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Peter Georgoutsos, left, and architect David Mazino go over plans together.



Georgoutsos with his electrician and plumber in his garage workshop.



The deck is a favorite place for gathering with friends and clients.





Restoration is about care and attention to detail, says Georgoutsos. Choosing the perfect picket fence — “every aspect is intentional” — took over a year.

Peter Georgoutsos is giving a tour of his newly renovated Victorian home, starting with his third-floor home office. He squats down to talk about the floor.

“Wood is something that few people truly understand,” he says. “Today, the lumber that is used to build most homes is harvested wood — it’s engineered to grow just 20 or 30 years. But the trees that were cut down and put into historic homes can be 300 or even 600 years old. It is really dense wood — solid. The hard pine found in these older homes is taken right from the middle of the tree,” he explains.

“It’s a lot different from the sugar pine cut in the South

A Passion for Perfection

Peter Georgoutsos, a restorer of historic houses, says his Van-Go Construction Company’s made more money than he knows what to do with — unless it’s pouring it into his Victorian masterpiece.

now and shipped out for building material. You step on soft pine and it dimples. And, unlike cedar and mahogany, new pine can rot on you in five or 10 years.”

Georgoutsos, 35, owns Van-Go Contracting, an historic home restoration business in Englewood, N.J. The attractive community — home to actor Eddie Murphy and U.S. Sen. Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.) — is a dream place for anyone who loves older homes. They are seemingly everywhere.

By Rebecca Clark
Photographs by Robert Kern



"I love this room," says Georgoutsos of his office. It's a work of art from the white maple floors to the ceiling with its sea of miniature blue stars.

Gothics, Second-Empire Victorians, Queen Anne Victorians, and Six-Style ones.

For almost 12 years, Georgoutsos has carved out a successful career renovating many of them — in addition to his own. An economics major in college, after graduate school he spent a short time as a financial consultant but, "I found it dry and boring," he says.

On the other hand, "I've always had a passion for older homes. Each time someone destroys a perfectly sound historic home, it's a small piece of history that's extinguished forever."

So in 1989, Georgoutsos, who had worked in construction all through school, launched Van-Go Contracting — the "van" a reference to how most contractors get around, and "go," a self-deprecating jab at his own hyper-kinetic energy.

Building a team

Single and never afraid to take a risk, Georgoutsos found it easy to go out on his own. The rough part was pulling together a team that shared his passion for perfection. His operation is small by design — 15 carpenters, painters, and other artisans. His plumber and electrician, who have their own businesses, work for him on a contractual basis.

In the past year, he and his crew have worked on over 40 projects. A job can take anywhere from three months to over a year and costs can easily double the initial price of the home. Just renovating a porch, "can run a homeowner close to \$100,000," notes Georgoutsos.

"I've made more money than I know what to do with," he reveals, "but I'm not in this business for the money. It's like a calling for me. I've got to do it." Besides, he says, "It's a lot of fun. You drive around and you look at the work you've done, and it makes you really happy. You restore something and you look at it years later and it still looks great — and it makes you proud that you were able to create something for someone that they can appreciate now and for many years to come."

Finding a dream home

Georgoutsos found his own home — a Swiss Chalet Six-Style Victorian built in the 1870s — three years ago. He was driving his truck to work when he passed the house

A renovation of the porch on a Victorian such as his can cost up to \$100,000 reports Georgoutsos. He bought his Six-Style Victorian three years ago.



"It's so nice to know my neighbors are my clients. I could live and work on this hill for the rest of my life."

and saw a "Garage Sale" sign on the front lawn. He stopped to look around. A beautiful cherry mirror quickly caught his eye. He asked the owner how much he wanted for it, and the man replied, "Ten dollars, but if you buy the house, I'll throw in the mirror for free."

The mirror now hangs on a wall in Georgoutsos's master bedroom.

For 13 months, he brought in six of his carpenters to work full-time on his purchase — "I just went crazy," he admits — and he still has more to do.

Care and attention to detail

Georgoutsos is fond of saying that historic home restoration is all about care and attention to detail. His house and grounds are proof of that. Take his picket fence, for example.

"A tremendous amount of thought went into it," he says. "I wanted a fence that would complement the house and be from the same vintage." Georgoutsos pored over magazines and historical books. There were so many fences to choose from: wrought iron, wood, fantail, picket, scroll, split rail. But he wanted one that was unique. So he began scouring for fences whenever he traveled. When he'd find one he liked, he'd stop and study it.

This went on for a year and a half. Then one day as he was traveling with a friend through a small town in upstate New York, Georgoutsos caught sight of a cedar fence that held him spellbound. "It captivated me," he says. "I liked its simplicity, but something about it was alluring. It made a statement."

He took pictures of the fence and scribbled some notes. When he returned home, he sat in his basement office with his friend David Marino, an architect with an extensive background in historic restorations who frequently works with Georgoutsos. From just my notes and photos, Dave was able to sketch the entire fence — sight unseen," he marvels. Then Marino, also a skilled carpenter, built the fence in just a few weeks.

First Marino took the 4x4-inch posts

and painted them black. Then he set them three feet into the ground with concrete footings. Next, he slipped cedar box frames over the posts, complete with cutouts done with a handsaw and router, and painted them white. Not only did this give the fence more detail — and a more three-dimensional look — but the black and white colors matched the black and white trim on the house.

"I didn't want the fence to be a barrier around the house, but instead to invite people in," Marino explains. "The fence is continuous with the house in a way that makes you feel that the whole property is pulling you inside." Georgoutsos heartily approves. "This is the perfect fence for this house!" he exclaims. "Every aspect of it is intentional. For example, the gaps between the pickets give the fence a feeling of openness, and that's important to me because I want my house to feel welcoming to clients. The sequencing was interesting, too. Each picket alternates in height — one shorter, one taller. I also wanted to give the sense that the fence is a continuation of the house — and it is. The fence has lots of angles just like the house and its double-gabled roof. For instance, the tops of all the balusters are cut at 45-degree angles."

Room to breathe

For Georgoutsos, historic home restoration is not just about perfection — it's also about letting the house and all the rooms inside it breathe their own air.

"I like to give each room its own personality," he says. "Whatever room you enter in this house, you'll see that I've created a continuity specific to the room. I think it makes a statement that way."

We head back to his office. "I love this room because I really had fun with it, and the colors make me feel energized when I talk to clients," says Georgoutsos. "I

thought that as president of my company, I should have a presidential look and an American theme."

As we step into the room, all eyes are drawn to the magnificent ceiling, wallpapered in a sea of miniature blue stars, set off by an old-fashioned lighting fixture. The walls are coated a crimson red that gives a slightly leathery look. The floor is white maple, lacquered in such a way as to bring out the natural pink tones. To complete the theme, Georgoutsos bought himself a Chippendale desk set.



Each detail in the living room exudes a passion for the period.

Working from his home is the perfect life, says Georgoutsos. "I can basically work 18-hour days, but I'm at ease with my surroundings. There's just something that happens to your stress level. You don't feel weighed down. For me, words can't describe it. It's just so nice to wake up in the morning and know that my neighbors are my clients. I could live and work on this hill for the rest of my life." □

New York writer REBECCA CLARK has a long-time interest in historic houses.

"I just went crazy," jokes Georgoutsos. Six carpenters worked full-time on his home for 13 months after he bought it — and there's more to do.

