

Living in a “Moffitt House”

I love!

16th Century — and Ahead of its Time

by Jeff Schabillion

Homeowners tell us about their quaint and quirky Moffitt houses.

FOR ME, the nicest part of living in one of Moffitt's stone cottages has been that it is the kind of house that strongly appeals to many people's curiosity and imagination — and I enjoy sharing in their wonder. I remember on one Halloween overhearing a four-year-old dressed in a witch's costume loudly inform her parents that she would not go up to my door trick-or-treating because she was certain that a real witch must live there. Then there was the time one spring evening when a

young couple, walking by arm in arm, stopped to admire the garden and jokingly commented that the house looked like it should have a brass plaque on it reading “Home of Shakespeare's Grandmother.” Or the time I answered a knock at the door to find a retired art historian who proceeded to introduce himself and deliver an impromptu lecture on how the house was an architectural gem incorporating features from sixteenth-century Cotswold vernacular, nineteenth-century English Picturesque, and



Nine interior levels add visual space to this small stone Moffitt house. Continuing Moffitt's labor-intensive style, current owner Jeff Schabillion has added the stonework in the front yard. He describes his home on these pages. See page 155 for another view of the house.

PHOTO BY MATTHEW J. CARPENTER

the twentieth-century Arts and Crafts Movement, et cetera, et cetera. Now you've got to admit that there aren't many houses around that can singlehandedly evoke fear, humor, and scholarly admiration from passersby.

The interior of my Moffitt stone cottage seems larger than the exterior suggests, because the rooms are arranged on so many different levels (nine levels if you include the attic, basement, and cellar). Although many of the rooms are rather small, they seem larger because they borrow visual space by opening into adjoining rooms and staircases. The inclusion of unusual architectural features

throughout the house, along with special rooms such as the dungeon-like cellar and a "secret" room that is entered through what looks like a linen closet door, all help make the interior especially memorable.

Although many of Howard Moffitt's construction practices were initially considered unorthodox and controversial, it's interesting to note that some of them have present-day counterparts and supporters. Advocates of recycling should be pleased to learn that salvaged lumber, bricks, foundation stones, windows, and doors were regularly used in constructing the cottages. In some cases

energy conservation was enhanced by insulating walls and attics with sawdust. Passive cooling and solar heating were facilitated in those houses built into hillsides or with thick stone walls or poured concrete floors. Even Moffitt's practice of using railroad or trolley car rails to support joists seems less bizarre when viewed from the perspective of the subsequent widespread use of steel T- and I-beams in the construction of ranch-style houses. In many ways Moffitt's cottages are unique blends incorporating the best of both old and new. □

Affordable Housing and True Artistry

by Linda Brown-Link

WHEN I go walking in Iowa City, I often choose the neighborhoods with quirky, kitschy Moffitt houses. These mystical dwellings look as if Germanic elves constructed houses for Irish pixies, and tucked them away among homes where normal folk live. It's this incongruity of these European-cottage-inspired homes that completes their charm. In England or France, each would be just another picturesque abode among so many. In Iowa, however, they fascinate passersby, demand attention, and inspire imaginings of faraway places and times. Just one Moffitt original can transform a whole block into an other-worldly realm.

I first experienced a "Moffitt" years ago and thought that it was the type of place where I belonged — a home for the eccentric-at-heart who loves the old and unique but must do so on a budget. Thus I had been

hooked long before a realtor's sign appeared in front of one of Moffitt's most funky creations. The day we signed the final papers was when my own personal version of the American dream came true.

Coincidentally after moving into my house, I discovered that Howard Moffitt, the eccentric builder who died in 1982, was my cousin. This connection delights me, and I occasionally talk to Cousin Howie (as I like to think of him) in both appreciative and derogatory tones. These communications become good-natured curses when resolving mysterious plumbing techniques, re-wiring dangerous electrical connections, jacking up sagging floors, or negotiating a roof with a 65-degree pitch. I bemusedly tolerate these and other inconveniences because it is all a part of the Moffitt experience of genuine comfort tempered by questionable construction techniques.

Surprisingly to most visitors, the interior lacks the rich woodwork and other Anglo trappings that one would expect, judging from its bit-of-old-England facade. Yet, the simple, rough-plastered walls, plain oak floors, sparse millwork, and bungalow layout provide me and my dog with perfect cottage coziness. The interior, like the exterior, is another testament to the positive manner in which Moffitt's thriftiness and ingenuity melded with the designer's eye for style. In other words, cheap can be attractive when done with the right balance of flair, salvager's mentality, and tasteful restraint. The important lesson being that affordable housing does not have to mean look-alike boxes, and can even mean true artistry. I thank Cousin Howie for this contribution to local color, and for providing me with a home suited to my sense of identity. □