

AWAY

The Look of Then, The Comforts of Now



By LOUISE TUTELIAN

JOHN DEWBERRY'S town house in Charleston, S.C., was standing when the British captured the city during the Revolutionary War. It was standing when the first shots of the Civil War were fired on Fort Sumter across Charleston Harbor. And it was still standing after an earthquake rocked the city in 1886. When he bought the house in 2003, Mr. Dewberry, a developer in Atlanta, wasn't about to compete with that kind of history.

"I told everyone, 'We're going to take this house back to the year it was built — 1770,'" he said, as horse-drawn carriages filled with tourists passed by outside on a spring Friday.

It took three years, but Mr. Dewberry, 45, the chief executive of Dewberry Capital Corporation, a commercial real estate company, now has the house he envisioned. It is a luxurious 21st-century home within an 18th-century structure, architecturally correct down to the proper hand-tooling of masonry grout.

Brick makers, furniture makers, wrought-iron craftsmen, masons, copper-smiths, stoneworkers, even interns from three colleges — 32 people in all — helped Mr. Dewberry turn back time. They removed every element that wasn't era-appropriate. What they couldn't restore, they recreated in minute detail. Four months of research preceded the start of the project.

"John was committed to doing the research necessary to document the structure," said James Meadors, the owner of Meadors Construction, which specializes in restoring historic architecture. "He wanted to be the current



steward of the house and preserve it."

What stands today is a 5,000-square-foot structure that has been returned to its original Georgian dimensions, its floors raised nearly two feet to correct an earlier modification, windows replaced with taller ones of period size, and brick that was either salvaged or fashioned to look 250 years old.

Cypress walls and floors reflect the patina of age — real or faux. Bluestone in the garden patio has replaced cement. Flickering copper gas lanterns frame the door.

Mr. Dewberry searched for eight years before settling on the three-story house on Meeting Street, a few blocks



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IN CHARLESTON John Dewberry and Cameron Schwabenton in his restored historic town house. The kitchen, above left, was once the stables.

from Charleston's waterfront. It had languished on the market, and for good reason. While it had a pedigree, having been the home of Henry William de Saussure, a director of the United States Mint under George Washington, it had also been a corner store for 100 years. Several ill-advised renovations later, the house needed a buyer with patience and deep pockets. Mr. Dewberry bought it in 2003 for \$1.5 million.

Two months into the renovation, he realized the project was far bigger in scope than he had imagined, and to "get it right" — a favorite phrase of Mr. Dewberry's — it would take longer and cost more. The price tag? More than twice the cost of the house itself.

Mr. Dewberry's primary home in Atlanta is a ranch house retooled to resemble a mountain lodge, but as a history buff, he was enchanted by Charleston's past. "I always said, 'If I do well enough, I'd love to have a house in downtown Charleston,'" he said.

By almost any account, he has done

more than well enough. Dewberry Capital develops office buildings, mixed-use retail space and hotels, and has \$500 million in owned assets.

He has also been a player of a different sort. Mr. Dewberry was a starting quarterback for Georgia Tech in the mid-1980s. He financed his company after college with a \$5,000 signing bonus from the Calgary Stampeders of the Canadian Football League.

As Mr. Dewberry led a tour through the house, he flashed a guileless charm combined with the Southern swagger of a Ted Turner and the relentless pitch of a Donald Trump.

But he has not been immune to misfortune. In July of 2008, he received a diagnosis of prostate cancer. Five months later, he appeared on an Atlanta news program to talk about his illness — an appearance he felt was imperative.

"It's not just the right thing to do, it's the only thing to do," he said on the program, on WSB-TV. In April, his doctor declared him cancer-free, and he is tak-

ing only hormone therapy. "No one wants cancer," Mr. Dewberry said, "but the outpouring of good wishes has released a lot of good karma into the world. I was grateful to understand how many people cared deeply about my well-being."

Despite a penchant for accuracy and a love of history, he has neither turned the house into a museum nor sacrificed contemporary comforts. "I live in every room," said Mr. Dewberry, who visits Charleston once or twice a month.

On the first floor, living and dining rooms are decorated in golds, creams and earth tones. Georgia, Mr. Dewberry's German shorthaired pointer, lounges on a chocolate-hued velvet couch in the living room. Sisal rugs cover cypress-plank floors. A portrait of Washington gazes out from a dining room wall. The painting may or may not have been done by Gilbert Stuart, Mr. Dewberry said, but the mystery makes for good storytelling, its owner's favored conversational style.

The house's original kitchen was in a separate outbuilding, which still exists on a next-door neighbor's property. In the early 1900s, owners attached the original brick stables to the house, and that became the kitchen. This 38-by-13-foot "hyphen," as it is called, was dark and utilitarian. Mr. Dewberry gutted it and installed five sets of French doors opening to a patio garden. An island has a cast stone countertop; a high-end stove and two frosted-glass-front refrigerators stand ready.

Cameron Schwabenton, an interior designer who is also Mr. Dewberry's girlfriend, completed all the drawings for the kitchen wing and was on-site nearly every day for two years. She weighed in on details like duplicating an 18th-century sand-and-shell plaster called tabby to be daubed artfully over the brick in some places. With a master's degree in historic preservation, she cast light on another role these spaces played, as slave quarters.

On the second floor, in addition to Mr. Dewberry's master suite, is a library he calls the Cypress Room, for its abundance of that wood on the walls and floor. The paneling was stripped, but Mr. Dewberry wanted to retain a sense of age, so he left flecks of paint on it.

Mr. Dewberry takes pride in summoning guests at a moment's notice. "I have an eclectic group of friends," he said. "Athletes, artists, writers — I like to gather them all here. Cameron will take a steak and rub it with rosemary, sea salt and pepper and we'll have steak, poached eggs, stone-ground grits, Champagne and mimosas for brunch," he said.

The Preservation Society of Charleston placed a plaque on the house in March, acknowledging its long history and past tenants. Mr. Dewberry is pleased with the distinction, but for him the project was its own reward, one that he plans to enjoy whenever he wants — for as long as he wants. "This house," he said, "will never be for sale."