



# THE JEWEL OF COURTLAND

After falling on hard times, a historic home is restored to its former shine

By Scott Holbrook

There are many spectacular historic homes for sale in Shaker Heights, but the one at 2834 Courtland is perhaps the most surprising.

Just a few years ago, the once-stately Tudor at the corner of Courtland and Shaker Boulevards seemed to be doomed. Its destitute owner had stripped it of everything of value, including appliances, cabinets, light fixtures, radiators, all plumbing, and every other piece of metal in the house. A leaky roof and the infamous “Polar Vortex” winter of 2013-14 had conspired to leave a thick sheet of ice on the floors of several rooms in the house.





- A) Exterior courtyard and facade facing Shaker Blvd.
- B) View of the library from second floor interior balcony.
- C) First floor solarium.
- D) Detail of leaded glass featuring the Colston coat of arms.

Photos courtesy of Chesnut Hill Realty

## GRAND BEGINNINGS

The unfortunate home was now a long way from its prosperous beginnings. Completed in 1922 and designed by the prestigious architectural firm Howell & Thomas, 2834 Courtland was built as one of the first four demonstration homes commissioned by The Van Sweringen Company. Demonstration homes were built on speculation to demonstrate the quality of design and construction one could expect in this new, higher-end development.

The Van Sweringen brothers mandated high design standards and only allowed English, Colonial and French Revival styles. 2834 Courtland is an English design of brick, stucco and half-timbering, with scrolling acanthus leaves, Tudor roses and thistles incorporated into stucco elements and wood carvings. The home is 4,738 square feet (including 1933 and 1992 additions) and boasts one of the largest lots in Shaker Heights's exclusive Club Section. Its first owner, Colonel William A. Colston, was Vice President and General Counsel of the New York, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad. Colonel Colston's family coat of arms is incorporated into the exterior stucco over the garage and in the stained and leaded glass windows in the soaring, timbered library. The Colston family remained in the house until 1950.

Seven owners later, though, the house had fallen hard.

## LEGAL TANGLES

In 2013, the City of Shaker Heights declared the home a nuisance, and uninhabitable, but the bank holding the mortgage declined to make any repairs on the home. Instead, it sat on the house, paying only the property taxes to avoid losing its status as first lienholder on the property. In doing so, it was also postponing foreclosing on the property, because obtaining the home through foreclosure would trigger the bank's responsibility to fix it.

The bank also expressed interest in demolishing the home, another way to avoid the expensive work of saving this historic gem. The bank wanted to make a quick buck selling a vacant lot and wash its hands of the matter. To the bank, the Courtland house was no more than a bad debt on its books.

Shaker Heights acted swiftly to grant temporary landmark status to the home, effectively staying any moves to demolish the property. The City then immediately turned to the Cleveland Restoration Society for legal and professional help.

CRS found a complex web of legal claims upon the property, and an uncharted route for resolving them. In addition to the mortgagee bank, a number of smaller lienholders, including unpaid contractors, laid claim to interests in the home. To save the home, CRS had to secure a primary legal interest in the property, which would allow it to do the work the other lienholders were unwilling to do.



Two decades ago, CRS had successfully saved a few residences in the city of Cleveland by invoking Ohio Revised Code Section 3767.41, which allows nonprofit entities with the goal of improving housing conditions in the county to be appointed receiver of residential properties that are a public nuisance. This appointment as receiver gives the nonprofit the right to invest money in the property to abate the nuisance, and gives that investment a primary position over other lienholders.

In those cases, the innovative legal action by CRS was uncontested. This time, still to date one of the few times in Cuyahoga County the statute has been used to save a historically significant residence, there was the added complication of other interested parties who were not cooperative.

CRS, represented pro bono by myself, my partner Patrick Lewis, and our law firm Baker Hostetler LLP, made concerted efforts to negotiate with the bank and the minor lienholders to assign their liens to CRS or release them outright. The bank was unresponsive, so CRS brought the matter to court for a formal declaration of nuisance and for an injunction appointing CRS as receiver.

The bank then took an aggressive posture, opposing this action by CRS. The law firm and CRS prepped extensively for the injunction hearing seeking a formal declaration of nuisance and CRS's appointment as receiver, preparing fact and expert witnesses, including CRS Trustee Michael Chesler and Chief Operating Officer Tom Jorgensen. Just before the November 2014 court hearing, the bank finally gave up on tearing down the house and consented to an agreed court order in which it quickly approved of CRS's appointment as receiver and, for a nominal sum, assigned to CRS its interest in the house.

The house was saved in this remarkable and groundbreaking legal result—but there was more to do.

E) Remodeled master bath with original leaded glass windows.

F) Reconfigured kitchen with center island.

## RESURRECTED

Once CRS had ownership of 2834 Courtland, it immediately acted to stabilize the property—until then, for example, the roof was still leaking—to make it ready for sale to a new, responsible buyer who would complete renovations to their own tastes.

Ultimately, CRS sold the home to CCDP Investments LLC, whose principals, Dino Palmieri and Craig Cantrall, have an established track record of high-end renovations. After more than a year of intensive restoration and modernization, the property is at last restored to its former glory as a distinguished and enviable home.

The Courtland house, recently sold to a new owner, is wholly reinvented. The hardwood floors gleam again, and moldings and mantels are restored to their former shine. Not only are the home's unique architectural elements, including massive leaded glass windows, fully restored, but the floor plan has also been tweaked for modern living.

Where there was once a dated kitchen walled off from a dim interior sitting area, there is now a spacious white kitchen outfitted with top-notch appliances, a massive island, and plenty of space to gather with family and friends. A handy mudroom and all new bathrooms—including the showstopping master bath—round out the up-to-date amenities that mesh effortlessly with the home's historic pedigree.

In its 95 years, 2834 Courtland has had many owners and renovations. Surely, it doesn't look precisely like the demonstration home the Van Sweringens proudly raised in 1922. Just as surely, the Van Sweringens would approve of the home today—once again, it's a fine example of high-end living in Shaker Heights. ♣