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SEVEN DAYS • HOME DELIVERED • LOUISIANA OWNED

A modern edit

New Orleans' Faulkner House, famed for its colorful history and opulence, gets a new role: family home

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Contributing writer July 21, 2022

Tucked down a passageway steeped in buccaneer lore, and inside the actual French Quarter rooms that begat Southern Gothic literature, resides the unlikeliest of finds: a family. When bright young marrieds Permele and Garner Robinson decided to settle down, they made a unique choice, a townhouse on Pirate's Alley that included a bookstore.

Their 1837 Greek Revival, its site once trod by notorious smuggler Jean Lafitte and its rooms once inhabited by renowned author William Faulkner, now supports the wheels of a stroller.

"You should see the looks we get from people when we come out the front door with a baby," said Permele Robinson. "They're so surprised to see a family in the French Quarter."

Well-read and well-traveled, the newlyweds are ideally suited to the historic property, which integrates New Orleans' famed Faulkner House Books with their private residence. The bookstore is located on the first floor of the building where Faulkner once lived and penned his first novel.

With French blue shutters, slate roof, wrought-iron balconies and casement windows overlooking the local cathedral, the exterior wouldn't be out of place in Provence, France.

The townhouse layout is traditional, with small rooms stacked atop each other behind a narrow façade. What's



The Times-Picayune

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unusual is the access to the upper levels. A winding cypress staircase, originally in the courtyard, is now situated down an alley and around the corner. However, neither the alley nor the now-enclosed stairs are walled off from the bookstore. Instead, store and living quarters meld, separated only by an iron gate.

"It is a very special place," said Permele Robinson. "We see who comes in every day because our personal entrance literally passes through the store."

The house features charming twists, turns and split-level passages once linked to a garçonne. Alcoves, eaves, a hidden entrance, gold-leaf fixtures and 18th-century Grigio marble fireplaces evoke the house's mysterious past.



A book lover's paradise

The bookstore, however, is what initially drew the couple to the house. Garner Robinson, an avid book collector, interned there in his youth. It's through this connection that his then-fiancé, Permele Doyle, a native of Millbrook, New York, came to reside in a house where famed Southern writers once parsed words over bootleg gin.

Permele Robinson started her career in communications in New York at Estée Lauder and Tom Ford before co-founding Billion Dollar Boy, a social media marketing agency with offices in London, New York and New Orleans. When not at the Magazine Street office, she runs the business from home, at a small antique secretary overlooking Pere Antoine's garden.

Garner Robinson, a former intelligence officer in the Navy Reserve, leads his fifth-generation family business, Robinson Lumber Co., while also managing Faulkner House Books with partner Devereaux Bell.



The Times-Picayune

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The bookstore was founded in 1988 by attorney Joseph J. DeSalvo Jr. and his wife, writer Rosemary James.

Garner Robinson's personal trove of books spans every floor. Bookcases line almost every room of the house — including the attic nursery. He says it's not easy to tell where his collection starts and the store's inventory ends. Author-inscribed favorites remain sacrosanct, but the rest are now for sale. Still, he's living his dream; what was once a passion has become a job description.

"I've always bought books," he said. "And we just bought a ton at auction, but now I'm able to buy more books than I ever have in my life."

Paring down the decor

When they bought it, the house already had been faithfully restored following historic guidelines and decorated in period style. The decor, though exquisite in detail, was too formal for the Robinsons. Thus, began what can only be described as a paring down.

Friends Bill Brockschmidt and Courtney Coleman, owners of Brockschmidt & Coleman decoration and design, were called in to assist. Based in New York and Louisiana, the pair also was responsible for the decor for late mutual friend and writer Julia Reed's Mississippi house, the "Delta Folly."



The Times-Picayune

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What followed was a collaboration. Thought-provoking pieces were curated to blend with antiques and family artwork.

"Our goal was to preserve the character of the original Rosemary James interiors," said Courtney Coleman. "We wanted to give the living spaces a lighter modern feel for their next chapter as a home for a young family."

Some of the formality was retained, such as the Austrian silk window treatments, a 19th-century Russian chandelier and French Empire sconces.

An eclectic mix evolves

"They (the designers) felt, and I totally agree, that because of the drapes and ornate moldings and the chandeliers, we had to juxtapose a bit by adding more modern pieces," said Permele Robinson.

One of many contrasts in the space finds a bold blue mid-century modern chair facing an Empire settee, upholstered in palest Venetian green velvet. The design duo wanted the eclectic mix to appear as if the pieces were collected over time.

Some were. A pair of flea-market-find mid-century modern chairs from Garner Robinson's university days were revived with the unexpected, a chartreuse silk damask.

A custom ottoman of teal velvet and antique brass nailheads was designed to anchor the room. It was created by the local Leonel's Upholstery to balance books and cocktails, with plush edges designed to offer a soft landing for a toddler.

The interior is personal despite its sophisticated décor. The abstract paintings hung above the sofa and dining table are the work of Garner Robinson's late mother, Julie Robinson, a local artist.

Thoughtful wedding gifts feature heavily in the rooms' decor.

A rich teal Kasbah side table by Reed Smythe and Company adds color beneath a beloved painting by British artist Luke Edward Hall that was gifted by a close friend. A bowl made of salt and resin, sculpted by Queen Elizabeth II's cousin, cradles hefty quartz pebbles that the baby loves to fondle, and occasionally attempts to toss, with mixed results.

Immersed in literary history, and amid a mélange of styles and possessions old and new, the couple has succeeded in creating a family atmosphere. It's where they both can live and work, and where a small boy is fed his favorite meal, his mother's homemade pasta puttanesca. It's prepared next to a kitchen alcove filled with Provençal linens and shelves of yet even more books — this time, cookbooks.

