

Why I chose to build the Owens' House from Practical Magic

Since I was a little girl I've loved doll houses and wanted one of my own but never had one. As I grew older this metamorphosed into a love of old houses (perhaps that's what it always was) and I started to collect magazines on old houses and articles on doll houses. This grew into a desire to have an old house myself and fix it up, but living in Canberra the oldest houses are from the 1920s and 1930s unless you're one of the landed gentry and come from one of the old homesteads around Canberra. Nothing like the Victorian splendiferous mansions I used to gaze at in wonder as I trundled along the railway line in Sydney (where I grew up). I used to look out of the train window at these spectacular old houses with their towers and cupolas and stained glass windows and wonder what it was like to live in a house like that, with nooks and crannies, places to hide away and read a book, like Jane Eyre curled up in a window seat, buffered from the world. I would have loved to live in a house like that but it seemed an impossible dream.

So you can imagine how charmed I was by the house in Practical Magic, as others have commented, it is almost a character in the story itself, and I fell in love with its pretty character, somewhat Gothic but also modern and homey. I loved the world of the imagination that house represented - a world where strange women lived, misfits and outsiders, hated and revered at the same time, supremely confident in their own strange abilities, except for Sally, who wore her strangeness with discomfort. I so related to the character of Sally, always strange, always 'other' and targeted and abused for my strangeness and never really knowing how to embrace it and make it part of me and who I am. I longed for the acceptance that the Aunts displayed, while I also longed for the normality that Sally craved. I loved that the house was a woman-only world where violent men got their come-uppance, where women reigned supreme, where children were loved and free to be themselves, where the garden grew with wild abundance, where everything was beautiful.

After a particularly difficult few years in my life I needed the balm and therapy of a project that would take a long time to make, keep my hands busy, keep my mind occupied, and was completely selfish and self-indulgent. I decided to make my dream house a reality! I'd spent a wonderful summer, the summer of 2008/09, the last before my beautiful son became a boy-man, dreaming up how the house would be in a 3-dimensional world instead of a celluloid world. The tragedy of its disappearance after production shooting ceased seemed to me to be worth resurrecting, if only to give my mind a place to go and curl up in a window seat with a book.

My son helped me by building a 3-D model of the house in Google Sketch-up and we enjoyed a lovely several weeks of the summer holidays nutting out together how the building's shapes would fit together and coming up with solutions between the exterior set and the interior studio scenes (which don't quite fit together!). It's a precious memory that I will treasure forever, and I thought it would end at the computer model but after it was all finished and I could walk around virtually within the house I started to feel the tug of making it real.

*Here was my project, and it fitted all the criteria. I set out to make the house from scratch with few woodwork skills, but a delight in learning something new, loaded with lots of plans, designs and information from the website, *Amas Veritas*, a fan-site which is beautifully designed and fits in very well with the feel of the house. In searching around this website, the official site, and other sites I remembered that I had kept an article about the house from years before, from *Victoria* magazine, so was able to dig it out and had excellent reference shots of the interiors and garden as a result.*

After around two years of hard work I have finally finished this project and I had so much fun making it along the way, even though it was a lot of hard work, a lot of problem-solving on the job, designing and re-designing aspects of the building, adapting the original design to work in the real world and with the supplies I had available. I've decided that I'm not the world's best builder and probably never will be as everything about the house seems to have come out sort of wobbly-looking and off-centre, but somehow the house doesn't seem to mind. It gives it a feel of age, of magic, that perhaps a perfectly straight house would not achieve. I had a lot of fun over the two years imagining what the lives of the characters would have been like in such a house and invented little worlds for them, so they now have a laundry and bathroom and other practical features like that, as well as items in their personal drawers which hopefully indicate the sort of personality they have. I loved the idea of hiding things away in drawers and cupboards so wherever I could I did that and tried to make them fit the space. I dreamed about what sort of colours the Aunts would have in their bedrooms, they both have such different personalities - Aunt Frances so vibrant, mystical and bold, while Aunt Let is more calm, quiet and gentle but with a wicked sense of humour. Somehow the magic of this story, of Alice Hoffman's story, seeped into my soul, made me feel better about myself and gave me several window seats to curl up in imaginatively. I now have a tower to climb and I can stare out to sea any time I like, even though I live 200km away from the sea. And I finally know what it's like to live in one of those glorious Victorian mansions with a tower and dormer windows and yes, window seats.

So here's a heartfelt thank you to Alice Hoffman for your evocative, lovely story, and Griffin Dunne for your beautiful inspiring movie, and especially to Robin Standefer for the house you designed that has a soul, and for allowing people like me to have our souls healed and our imaginations inspired with the ephemeral effects of your story, told beautifully and evocatively with cellulosid images.

Heather Aspinall

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