



## REAL ESTATE

### The house that *faux* built

Introducing innovative design techniques in the name of charity

Just a few miles away in Arlington, expensive home renovation methods were recently shunned in favor of transforming a small, dated 1940s brick colonial house with creativity, paint, plaster and other techniques that only a few even know exist. It was a project that was led with big hearts and a lot of passion.

By **TINA GAMES-EVANS**  
Alexandria Times Real Estate Editor

In the name of charity, more than 50 renowned artisans and 30 national and local sponsors have given gifts of talent, over-the-edge creativity and innovative products to transform the house to benefit Habitat for Humanity-New Orleans.

This particular house, located at 1457 North Longfellow Street, was chosen for its original design lines. Having been a rental for many years, it was run down and was considered by many to be an eyesore. But, in the eyes of artists, it had great potential. "We liked the fact that it was one of the hundreds of brick colonials built in the 1940s to house pentagon workers. It's a house hundreds of Northern Virginia homeowners can relate to," said Adrienne van Dooren, Chairperson for "The House That Faux Built" project.

The project was started as a way to educate people about what faux design techniques are and how far they have come. "We wanted to show how an ordinary house can be transformed by faux rather than by ripping things out. For example, in this house, the cat stained living room parquet - deemed hopeless by many- is now the showpiece of the house. It resembles an inlaid wood oriental carpet," described van Dooren.

#### What is "faux" finishing?

One of the artists who participated in the project was Ashley Spencer, a local decorative painter and faux designer who grew up in New Orleans. She found out about the project through a friend and was eager to add her talents to the venture.

"There is a difference between decorative and faux finishing. Decorative painting is meant to be just that, a decorative enhancement of a wall or surface that is usually painted, but could be plastered or achieved with a variety of treatments. This includes treatments that produce a patina and or texture such as:



Courtesy Photos/C. Ashley Spencer  
"Trompe l'Oeil Robe with Stenciled French Pompadour Shoes," painted by C. Ashley Spencer.



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colorwashing, sponging, ragging, dragging, strie', aged and distressed, Venetian plaster and others. Its subcategories include more specialty treatments like faux finishes and murals," she explained. "Faux finishing is a decorative painting or plaster technique that is meant to look like something real, but isn't—therein, "faux" or French for fake. Faux finishing treatments usually mimic what occurs in nature - like wood grain, marble, natural or semiprecious stone or organic surfaces. Faux finishing is achieved through mastering techniques with old world and contemporary materials (many seen at the faux house) that dazzle the eye."

Spencer said that certain aspects of these painterly treatments - as well as murals and trompe l'oeil (which is a part of the mural category) are meant to literally "fool the eye." "These techniques have been around since early ancient times. In fact, mural painting can be seen in the early Lascaux cave murals as a way for man to pictorially describe and document his everyday existence."

When asked whether faux finishing was becoming the wave of the future, Spencer replied, "Throughout time, all these treatments have seen waves of popularity and resurgence as trends in decorating change with the times. Perhaps people are more aware about them now than in the past, but I don't think they are trendy. From prehistoric cave paintings to Italian villas to the French Rococo period, decorative painting, faux finishing and murals have withstood the test of time and continue to be popular despite decorating trends. Painting trends have come a long way from the stereotypical, Las Vegas, over-the-top production to more commonplace occurrences for the every day residence."

Spencer said that the Arlington project, The House That Faux Built, will show a broad array of decorative treatments that can easily be achieved by any person who is willing to try it themselves. It will also show the masterly techniques practiced by professional artists and artisans.

Spencer, who lives in Old Town, has seen evidence of history's love for these techniques. "Decorative painting has been used since the colonial days. For example, George Washington used faux blocked stone and wood grain in his Mt. Vernon home. It was a way to get a sophisticated look without having to use the real expensive materials."

**All for a good cause**

The Arlington house will be open to the public from May 15-June 15. One hundred percent of ticket proceeds will be contributed to Habitat for Humanity to build a house in New Orleans. For this reason, the project is dubbed "The House That Faux Built." As part of this project there will be a birdhouse auction in July benefiting animals made homeless by hurricanes. Private fundraising and press events will be held through the end of May. There will also be a gala cruise (along the Potomac River) on June 16 where participants can meet the artists.

"Our goal is to raise \$75,000 from these events which is what it will cost



"Trompe l'Oeil Letters on Aged Bench with Stenciled Lace Doily," painted by C. Ashley Spencer.



"New Orleans Menu on Door," trompe l'oeil by C. Ashley Spencer.



"New Orleans Menu" trompe l'oeil by C. Ashley Spencer.



us to build a Habitat for Humanity house in New Orleans," said Spencer.

Additionally, a book has been created showing the project from start to finish. "The House That Faux Built: How to Transform Your Home from Shabby to Showplace Using Paints, Plasters and Creativity" will be published showing full color before and after photos of the Arlington project (and its sister project in Chicago). It will be published in hardback by New Cambridge Press June and will retail for \$39.95. A

portion of the book profits will go to the Habitat for Humanity project in New Orleans while the remaining profits will be used to cover the \$110,000 incurred to transform the Arlington house. This amount will cover the expenses of keeping the house unoccupied for ten months. These expenses include the mortgage, taxes, utilities and various contractor fees.

"I hope everyone who has an interest in decorating and helping New Orleans back on its feet will go see The House That Faux Built. And if you can't make it, spread the word. We have posters and cards to put around town," said Spencer. "And you can always buy the book. It's a win-win for everyone."

**If you're going**

Tickets are on sale for \$20 (in advance) and \$22 (at the door). Hours will be 11 a.m.- 4 p.m. (Monday-Thursday) and 10 a.m.- 6 p.m. (Friday-Sunday). Advance showings are available to groups. Tickets for the "Meet the Artists Grand Gala Event" on June 16 will go on sale soon. For more information, contact the Project Chair, Adrienne van Dooren at [chair@fauxhouse.com](mailto:chair@fauxhouse.com) or visit the project's website, [www.fauxhouse.com](http://www.fauxhouse.com).



C. Ashley Spencer

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