A Passion to Preserve

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Ken Miller was born in Denver, Colorado, in 1947. After completing an undergraduate degree in history he served in the Peace Corps in Iran, then returned to the United States, and completed graduate degrees in religion and Middle Eastern studies. Following a fellowship in Egypt, Miller moved back to Denver. There he met Larry Lyons, his lover and business partner, who died from AIDS in 1992.

ONE DAY IN THE MID-1970s, traveling from downtown back to my mother’s place, where I was living at the time, I drove through a section of Denver that I had never experienced. When I was growing up, there were areas of the city you didn’t go to, streets you didn’t cross. I never understood why; that was just the way it was. But here I was, driving through Swallow Hill, one of the older sections of town. Denver at that time had just the slightest inclination toward urban revitalization and preservation. These things may have been roaring on the East and West Coasts and in Chicago, but in Denver they were barely surfacing.

Living and traveling abroad, I’d been exposed to so much historic architecture. I had actually become more interested in the architecture than in my academic studies. As I drove down this street in Denver, passing one decaying Victorian building after another, I was absolutely captivated. When I looked over at an incredible terrace, I thought, I want to live there. That was the first place I went looking for an apartment, and they had one for rent, so I moved in. The building was home to a lot of hippies and other marginal types, and everybody formed a wonderful little community within the building. It was the perfect environment for me, and I became absolutely enamored with American architecture of that period. I knew nothing about it; I just knew that it engaged me.

I met a gay man who had gotten into decorative painting on the West Coast, and he invited me to get involved in that work with him during what proved to be his brief stay in Denver. That was my introduction to preservation. We worked in an old Victorian home in the Curtis Park area, one of the first districts in Colorado to be put on the National Register, an intact neighborhood abutting the downtown. I realized there was something going on here that I not only enjoyed but was excited by and wanted to learn more about. At that time in Denver there wasn’t anybody who knew a damn thing about interior restoration, so anything that we wanted to do had to be researched. With my academic background I was well suited to that.
Within a few months I asked another gay man with whom I had become acquainted if he might be interested in going into business with me. Maybe there was some potential there. Both of us had nothing, so we had nothing to lose. We jumped into it head first, neither of us with any academic background in preservation or art. This man who became my business partner also became my lover. So Larry and I had a unified and very focused life. We survived financially by pooling whatever minor resources we had and putting all our effort into promoting and doing what we could with this crazy idea, dealing primarily with restoring historical interior finishes and design.

I met Larry because he lived in the same building, the fabulous Queen Anne terrace in the Swallow Hill area. We eventually moved in together, and then when that building was sold, we traded work for rent and moved into an 1880s sandstone house that was on the other side of the city but still in the inner city. By that time we were so completely immersed in the Victorian environment that there were no alternatives. I would not consider living anywhere else. I tell people that I’ve lived in all the great slums of Denver. Of course, now they’re so yuppified that you couldn’t get near them with three hundred grand, but back then it was a different story.

The late 1970s and early 1980s was the period of the West’s great oil boom, so there was a lot of money. People who weren’t necessarily preservationists were getting involved in property development in a Wild West kind of way: nobody knew about these parts of town, but the buildings were good deals, and, what the hell, what have we got to lose? So Larry and I began doing projects for some of these people. Of course, we palmed ourselves off as experts even though we didn’t know a damn thing about most anything. We would tell people that we knew all about it, then come home and try to figure out how in hell to do what we had just promised. I named our business The Grammar of Ornament, after the book with that title.

One day we were just driving down the street, and there was a fabulous 1920s kind-of Beaux Arts house that had been donated to the city as headquarters for the adjoining botanic gardens. A sign out front said that a ceiling restoration project was being funded by the Colorado Historical Society. Larry suggested that we stop in, and, to make a long story short, we talked ourselves into the job. Our experience has been that if we don’t know about something, we’ll find someone who does. The person who ran Historic Denver lived at the other end of our block, and through her I got in touch with a guy who worked for the National Park Service and also did paint color analysis. We asked him if he would help us. People were very gracious, understanding that we didn’t know what we were doing but respecting our desire to learn and to do things correctly.
After that project we went back to doing private homes when they were available. There were periods when we had nothing, when we had to take second jobs, and then we managed to get a project at the United States Mint downtown. Unfortunately at the time of Larry's death we were at the threshold of our most successful period. In the years since, I've been the recipient of the fruits of our labor up until that time, and the inheritor of Larry's drive and commitment.

The house that Larry and I purchased in the Curtis Park historic district was almost completely derelict. But it was the size and style we wanted, and we could never have afforded a house like this already renovated. We got into it like a couple of guys on a tree-house adventure, with totally unrealistic expectations about money and time and effort. Thank God, we were ignorant. We moved in and began the process, which I thought would take five years. My, how time flies. I've been here for a little over eighteen years, and just last year I finished the interior.

About a year after we got into this house, the oil crash hit, the economy went flat, and we saw people losing things all over. People had moved into these big old houses, mortgaged themselves to the hilt, borrowed massive amounts of money to renovate, and then lost everything. Larry and I decided that the house had to be done with cash and that we would do as much of the work ourselves as we could. We were not going to jeopardize our home by borrowing money, which we couldn't have done anyway.

I was never trained in preservation, and I had no art training whatsoever. Why did I end up doing this? From my earliest memories I was always fascinated with houses and what happened inside them. Two things that were extremely important to me as a child: One Christmas I got an absolutely fabulous toy gas station, one of those little 1950s metal things with the cars and ramps and garage doors. A couple of years later I wanted a miniature house. Well, of course, there was only one way to describe it then: a dollhouse. I got it, and I don’t remember anyone freaking out about it. After all, I hadn’t asked for dolls.

Most of the houses in the area where I grew up were built from about 1900 to about 1920. They were what we call Denver Squares. Contemporary houses didn’t appeal to me because they didn’t have a past. We lived a block from my grandparents, so I formed a very close relationship with them and loved spending time in their home. My grandmother had begun collecting antiques from the time she was first married, about 1917, so she had old pieces and the stories that went with them. I would spend a lot of time hanging out with her: Tell me about this. Where did you find this? What does this mean? She had collected and maintained an enormous amount of family history, letters and artifacts that went back to 1815 and earlier. All these
things fed my interest. Now I’ve become the repository of all that stuff, which
I’m currently farming back out to the relatives.

I’ve always loved history. As a five-year-old I was cutting things out of
the newspaper that had to do with old dynastic families. Good Lord, I could
hardly even read. I did a lot of yard work in the neighborhood in the sum-
mers, and any money that I earned I would spend at antique shops with my
grandmother. I became fascinated with a type of pressed glass that was a
ruby red color. I didn’t particularly care what the object was; I just loved the
color. When I would go to the Saturday movie matinees, I was obsessed with
movies that had anything to do with lost cities or people finding treasure. I
was always fascinated by the past, anything old, anything hidden, anything
unrecognized.

For more than ten years Larry and I were the preeminent interior
restoration consultants in Colorado. There was no one else doing it, so we
ended up working on all the major preservation projects in the state. Eventu-
ally they played out, and there hasn’t been a lot in the years since. Around
the time Larry died, we had begun a major shift away from preservation.
Now I deal almost exclusively with very high-end residential projects.

Preservation has all sorts of wonderful things about it, but it doesn’t
pay shit. No one ever has any money. They can have a ten-million-dollar
project, and by the time they bring you in, they say that they ran over budget
on everything else, so all they have left for you is ten bucks. That may be fine
when you’re young and if you’re willing to live the starving artist lifestyle,
getting along by the seat of your pants. But I was never interested in leading
a bohemian life. We needed to go where there was money.

Now I design and execute painted period interior pieces: eighteenth-
century Adam ceilings, Louis XV ceilings, Tudor Revival things. So, I’ve left
preservation in the strictest sense, but what I do is still part of the historical
continuum. There’s nobody in the state of Colorado qualified to do what
Larry and I used to do. Now they have to haul someone in from New York
and pay through the nose to get restoration stuff done.

Nobody around here would ever study with us; no one was ever inter-
ested in learning to do what we did. Out here in the rootin’-tootin’ West,
men do not get involved in my profession. They may get involved in preser-
vation, but being an architect is the only way that is socially acceptable. Oth-
wise, you’re too artsy-fartsy and suspect. I got so tired of women, only
women—and I’m not a misogynist—but I just wondered, isn’t there a man
out there who’s interested in this? What’s the problem? Do they consider
this effeminate? You go to the East or West Coast and that doesn’t play any-
more, but in the West it still does. It’s not regarded as a manly thing to do.
You’re a “fop decorina,” as we say.
Larry and I poured ourselves into the revival of a late 1880s Queen Anne house, one of America’s icons of family, heritage, tradition. In my family and social circle, everybody wanted to come to our house for Christmas and other holidays. Our involvement in preservation has involved us in the resuscitation and safekeeping of all our pasts. This house and a handful of houses around it were scheduled to be demolished for a telephone switching station. I’ve wanted to make sure that whenever I give up this house, it would never occur to anybody to demolish it. Of course, demolition is legally impossible now.

Denver destroyed most of its downtown through urban renewal. They leveled blocks and blocks of our history to make room for parking lots. It went on in the 1960s and 1970s and 1980s and 1990s; they’re still doing it. Now, if it’s Victorian, it’s safe. But if it’s a magnificent International style building from the 1930s, they don’t give a damn. Tear it down. Destruction in Denver is an ongoing thing because the city is so pumped-up on money and its sense of self. That’s pretty typical of Western cities, and Denver has done that ever since it was founded.

We lost the downtown. All we had left were the neighborhoods. Thank God, the block I live on has been city landmarked. Because of the economic boom and downtown development, and because this area is a ten-minute walk from the middle of downtown, our property values have gone through the ceiling. As a self-employed person, I see this as my retirement. It’s one of the few times that I can say, boy, it was a crapshoot and I won on this one. But I have no intention of leaving this house until I cannot physically maintain the property. I’m an inner-city rat. When I visit people who live “outside,” I get creepy-crawlies after a few hours away. I want to return to my neighborhood, my culture.