Robert Smith's French Louisiana restoration complex near Breaux Bridge merits serious historical attention.

BY JAMES EDMUNDS

Reality. Dreams.

Memories.

A rose bush saved from the yard of a dying aunt. An armoire bearing the monogram of one of the most splendid of plantation houses. A house that languished unattended for decades, but still holds the careful grace born of its construction in the last century.

Reality. Wood and dirt and sweat and smells. Dragonflies and lizards and piercing bright flowers that are fresh with each spring. The tedium of garden care, the demands of the grounds, the incessant ticking of time that commands attention to painting and repairs and upkeep. The whispered splendor of a spring evening, the ebbing sun painting gentle hues into the perfected proportions of the garden. The relaxed superiority of a busy party full of lovely faces and bright chatter.

Dreams. Young but sturdy oaks, proudly lined into a nascent leaf-shaded alley. A handsome portrait of that master builder, just a few feet from the armoire that bears his initial. A vision, a vision of a world where man and nature and air and light don't just coexist but complement one another's place in the landscape.

The significance of the eight pages the April 1988 issue of Antiques magazine gives to color photos and text coverage of the Henri Penne house complex near Breaux Bridge, goes beyond the obvious tribute to its owner, historic preservation consultant Robert Smith. It is of course an accomplishment of the highest order for someone in Smith's profession to receive the imprimatur of the leading magazine in a major field of his endeavors, but Smith himself adds that there is a certain weight to the fact that a French Louisiana historical property has been given this serious a feature.

"This is a magazine that is read by professionals and serious collectors, and kept for reference," Smith says. "The fact that it featured anything with French vernacular antecedents is somewhat extraordinary. For the most part, the magazine reflects a very Northeastern orientation—the interest is largely centered on Anglo and Anglo-American antiques."

The implication is that a complex as fine as Smith's makes it easy to ascribe a higher value to that slice of colonial American material history that reflects French history and the French taste. That Robert Smith would serve as a key vehicle for the keen appreciation of the material culture of 18th and 19th Century French Louisiana should come as no surprise to those who have followed his career—including numerous clients with whom he has worked in restoration projects.

"What I do for a living is exactly what I do when I don't get a check," Smith says. "Not many people are that blessed. I've worked on projects of completely different sizes—from outhouses to $2 million complete restorations—and found them enjoyable."

Smith has brought together six buildings at a site in Anse La Butte (near Breaux Bridge) and restored and arranged them to re-create a 19th Century Creole plantation.

The centerpiece of the compound is the Henri Penne house, which dates from the 1820s and which was moved from Iberia Parish in 1974 and restored at its present site in the following years. The Penne house is linked by a semi-detached kitchen to the Petite Maison, a smaller house built in the 1830s in St. Martinville. Its present orientation to the larger house evokes an overseer's house or perhaps a garconniere. Other structures on the property include a pigeonnier, two privies, and a storage building recovered from various South Louisiana plantation and home sites.

The buildings enjoy a jewel-like setting of huge live oaks, and the front of the Penne house is graced by an enclosed parterre garden based on the gardens at the Academy of the Sacred Heart Convent in Grand Coteau.

The sense of vision that led Smith to draw together and re-create his own colonial plantation complex—as well as to play a vital role in similar restoration projects for his various clients—was born quickly on the day in the early 1970s when a friend brought him to visit the now-demolished Lady of the Lake Plantation in St. Martin Parish.

"When I saw Lady of the Lake the first time," he recalls, "it was like somebody had plugged me into the wall. I had the desire to have a residence of similar taste and style." Smith, a graduate of the architecture program at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, was employed then as the curator of exhibits for the Lafayette Natural History Museum and Planetarium. His work with exhibits often involved him in the material history of French Louisiana, and after hours he pursued furniture restoration as a personal interest. Not long after that first whiff of Lady of the Lake, he located the piece of property where he now lives and prepared to make the quantum leap into full-scaled architecture.

In 1974 he bought the Penne house and moved it to Anse La Butte, undertaking a restoration project he now recalls as a "test of fire." The first four months he worked, there was no electricity or water at the site. "That kind of experience really gives you a perspective of handwork," Smith smiles.

At the end of nine months, he moved into the house. His immersion in his
The centerpiece of the compound is the Henri Penne house, linked by a semi-detached kitchen to the *Petite Maison* (left).

Continuing counterclockwise: *Petite Maison* before nine months of restoration work, Robert Smith and the fully restored *Petite Maison*, photo from the *Antiques* magazine spread.

**PHOTOS BY ROBIN MAY**

own restoration project led to his being asked to help others with restorations of their own, and in 1977 he resigned from his museum position to devote his full time to historic preservation consultation. Meanwhile, he has added the other buildings and the garden to his own property to constitute a plantation complex worthy of the *Antiques* feature story.

For the last five years or so, there's been a slip of paper pinned above Robert Smith's drawing table. There are three words: Memories. Reality. Dreams. In his work, Smith says, he strives to carry the memories of the past through a pleasant reality of today, and to contemplate the dreams...
Robert Smith's contributions to the sphere of restoration do not stop there. He has a detailed knowledge of Louisiana as well as French 18th and 19th Century landscaping. His own garden is populated by plant species known to Louisiana in the early 19th Century, including Malmaison and Louis Philippe roses, phlox, shasta daisies and native verbena. Some varieties have been obtained from disused plantation grounds or from archaic gardens on old homesteads. As the flowers move into the house, he can even provide studied expertise in arranging them in the style appropriate to the restored environment.

At least one inspiration for Robert Smith's own dreams is firmly identified. In the bedroom of the Petite Maison hangs a portrait of Alexandre De Vins Bienvenu II, the nineteenth century St. Martin Parish builder who erected Lady of the Lake.

"His taste is my taste," Smith says. "It's a higher level of enjoyment of form, texture, of lighting. It's a higher level and more complex structure of aesthetic sensitivities—it's so much more in evidence in the creation of a house like this as compared to a tract house."

The Penne house and its related buildings and garden capture and express that sensitivity to nature and the environment, keeping the memory of that harmonious plantation complex alive, making it a reality today, and evoking dreams of that symmetry and proportion as a part of the future.