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Modern Luxury In The Historic Heart Of Napa



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Real Estate

I think old houses, and the people who love them, are fascinating.



The Italianate style is beautifully expressed in the 1878 McClelland House. R. BRAD KNIPSTEIN

Visitors flock to Napa for the wine, which is justly famous and worth the trip. But, until now, they have had to choose between lodgings in posh hotels, ho-hum chains, or in personal, but quirky and unpredictable bed and breakfast inns. Now there is lodging in an intimate inn that also provides every luxurious amenity a visitor could want. In addition, it has deep history, important original architecture and the incomparable atmosphere that can only be found in a beautifully preserved grand old house.

The McClelland House is a tangible piece of Napa history within walking distance of downtown's world class restaurants, tasting rooms, craft cocktail bars, and boutique shopping. Built in 1878 for Joseph A. and Anna West McClelland, the house is an elegant two-story Italianate that displays the characteristic hallmarks of the style: wide eaves, tall arched windows, a low-pitch hipped roof, large brackets and, to enter, double doors with stained glass panels. The house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and its neighborhood, the Napa Abajo/Fuller Park residential district, is a designated historic district.



In the dining room are elements of the original Victorian grandeur. R. BRAD KNIPSTEIN

The house has operated as an inn since 1991; though it deteriorated over the years, none of the original architectural and interior elements were destroyed. Thus, when it was sold in 2019 for \$3.273 million, the new owners had a gem that only required some updating and polishing to make it glitter. An ambitious remodel was completed in late 2021, and now, the McClelland House is an important piece of an important tourist destination.

“Our goal was to create a luxurious property,” says Jill Cole, managing principal of the hospitality interior design firm Cole Martinez Curtis and Associates (CMCA), which has offices in Los Angeles, San Francisco, London and Napa. “To appeal to the luxury market, we wanted to preserve the original beauty while not making it feel like grandma’s house.

“The house had been band-aided over the years, and was patched together in spots,” she says. “The baths were old, tired and substandard, and there had been damage from a recent earthquake. And, the beautiful, curving main staircase is steep, with a low handrail not up to code, and downright dangerous for guests carrying suitcases.”



The grand staircase inside the entry is beautiful, but impractical for guests carrying bags. R. BRAD KNIPSTEIN

In the 18-month remodel, the entire house was lifted up to dig a full basement and to build a new foundation. The back staircase, originally used by servants, provided the ideal location for an elevator. The bathrooms were demolished; new baths include freestanding soaking tubs, double vanities, top-of-the-line fixtures and luxurious French bath products. There are six unique guest rooms, each with a totally different adjacent private bath. There is also a first-floor powder room.



Each of the six bedrooms is unique. R. BRAD KNIPSTEIN

“At first, we just wanted to spruce it up,” says innkeeper and co-owner Choolwe Kalulu. “But then, after we got to know the house a bit, we decided to go deep with a new basement, new bathrooms, an elevator and a spectacular kitchen. We found the beautiful original floors under carpeting and we painted the exterior a color it may have worn originally.”

“Because of the house’s historic designation, we had to work within the perimeter of the building,” Cole says.



Like the bedrooms, the baths are all different R. BRAD KNIPSTEIN

For the past two months, guests have been enjoying the new, improved historic McClelland House.

“It is fully in use, and we have great feedback,” Kalulu says. “We are past the point of selling beds; now, we are selling experiences. There are nice hotels in the area, but because we are small and nimble, we can do things they can’t.”

These include regular dinners by celebrity chefs, a daily happy hour, cooking demonstrations in the kitchen and, for guests who want to explore, electric bicycles.

Choolwe Kalulu wonders whether “bed and breakfast” is the correct designation for a property like this.

“Maybe, instead of a B&B, we should call it a boutique inn.”



Regina Cole

I learned about historic houses from the best: owners who lovingly preserved and restored them, and preservationists who shared their knowledge. When I first began to write about old houses, I depended on the generous help of people who care about the past, and about how we can learn from it. They taught me the difference between timber and balloon framing, Greek Revival and Italianate house styles, and the unrivaled value of old-growth wood. That led to a career as a freelance design writer with a specialty in historic architecture and the history of the American and European decorative arts. After two decades of writing about historic architecture for a number of publications, I have yet to be bored, either by old houses, or their owners