discovered the original wood siding. That was removed and replaced -- after a plywood water barrier was first installed.

Inside, the work not only relocated the kitchen but also added bathrooms in such a way as to minimize -- actually virtually eliminate -- any damage to the floors, baseboards, chair rails, wainscoting or crown moldings. Each of these rooms could be reversed in the future with no harm to the house.

The work removed the few Victorian and 20th century changes, though it kept a Greek Revival mantel and ceiling molding because it dated to around 1850. (They also kept the second floor piazza, which likely was added around the same time or even earlier).

Repairs to the slate roof proved to be a money pit, as did the unfortunate discovery of leaks from the roof through the walls.

"With old houses, you just don't know what you're getting into when you take them on," Elder says.

But their good deeds have been noticed. The Historic Charleston Foundation honored the Elders with its Robert N.S. and Patti Foos Whitelaw Award during its Founder's Day event last week. The foundation also presented Whitelaw awards to Antony and Ann Long Merck for their renovation of 39 Church St. and to the City Preservation Trust for its renovation of the City Market.

Also, seven conservators who helped with the Charleston loan exhibit featured at the 57th annual Winter Antiques Show in New York City received Samuel Gaillard Stoney Conservation Craftsmanship awards. They include: Russell Buskirk, Alfred L. Crabtree, Leroy Graves, Marion L. Hunter, Nancy Newton, Catherine Rogers and Kathleen Staples.

And the foundation also recognized the Small family and Habitat for Humanity, its partners on a successful renovation of the Small family's residence at 66 Lee St.

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