ILLUSTRIOUS F A - U P

The couple who looked at a derelict mansion and saw a museum

By CHANNING GRAY
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Laurence and Judy Cutler had just one requirement when they went looking for a new house — room enough to hang their art collection.

The thing is the Cutlers are anything but your average art lovers. Over the years they’ve amassed a couple of thousand paintings valued at $150 million. They needed space in a big way.

So when a real estate agent showed them Vernon Court, a rundown 52-room mansion on Newport’s Bellevue Avenue, they knew they’d found the right place.

“It was two or three times more than I planned to spend,” said Laurence, who’d looked in vain for suitable properties in Maine and Georgia. “But when I saw Judy’s face, I knew this was it.”

“I never saw a more perfect space,” said Judy, who owns an art gallery on New York’s upper East Side. “It was love at first sight.”

The Cutlers, childhood sweethearts who married five years ago, have spent the past year and pots of money restoring Vernon Court, plugging leaks in the roof, rebuilding chimneys and installing new heating and air-conditioning systems — with 32 zones.

Now they plan to open the ground floor of their home to the public as the first museum dedicated to the heyday of American Illustration. Starting late next month, visitors to the National Museum of American Illustration will be able to stroll through marble-floored loggias and ornate salons filled with paintings and drawings by the likes of Norman Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish and N.C. Wyeth.

The Cutlers are also planning to turn a vacant lot they own across the street into a public park honoring famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. The grounds, once the site of Shooesacre, a lavish mansion that burned, were designed by Olmsted in the 1880s. The mammoth beeches he planted will stand.

“Most of the good art that was once in Newport was sold off years ago,” said Laurence. “We’re bringing a lot of it back in a museum setting.”

But for all its grandeur, its high-security fences, 13 fireplaces, dozen baths, and 1,500 square feet, Vernon Court is just plain old home to the Cutlers.

When guests dropped by the other night, Laurence picked on the fountain in the rose garden and cracked open a bottle of bolognese. Judy retreated to the kitchen outfitted with the kind of high-end, heavy-duty appliances you’d expect to find in a restaurant, and whipped up a simple meal of pasta and grilled chicken.

The onlyipple in an otherwise placid day occurred when Laurence had to chase away a group of French tourists he found poking about the grounds.

“Everyone says this is the time in life to downsize,” said Judy, 57. “But we thought why not try it. You only live once.”

Laurence, a 59-year-old architect who once taught at RISD and has had offices the world over, took an immediate shine to Vernon Court, which is next door to Chateau sur Mer. As Newport mansions go, he said, “this is one of the best.”

Built at the turn of the 18th century, it was a French chateau style, the main house is beautifully proportioned, giving it a livable feel, despite 25-foot-high ceilings and 15-foot-high doors.

The Cutlers are at home with a vast art collection

Continued from the cover

It was the rented firm of Careme and Gaudins, architects of the New York Public Library, that created Vermont Court for Miss Rhoda Grey, an acquisitive patroness. The two architects trained at Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, and their work reflects a faithful adherence to the French notion of balance and elegance, unlike some of the overcrowded homes along Madison Ave.

The grounds, these acres defined with reproductions of Michelangelo and other famous works, were landscaped after the garden of Henry VII’s birthplace, where Sir Walter Raleigh lived.

A modern, unground pool and numerous terraces were the only features that took out of place.

The 18th-century Charger’s interior is the work of the Allan family of Sheffield, a Puritan firm that took its roots in the Middle Ages and had its mainstay in the French Antiques, Furniture and Interior Design. A modern, unground pool and numerous terraces were the only features that took out of place.

A Drawing of Scouting

A DETAIL from one of the many

ARCHITECT Laurence Cutler took

A detail, one of the many

WALLS AND CEILING in the south lobby have trompe l’oeil latticework lids with flora, fauna and cherubins.

To protect the paintings from the ele-

mations, framed windows were instal-

led on the first floor, along with a climate control system, which meant all

dust work had to be mixed and applied to the walls and ceilings.

“Who made it?” Laurence said of the air conditioning. “It was hard for me, because I can’t see where all the money went.”

Julie and Laurence, who grew up outside New Haven, Conn., were both married before they met in New York City. They have collaborated on their books about Manxfield Parian, whose features include a book, catalog and magazine during the first half of the 19th century. A fifth volume on Parian is due out early this year.

Although the Cutlers moved out of their home on the third floor, they kept the collection intact, yet share it with the public.

The couple, who keep homes in New York and New Hampshire, plan to live for the rest of their lives in a second floor of Vermont Court, at least during museum hours. The 14 rooms on the third floor will be used for storing art, a library and office space for the museum.

Their collection boasts the largest number of Rockwell’s private hands, 120 paintings, and the biggest block of Parian works anywhere. 50 paintings and some 600 prints, etchings and assorted memorabilia. They also own some 70,000 prisms.

A series of high-quality panels are a Parian mask, Franklin Fox, from the opusmores of the 19th century. They were brought from the Museum of the American Art and installed in the lobby of the museum.

“The most American of American art,” said Laurence. “It’s significant stuff.”

The museum is his favorite at the museum, although a museum shop is planned to be housed in the basement. The opening is set for late next month and has been fittingly delayed. The opening ceremonies will take place on March 1 and on the Fourth of July. 2000. Information on the museum is available over the Internet at amomuseum.com.

The Glencairn Legacy Park, located on the main campus across the street, will probably be open next spring. The Cutlers also plan to erect a monument on the site to famed architect Louis Kahn. That will be in the form of a brick arch Kahn designed for the India Institute of Management in Ahmedabad.

Laurence Cutler envisioned the park as a place for meditation and reflection, where people can sit and watch the flow of flowers and mosses. It is a garden of flowers and mosses. It is the first national memorial to a landscape architect,” he said. “Usually monuments are to politicians and generals, but it’s rare to honor designers.”

Taking on Vermont Court — raising the house, opening a museum and park — has been daunting for the Cutlers, and they have no regrets. "I can’t tell you how lucky we feel to have found a place like this," said Laurence, who can house a major collection of art, a significant piece of architecture.