



A creative
Montgomery,
Alabama, couple
transforms
a forgotten
firehouse into a
welcoming home

HOT PROPERTY

By **Jeff Book** • Photography by **Steve Gross & Susan Daley**



WHEN DAVID BRALY AND MARK MONTOYA went looking for a new place to live in Montgomery, Alabama, they knew they weren't interested in a conventional home. "We wanted a live/work property—we were thinking of Europe and Asia, where a lot of people live above their shops," Montoya says. They found an uncommon opportunity for just that: an old fire station languishing unused in Montgomery's historic Garden District, a former streetcar suburb developed around the turn of the last century.

The building, which originally bore the city-designated moniker "Firehouse Nine," seemed ideal for a couple of artists with a talent for transformation. Both men enjoy painting and drawing as a complement to their day jobs as an architect with Montgomery-based McAlpine Tankersley Architecture (Braly) and a landscape designer (Montoya). They envisioned the ground-floor equipment bay as their studio, and the upstairs as an urbane apartment.

Firehouses are, after all, one of America's oldest live/work building types, around since at least the mid to late 1800s. Built to last, they've been repurposed as everything from restaurants to offices to inns. Records of this one's original plans and early history were likely destroyed, ironically, in a 1932 conflagration that gutted Montgomery's 1871 city hall. "We know the station started operating shortly before the U.S. entered World War I," Braly says. Oddly, it closed not long after opening. "We think the city may have lacked funds for it, since they gave it a galvanized steel fire pole instead of a brass one," Montoya adds. (The fire pole still occupies a place of honor in the main living area and studio.)

Firehouse Nine lay vacant for several years, then served as an annex for a neighboring public school, with a lunchroom on the ground floor and a classroom above. "The floor in our living area has holes where desks were attached," Braly says. In 1948 the building reopened as a firehouse, with a small rear addition holding a new ground-floor kitchen and upstairs bath. At some point its municipal role changed again, and it became a radio communications facility (hence the antenna tower still attached to the back of the building).

Despite its various uses, the original structure was largely intact when Braly and Montoya found it. The firehouse wasn't officially for sale, but the couple identified city officials willing to part with the 0.3-acre property for \$110,000. Then they confronted a hurdle that often arises on the way to adaptive reuse: the extra effort required to establish the building's new zoning status as a private residence and secure a loan for an unconventional dwelling.

"We had to ask the city to replat the property to divide it from adjacent city property—the school building and parking lot next door—and to rezone it as a home," Braly says. "To get a loan, I had to do a presentation of floor plans and interior drawings, which I also showed the neighborhood design review board." His well-honed ability to make beautiful architectural renderings helped clear the red tape, and the sale closed in early 2007.

The building is not a designated historic landmark, so the authority of the city's Architectural Review Board is largely limited to changes to the street facade. The new owners could have made jarring changes. But Braly is used to designing deft interpretations of historic styles. He's also a former president of the board of Montgomery's main preservation group, the Landmarks Foundation. The group has helped save and restore 50 historic buildings, many of which are clustered downtown in an area known as Old Alabama Town.

Montoya, for his part, is just as enamored of vintage architecture as Braly. There was no chance these two were going to violate the spirit of the old firehouse.

Early on, friends gave them theme gifts, "like a



ceramic Dalmatian," Montoya recalls. "Thank god it wasn't a real Dalmatian!" Braly jokes. That soon stopped when they made it clear they were not creating a shrine to the hook-and-ladder past but a home for the present—one that would still preserve the building's character. "We were going to figure out how to live in a firehouse, not turn a firehouse into something pretending to be a regular house," Montoya says.

It helped that the existing design was already close to their needs. "We really didn't change much except to make it more like it used to be," Braly says. The ground-floor engine bay was studio-ready, with a lofty ceiling and good natural light from side windows and two amply glazed, wooden garage doors. "The garage doors are operable," Montoya notes. "So we could still put a fire truck in there, but it would have to be a small one." They built a central wall for hanging artwork and turned the 1940s-era kitchen into a guest bedroom.





PREVIOUS PAGES

A classically inspired mural painted by the house's owners; the street view of the former fire station

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

The firehouse's main upstairs room now serves as a graciously appointed living space, complete with fire pole; the garden walls consist of salvaged brick and rubble; a mirrored arch was added over a hallway door; owners Mark Montoya (left) and David Braly; Montoya, a landscape designer, created a series of connected outdoor rooms



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE:
For a short video about Firehouse Nine, visit PreservationNation.org/online.





TOP
Beadboard wainscoting in the new second-floor kitchen

CENTER
One of the house's two cozy dens opens into the sunlit living room.

BOTTOM
The owners' artistic touches enliven both indoor and outdoor spaces.

The studio's concrete floor, they discovered, was a later addition—when the station was built, the ground floor was dirt, in keeping with the horse-drawn equipment of the time. “That explained the door a few feet up the staircase,” Montoya says. “They would close it to keep the horses from going upstairs.”

On the second level, the big front room that sheltered firefighters, schoolkids, and radio techs proved ideal for the multipurpose open floor plan Braly and Montoya favored. With a new kitchen installed at one end, it became an airy living/dining/cooking space, unified by symmetrical pairs of windows and original pine flooring. Eclectic furnishings reflect an appreciation of traditional craftsmanship. Paintings by local artists mingle with prints by Piranesi, Rossini, and other Old World masters.

An extra-wide hallway leads from the living area to the more private spaces. “We kept the walls where they were,” Braly says. “The original design was like an

old center-hall plan or, more rustically, a dogtrot house. The great thing about the hallway is that it's more than 6 feet wide. At that width, you can put furniture against the walls, so it can be a place to linger, not just pass through.” One of his only alterations was to highlight the hallway's grand proportions by turning the rectangular entrance from the living area into an archway.

Flanking the hall are two cozy dens with corner fireplaces. “They were originally coal-burning, and the chimneys had been bricked up,” Braly says. “We opened them up and put in gas-fueled inserts, so they're working once again.” Inspired by the angled fireplaces, he and Montoya gave each den a corner cabinet, as well as space-saving, barn-style sliding doors to the hallway.

The couple papered the master bedroom (originally a kitchen, then an office) with pages from old volumes of Grolier's encyclopedias. “They're laid lengthwise, like bricks,” Braly says, “which means you can read



them while lying in bed.” The bath added in the 1940s had ample room for a large shower and sink stand, the latter another example of adaptive reuse: Its ornate wrought-iron base, purchased at a local antiques shop, once graced a French balcony.

As artists and designers, Braly and Montoya put their own stamp on the building. Together they created a mural depicting classical architectural details that starts in the hallway and continues down the staircase. The living area’s steel chandelier, designed by Braly and crafted by local lighting artisan Kevin Reilly, wraps around a mirrored orb; Montgomery metal artist John Phillips designed and fabricated a sinuously curved grate for the fire pole opening. In the studio, Montoya built a table with a driftwood base around a load-bearing column.

In the backyard, he used salvaged bricks and rubble to fashion a tranquil garden recalling Roman ruins. The series of lush green spaces is punctuated

by assorted sculptures, a fountain, and a folly. “Since they rescued it, the firehouse has blossomed, literally and figuratively,” says the couple’s friend Mary Ann Neeley, former executive director of the Landmarks Foundation.

Even with a new kitchen and bath, the project’s remodeling costs were low. Braly and Montoya did all of the painting themselves, leaving the electrical and plumbing work to the pros. In the end the cost of their new home, including purchase price and renovation expenses, came to less than \$80 per square foot—a tribute to the value of reviving an old building.

As Neeley likes to say, “Every building deserves an ally.” Indeed, Firehouse Nine found two excellent allies in David Braly and Mark Montoya. **D**

JEFF BOOK has written about design and travel for magazines such as *Travel & Leisure*, *Smithsonian*, and *GQ*. His most recent *Preservation* story was “Greene & Greene and Green” in the September/October 2010 issue.

TOP
The former fire engine bay makes a perfect spot for an art studio.

BOTTOM
A local artist designed and made the metal grate that covers the firepole opening in the main living area.