

# Historic schoolhouse graduates to new life as Myrtle Hill lofts

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Debby and Garry Eades' floor plan opens the dining and living areas up to a modern kitchen.



A 1928 schoolhouse addition, designed by architect Harry Manning, was lovingly preserved; it now holds lofts.



An old school desk in the foyer sets the tone at the Eadeses' home in Myrtle Hill Lofts.



Scenes from Jack and the Beanstalk, along with etched illustrations of Old King Cole and the Pied Piper, adorn the original masonry fireplace in the Eadeses' loft.



Chalkboards and a large map maintain the schoolroom theme inside the Eades residence in Myrtle Hill Lofts, a converted school on South Race Street in Washington Park.

Take a walk through the historic Washington Park loft Garry and Debby Eades call home and you can almost hear the echo of schoolchildren laughing.

In their living room, where kindergartners learned their ABCs more than 80 years ago, the original masonry fireplace remains, adorned with scenes from Jack and the Beanstalk etched into the frieze, decorative tiles depicting the stories of Old King Cole and the Pied Piper over the mantel and a glorious old clock.

The wall is decorated not with a flat-screen TV, but with the original black slate boards where children once scrawled their arithmetic. And in the entryway rests a tiny wooden school desk, complete with the tattered 1908 storybook *Billy Bobtail* and the Depression-era tale *Old Glory*.

"We weren't just buying a condo," says Garry, a 49-year-old IT specialist who closed on the 1,800-square-foot flat this fall. "We were buying a piece of history, a work of art."

Such flattery is well deserved for the new Myrtle Hill Historic Schoolhouse Lofts, a glorious 10-unit development inside the historic Washington Park Elementary School that took three years, dozens of neighborhood meetings with the developer and an ambitious architectural restoration effort to create.

When Jonathan Miller of Colorado Land and Home bought the shuttered 62,000-square-foot school building in 2005, it looked as if this could be yet another tale of the Disgruntled Neighborhood Group vs. the Big Bad Developer.

But parties on all sides are lauding a happy ending after a civil 18-month negotiation process and a restoration effort that earned architectural firm the Lawrence Group a 2008 Architect's Choice Award, given by the Denver chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the *Rocky Mountain News* and the city and county of Denver.

"It started out very adversarial, but it ended up being the most wonderful process," says Virginia DuBrucq, a 40-year Washington Park resident and member of the neighborhood group Friends of Washington Park School. "What they have done in the school is so wonderful."

The tale of the school began in the late 1800s, when a real estate developer named Carrie Bartels decided it was important to have civic uses in Denver neighborhoods and donated a chunk of land just east of what is now Washington Park for a school and church.

First, in 1893, came the two-room Myrtle Hill School. Then, in 1906, came an expanded five-room schoolhouse. In 1928 came another addition, designed by notable Denver architect Harry Manning. And in the 1980s came another attached building, including a gym.

For decades, the school was owned by Denver Public Schools as Washington Park Elementary School, and in its heyday in the '60s it boasted more than 600 students. Despite efforts to keep it open as a public school, it was sold in 1982 to Denver Academy and then to Denver International School, which was ultimately forced to let it go for financial reasons.

"There is an amazing story behind this building, and from an architectural perspective it is absolutely gorgeous," says Alice Gilbertson, a neighbor who, upon hearing of its sale in 2005, filed an application for landmark designation with the city of Denver. "It is such a beloved landmark to so many people."

Meanwhile, Miller, who bought the property just days after Denver International School closed its doors there, was planning to level the place and build 18 single-family homes on the three-acre property.

"It was an old building, constructed over four generations. It wasn't exactly energy efficient, and there were parts of it that were in really tough condition," Miller says. "But we were approached by neighbors, some who had grandparents or parents who went to the school. They asked me if I would hear them out."

After 18 months, multiple meetings and a unique collaboration in which some neighbors went so far as to draft architectural drawings to turn the school into something marketable, a plan was hatched: The 19,000-square-foot 1928 building would be saved and converted to lofts, while the less architecturally significant 1906 and 1980s buildings would be removed to make way for nine single-family homes and eight attached brownstone structures.

"In the end, everyone got something that was important to them," says Miller.

The crowning glory of Miller's new development is the unique 10-loft complex inside the historic 1928 building. The refurbished exterior exudes nostalgia, with its variegated red brick, terra-cotta molding, intricate decorative panels and a flag waving in the wind atop a schoolhouse flagpole.

Inside, architect Kevin Koernig, of the Lawrence Group, took pains to preserve the decorative arches that once hung over the water fountains and the wide hallways where students' lockers once hung. He even recycled the chipped slate blackboards, using the pieces to make tile for fireplaces in some of the units, and restored several exterior windows that had been boarded over.

"The grounds were pretty run down," says Koernig, a self-described history nut. "Any time you can bring an old building back to life, it is really rewarding."

For the Eadeses, who were longing to get back to their Washington Park roots after years of living in Chicago, the project of further preserving the historic feel of the former kindergarten room has been downright fun.

Rather than opt for standard track lights, Debby, an attorney, scoured the Internet and found Portland-based Schoolhouse Electric, a company that makes hand-painted schoolhouse lights. Garry did his own research and found a vintage wall map and school desk.

And when it came to modern conveniences such as flat-screen TVs and glass fireplace enclosures in the living room, they declined.

"Everyone who walks into the place is drawn to the fireplace," says Debby. "Because it is so unique, we thought it would be really neat to retain that historic character."

Already, the Eadeses say they have met several of their new neighbors, who welcomed them warmly. Those neighbors say they couldn't be happier for the couple:

"People appreciate old buildings and want to live in something that has a history to it," says Gilbert. "I walk by that school and finally it is this wonderful, majestic building again after being so forlorn for a number of years. It has been an incredible success."

## Details

\* **What:** Myrtle Hill

\* **Built by:** Colorado Land and Home Co.

\* **Acres:** Roughly 2.75 at 1144 S. High St.

\* **Features:** 10 historic schoolhouse lofts, ranging from \$565,000 to \$1.19 million; eight brownstones, from \$974,000 to \$998,500; nine single-family homes, from \$1.36 to \$1.58 million

## Timeline

**1888:** Denver developer Carrie Bartels platted Myrtle Hill and donated land for schoolhouse and church.

**1893:** Two-room schoolhouse and neighboring Methodist church completed.

**1906:** School moved one block over to its current location at 1101 S. Race St.

**1928:** Addition designed by noted architect Harry Manning (seven classrooms and auditorium).

**1980s:** Larger gym added.

**2005:** Bought by Colorado Land and Home.

**2008:** Historic Schoolhouse Lofts opened in 1928 building.