

INVENTIVE ENTRANCE: A wide, concrete staircase ascends to the 6,500-square-foot loft edged with antique garden fencing.





Lofty Living

BY **ALLISON HERSH**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RICHARD LEO JOHNSON**

AS THE OWNER of Southern Antiques and Interiors — a downtown Savannah shop specializing in elegant English, French and Italian antiques — Lee Smith knows the importance of preserving history.

A Savannah native who was born on Taylor Street, Smith developed a passion for antiques at a young age, since his uncle, Arthur Smith, owned and operated one of Savannah's finest antique shops. After graduating from the University of Georgia with a degree in economics in 1982, Smith moved to Atlanta to pursue a career in the corporate business world but eventually found himself drawn back to antiques.

"It was an itch I had to scratch," he said.

This 42-year-old antiques purveyor ultimately moved back to Savannah in 1990, serving as co-owner of the Eliza Thompson House before opening Southern Antiques and Interiors in March 1994. Today, he owns and operates a successful antiques mecca whose clientele includes some of the area's wealthiest residents, as well as celebrities from New York to Hollywood.

In 1993, when he first purchased the Abercorn Street building overlooking Reynolds Square that houses Southern Antiques and Interiors, Smith left the upstairs unfinished, choosing to focus instead on converting the spacious main floor of the building into an antiques showroom. The cost of renovating both levels simply proved to be too expensive, so Smith leased part of the upstairs to a local upholsterer and occasionally used the unfinished space for out-of-town guests.

The structure itself was originally built in 1919 as a state-of-the-art Packard automobile dealership. In later years, it served as a Tucker dealership, the Motor Supply Company headquarters and an Army Corps of Engineers office.

The building's oversized front windows, which now showcase fine antiques, once housed shiny new cars. The upstairs parking garage, which once stored some of the city's finest automobiles, had long been neglected.

"It was the roughest space," Smith recalled, explaining that the upstairs was full of rotten acoustic tiles and crumbling stucco. "It was slightly worse than horrendous. It was really bad."

Last year, however, this former parking garage was given a new lease on life when the 6,500-square-foot upstairs space was converted into a luxurious loft for Smith and his two sons, Lee III, 13, and Andrew, 10.

While this distinctive home is an elegant place to entertain guests at a Saturday night cocktail party, it is also comfortable enough for Lee III and Andrew to skateboard or rollerblade through the loft's spacious interior.

Decorated with vintage paintings, rare silver and period furniture, the loft reflects Smith's lifelong love of antiques. "Antiques are a tangible part of our past, our history," he said. "They're a lot of fun."

Located on a trust lot in Savannah's National Historic Landmark District, Smith's loft is just steps away from the Lucas Theatre, The Olde Pink House and Broughton Street.

An unpainted, nondescript wood door in the rear of the Southern Antiques and Interiors provides Smith with easy access to the loft, which is also home to a burly chocolate Lab named Mo Trouble and a tiny grey and white kitten named

CREATIVE SPACES: Apple-green cabinets, stainless-steel appliances and Macintosh chairs blend with a Southern-style table to create a striking kitchen. **OPPOSITE:** A 90-foot span of open space accommodates a dining table and seating for 12. A Chinese altar table establishes an elegant seating area opening to a bird's-eye view of Reynolds Square.





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STATELY CENTERPIECE: An 1896 Brunswick Monarch billiard table is a popular gathering spot for Lee and his two sons.

Truman, who was recently rescued from the Truman Parkway. A set of double doors provides public entry from the street, with iron gates salvaged from a Paris flea market opening to reveal a grand 12-foot-wide concrete staircase that has been converted from an old automobile ramp.

Smith began renovating the upstairs loft in December 2001, finishing the project in March 2003. The thoughtfully designed and impeccably furnished space served as a featured stop on the 2003 Tour of Homes, delighting visitors with its harmonious fusion of clean, modern design and opulent antique furnishings.

With concrete walls, floors and ceilings, the renovation of Smith's living space pro-

vided a formidable design and engineering challenge. This accomplished antiques expert often had to come up with his own solutions to renovate the concrete structure.

"This renovation really taxed our design capabilities," he admitted. "It's hard to make a parking garage into a warm, cozy house. That was a real challenge."

Working from an architectural sketch developed by local urban planner Christian Sottile, Smith served as his own contractor, organizing a team of artisans and subcontractors to convert a raw, open space into a magnificent four-bedroom, three-bath home that offers plenty of room for family activities, entertaining or relaxing. "Without some creative ideas and some talented people to



MASCULINE RETREAT: Antique cabinetry is used for storage and function in the master bath (above). An impressive four-poster bed, rich fabrics and a paisley Persian rug create a relaxing sanctuary in the master bedroom.

t h e s t a t s

HOMEOWNER: Lee Smith

NEIGHBORHOOD: National Historic Landmark District

YEAR BUILT: 1919

SQUARE FOOTAGE: 6,500-square-foot loft upstairs

NUMBER OF BEDROOMS/BATHROOMS: 4 bedrooms, 3 baths

YEAR PURCHASED: 1993

AMOUNT OF TIME TO RENOVATE: 15 months

SOURCES:

- *Architect:* Christian Sottile
- *Marble, granite and soapstone countertops:* Bella Terra

- *Carpenter:* Ken Waldhauer
- *Stucco and stone:* Tim Sheehan of Specialty Construction
- *Tile and stone:* Steve House of House Details:
- *Antiques and furniture:* Southern Antiques and Interiors

THREE LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Details are important.
2. When it comes to renovation, nothing ever goes exactly as planned.
3. There's always more than one way to do things.

bounce ideas off of, the loft could never have turned out like this," Smith said.

The loft features a dramatic 90-foot span of open space running from east to west, with bedrooms, bathrooms, a kitchen and an exercise room hugging the north and south walls.

The western windows offer spectacular views of Reynolds Square, providing unobstructed views of the little park's emerald treetops. "In the morning we get that wonderful eastern sunrise through the rear windows," he explained. "At night, it really gets glamorous looking west out over the square."

The concrete floors have been scored, acid-stained and finished with a polyurethane wash to create a burnished golden patina that runs throughout the space. Nearly a dozen rare antique rugs from around the world create a warm, inviting atmosphere that softens the building's industrial feel.

Although Smith initially planned to put up walls to divide the space, he ultimately decided to maintain the integrity of the building's openness, leaving a series of concrete columns exposed and keeping the space as unconstrained as possible.

"As the plans started to materialize, it seemed like the more open space the better," he said. "I didn't want to lose the feeling of what the building was all about. I wanted to find a happy medium

between 1919 and 2004."

Smith's loft certainly makes a dramatic presentation, combining classic Southern style with a distinctly masculine edge. After climbing a stately set of stairs flanked by a converted antique wrought-iron garden fence from Philadelphia, visitors are greeted by an elegant 1896 Brunswick Monarch billiard table serving as a stately centerpiece and perched upon an antique rug. The table, which Smith had restored and refelted, frequently brings this devoted father and his two sons together for a friendly round of billiards.

"I had a pool table growing up and missed that for a long time," he said. "The pool table has become a favorite pastime for me and the boys." To the left of the billiard table, a black iron spiral staircase leads to a rooftop deck with spectacular views of downtown Savannah, by day or by night.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the furnishings in Smith's home have a unique story to tell. A restored antique mahogany sideboard from the estate of the late Jim Williams — the antiques dealer whose story was immortalized in John Berendt's best-seller "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" — graces the dining room area.

An ornate gold gilt mirror in one bathroom comes from the estate of David Byers, a former decorator for

President John F. Kennedy and Jackie Kennedy. A Steinway grand piano in the living room was once owned by the late Senator Elmer Burkett from Nebraska, who originally introduced the legislation to establish Mother's Day as an official U.S. holiday.

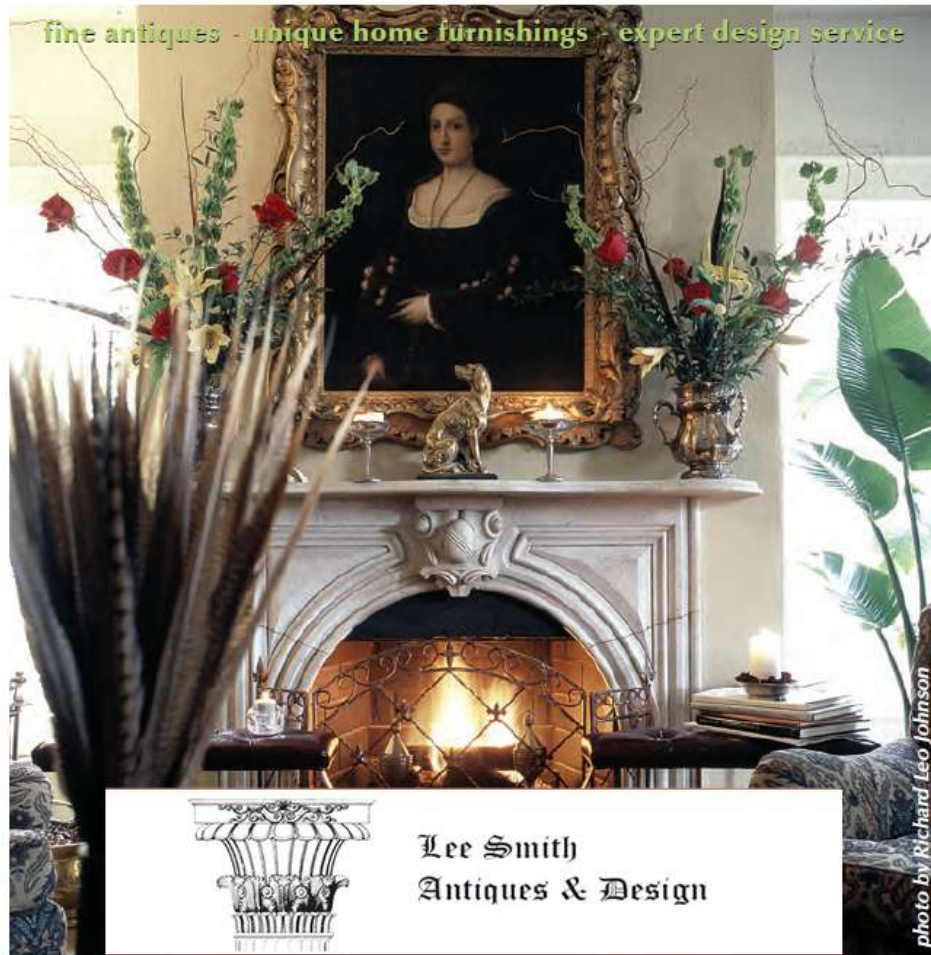
Part of what makes this loft so special is its creative approach to design challenges. An enclosed brick room in the center of the loft, for example, discreetly conceals the home's central heating and air-conditioning system while also serving as a wine closet with two climate-controlled wine cabinets. Air-conditioning ducts have been left exposed in much of the loft, leaving the original high ceilings intact and preserving the architectural integrity of the building.

Smith has furnished his home with ambitious combinations of oversized furnishings that keenly match the scale of the space. Delicate side tables or fragile accents might be lost in this expansive abode, so Smith has wisely furnished his loft with large-scale antiques, anchoring each room with one or more showpiece items.

The regal dining room, for example, features a 28-foot antique rug and a custom-made 14-foot mahogany table that seats 12, nestled beneath a pair of French iron chandeliers hung with giant rock crystal teardrops. The connecting living room showcases luxurious sofas and chairs, as well as an antique Steinway grand piano that has inspired the boys to take piano lessons.

To the left of the dining room, double doors — which were salvaged from an old Charleston townhouse and stripped to reveal intricate floral designs carved in the wood — open into a defiantly modern kitchen, with apple green cabinets, rustic soapstone countertops and high-tech halogen lighting. Tongue-and-groove heart-pine flooring has been glued directly to the original concrete floors, creating a warm foundation for this 850-square-foot contemporary kitchen. A 56-cubic-foot stainless steel sub-zero refrigerator, a six-burner Wolf industrial gas stove and other premium appliances make the kitchen a true chef's delight, while a 60-inch custom-made circular table with a lazy Susan at the center serves as a perfect place for Smith to enjoy breakfast, lunch or dinner with his two sons.

Across the hall, the master bedroom features a commanding mahogany four-



poster bed with a padded upholstered headboard and matching bedding. With pale sage walls and a Persian senna rug adorned with an intricate paisley pattern, the bedroom serves as a relaxing, contemplative sanctuary, offering respite from the antiques store below. A connecting master bath features a steam shower with a unique glass transom above the shower door, a sunken Jacuzzi tub, and a sink made from a converted antique cabinet. The master bath leads into a fully equipped fitness room with mirrored walls, an extensive selection of free weights and gym-quality exercise equipment.

The children's bedrooms, which are located in opposite corners of the loft, reflect each boy's individual passion. Lee's room features Georgian green walls that have been decorated with framed fishing lures and trophies from angling expeditions, including a menacing barracuda he reeled in during a recent deep-sea fishing expedition that is mounted over the headboard of an antique mahogany rice bed.

Andrew's room, on the other hand, reflects his love of hunting, with framed pheasant tails flanking either side of his pencil-post cherry wood bed and a stuffed deer head and animal skull hanging upon Merlot-colored walls.

The boys also enjoy a dedicated room where they can do their homework, play games or watch videos. With pumpkin-colored walls and framed ads for Remington rifles, the room offers a functional, private space with a computer on a black leather countertop, as well as ample board games and other diversions.

With a successful business to run downstairs and an antiques-filled haven upstairs, Smith seems to enjoy the best of both worlds. "The good thing is that there's only nine inches of concrete between me and work," he laughed. "But the bad thing is that there's only nine inches of concrete between me and work."

For Smith, this exquisitely renovated loft provides an ideal sanctuary where he can spend quality time with his sons. The space reflects his passion for antiques, his love for his children and his uncompromising eye for detail.

"I absolutely love it," he confessed. "It was fun to do this project because it was such a unique space. It certainly feels a lot more glamorous than your average parking garage." ■