



# THIS OLD LAW OFFICE

Law partners invest in a piece of Dallas history by restoring one of the city's last remaining Victorian mansions.

BY JOHN COUNCIL

**TEN YEARS AGO, LEIGHTON DURHAM, KIRK PITTARD** and Thad Spalding gladly left their downtown Dallas office buildings behind and headed due west across the Trinity River to set up their law practice a mile and a half away in a cozy Oak Cliff rent house.

And as the decade passed, the law partners at Kelly, Durham & Pittard watched outside their office windows in amazement as a stream of other new businesses and residents followed them across the Commerce Street Bridge into this once-neglected area of the city.

Block by block, people were breathing new life into Oak Cliff's historic commercial business buildings and houses by buying and restoring them. And the law partners finally decided last year it was time that they did the same.

"We were growing and we needed more space," Durham said of his appellate and litigation support boutique which employs seven attorneys including partner Peter Kelly who is based in Houston. "And we were look-

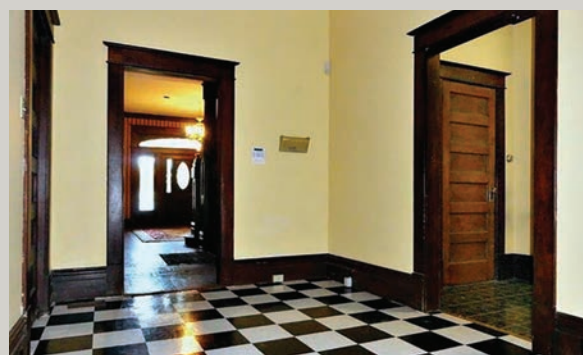
ing at places to rent. But the cost of rent was going to be about the same to buy and renovate and get a little equity."

By a stroke of luck, the lawyers stumbled upon the perfect place to stake their claim. An exquisite yet neglected three-story, 5,000 square-foot Victorian farmhouse located just blocks away from their leased office near the booming Bishop Arts District, was coming up for sale.

Better known as the "L.O. Daniel House," the stately residence is located on nearly an acre of land directly across from Dallas' historic Sunset High School. It was built in 1905 by Lark Owen Daniel, a prominent millenary company owner (his company made hats) who served as president of the Dallas Chamber of Commerce. Daniel named the home "Cedar Crest" and it is one of the few surviving Victorian-era mansions in Dallas.

Originally sitting on 27 acres, the estate was eventually parceled off to create several residential neighborhoods including the home's namesake, the L.O. Daniel neighborhood. The home remained in the Daniel family for decades





The L.O. Daniel house was built in 1905 by Lark Owen Daniel, a prominent millenary company owner (his company made hats) who served as president of the Dallas Chamber of Commerce. Daniel named the home "Cedar Crest" and it is one of the few surviving Victorian-era mansions in Dallas.

until it was sold and turned into a commercial property. It housed another law office in the 1980's and was most recently used as a title company. Despite the home being repurposed for business, it still retains its grand oak stair case, much of its original woodwork and doors, decorative leaded glass windows and even a ballroom on the third floor.

The grand home sat vacant for nearly five years until it was put up for sale for \$575,000—a relative bargain for a huge piece of Dallas history.

"A friend of mine knew that we were looking for space and he heard that this was about to come on the market and brought us all over here to take a look. And we started thinking about it, trying to put numbers together to see if they worked," Durham said.

It seems like a great deal for a mansion on a huge lot of land a mere two miles from downtown Dallas. So the partners got a loan for the home—including getting a little financial assistance from family members—and bought it.

The home is now owned by a limited liability corporation that the law firm will pay rent to. And in a nod to L.O. Daniel, the lawyers named their company Cedar Crest LLC—the same name Daniel gave the home.

"I like an old house feel of a law office. And I think when this opportunity presented itself, the potential was huge," Spalding said. "And we're old house guys and we like the old houses. You just can't do that in downtown Dallas."

Durham lives in a 1913 Prairie-style home in nearby Winnetka Heights and Spalding lives in 1937 Tudor in East Dallas, so the law partners knew from experience that there are plenty of hidden costs that come with owning a century-old house

While much of the interior of the home was presentable, the outside is another story. The home needs extensive wood rot repair, new paint and a new roof, for starters. And the lawyers have grand plans to turn the first story roof into a grand balcony that overlooks the home's huge front yard.





"We've all worked on old houses enough to know that it was going to be outrageously expensive and that it was not going to end when we move in," said Durham, who estimates his firm will spend at least fifty percent of the home's purchase price in restoration costs.

While they plan on reopening their law office in the home this month, the lawyers know it could be years until the restoration is finally complete.

Complicating matters, the home was declared a historic landmark in 1984 and all of the changes to its exterior must be historically accurate and approved by the city, including some much needed landscaping of trees that blocks the view of the house from the street.

Contractors are now busy inside working on all levels of the home, including repairing the brick walls in



An historic photograph of "Cedar Crest."

the basement, creating an authentic butler's pantry behind the stairwell, and turning the upstairs bedrooms into offices using temporary walls that can be removed if home is ever turned back into a single family residence.

"We intend to make it as period as possible," Durham said, who envisions inviting neighborhood groups and high school students from across

the street inside the home for tours and meetings.

"This is a great historic spot here in Oak Cliff and it obviously needed some work. But I think us moving into it and renovating it to what it used to look like will just add value to it and will continue to be a part of progress in Oak Cliff," Pittard said. "I just seems like a great historic home which will be great for our office space and good for the community too once we get it all fixed up." ■