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<https://peninsulapress.com/2021/11/16/one-of-the-130-year-old-painted-ladies-is-getting-a-climate-friendly-makeover/>



When first-time homeowner Leah Culver was looking to buy a home in early 2020, the software engineer wasn't looking for a fixer upper. And yet, that's what she found herself with after her dream home – a Painted Lady on Steiner Street – went on the market.

“The home is nearly 130-years old, and it is in need of some repair, to put it lightly,” Culver said. “However, I fell in love with the home and the location in the Alamo Square neighborhood.” The seven “Painted Ladies,” have become one of the most photographed places in the city. The colorful 1890s Edwardian and Victorian houses have become a city landmark, framed by the backdrop of San Francisco's skyscrapers. Tourists line the park, the simultaneous click of a dozen cameras capturing the famous “postcard row.”

Leah Culver bought the 714 Steiner Street property in January 2020 for \$3.55 million, significantly above the original \$2.75 million asking price. Her purchase made national news. It was only the second Painted Lady to go on the market since 2004. The first sold in 2014, almost a million dollars below the asking price.

The house's popularity in the market was even more surprising, considering its state. Inside, paint peels from the walls. Rust stains the bathroom tiles. In its current state, the house is a far cry from its picturesque exterior.

Fans of the house were curious to discover the identity of the new owner. At 38-years-old, senior Twitter software engineer Culver seemed like an odd match for this historic home.

“Preservation parts of the city were like, ‘Oh God, it's this young person. Does that mean everything is just going to get yanked out?’” Culver's neighbor, George Horsfall, said.

However, she quickly defied expectations.

“She was the exact opposite. She’s like a hero with all these people,” Horsfall said. Culver’s commitment to respect the home’s history, while incorporating climate-friendly changes in her renovation plans, has resonated with both the local community and members of the San Francisco Planning Commission.

During the Oct. 6 San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission, the commissioners, as well as the public, responded positively to the project’s lead architect David Armour’s proposal, which includes converting the garage into an e-bike charging and parking space.

Under Armour’s design, Culver plans to strip the home’s interior and convert everything from gas to electric. She wants to uphold the building’s roots while modernizing, she said. “What’s nice about the historic aspect is it really only is the façade.” Culver said. “There’s something interesting about thinking about how can I keep and preserve a home, but at the same time make it forward thinking.”

With strict federal standards from the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, the rehabilitation work is estimated to cost more than \$1.5 million dollars over the next ten years. A Mills Act contract, which provides property tax relief for owners of qualified historic properties who are engaging in restorations, will save Culver over \$30,500 of property taxes in the first year alone. At the hearing on Culver’s application, commissioners unanimously approved her renovation plans and Mills Act request.

“This is going to be one of the really good examples of how we can preserve our city and also allow for a new generation of vibrancy, joining the community and still continuing to be respectful to the character defining features of San Francisco residential homes,” Commissioner Lydia So said.

Elizabeth Gordon-Jonckheer, who works on historic preservation for San Francisco Planning, manages the team reviewing the 714 Steiner Mills Act proposal. She was pleased with the outcome. “It’s a great Mills Act project and a great preservation project,” she said. Gordon-Jonckheer and her team are working to expand the Mills Act program to underrepresented neighborhoods as part of SF Planning’s racial and social equity action plan. Their efforts include a new page on their website detailing federal state and local programs that offer savings, grants and loans to property owners.

Culver may have gotten the green light from the historic preservation commission, but because of the amount of money involved, she still needs final approval from the Government Audit & Oversight Committee. It has already been a two-year-long process of permits and applications and she has yet to even break ground.

But when she does begin, she’ll be posting the whole journey online. And with 18,000 already following the Pink Lady on Instagram, Culver has proven that people in 2021 are still very interested in an 1890 home.