



Designer Ken Fulk restores Vorse house into center for Provincetown artists

By Kathi Scrizzi Driscoll

Posted Jul 26, 2020 at 5:00 AM

Updated at 7:18 AM

A house that long drew the luminaries of Provincetown's 20th-century art scene is now becoming a haven for today's arts groups, thanks to designer Ken Fulk.

A house that long drew the luminaries of Provincetown's 20th-century art scene is now becoming a haven for today's cultural groups.

Internationally known interior designer Ken Fulk, a local arts patron for years, recently finished having the Mary Heaton Vorse House restored as a resource for four Provincetown groups to use for lodging, retreats and events. Plus whatever other artists might need from what he calls a "meandering" eight-bedroom house and garden.

Across Commercial Street, Fulk and husband Kurt Wootton (and their dogs) have their own waterside home, where Fulk has long kept a first edition of journalist-author Vorse's 1942 book "Time and the Town: A Provincetown Chronicle" on his nightstand for regular reading. When Vorse's granddaughters asked him to help save the rotting house to avoid a sale to someone who might destroy it, Fulk couldn't say no.

"I had already become enthralled and romanced by the idea that this (Vorse house) really was sort of a cultural center of Provincetown, a de facto sort of round table for all of the creatives from the last century who came through Provincetown and (met with) this great doyenne Mary Heaton Vorse," he says. "I felt like that couldn't get erased. I didn't know how we were going to do it but I figured we could come up with a way to save the house."

Three years later — after a \$1.1 million purchase and an estimated \$1.25 million renovation — the house is a cultural center once again.

Giving full credit to the craftsmanship and creativity of builder/artist Nathaniel McKean for making it happen, Fulk designed the Vorse restoration with an eye to history and preservation. His style in the low-ceilinged, steep-staircased home is so respectful to the past that, on a recent visit, film director John Waters noted that the house looks pretty much the same as it had.

“I said ‘Thank you!’ Fulk remembers with a laugh.

“The goal was to maintain as much of the historical integrity” as possible,” he says. “If Mary Heaton Vorse walked into the room, she would know that house.”

While all artists’ ideas are welcome, those using the house will largely be associated with neighboring Provincetown Art Association and Museum (CEO Christine McCarthy sees the house as helping to “build an artistic campus on this little block”) plus Provincetown Theater, Provincetown International Film Festival and Twenty Summers.

“The town didn’t need another arts organization. It needed a place that could be a connector for them all, that could foster ... community,” Fulk says. Noting there’s no “grand plan” for how the house will be used, he says, “I want folks to take ownership of it. I don’t feel like it’s my house. ... Yes, we were crazy enough to go borrow money to restore a house that we’re then going to give away ... (but) I feel like it’s an asset for all of us ... a way to link one another, a way to help save these organizations (that) are really being battered by this pandemic.”

Organization leaders are thrilled at what that could mean for future programs and costs, and have already used or plan to use the Vorse house in small, socially distanced ways.

“I think the fact that Ken wants to bring us together and see what comes of that, what sparks are generated by meetings and conversations ... in that beautiful home is going to be amazing,” says Joshua Prager, co-founder of the Twenty Summers series of talks and concerts. “Ken is an amazing man and when he blesses a project, it tends to grow. I have no doubt beautiful things will come of this.”

David Drake, artistic director at Provincetown Theater, calls the house “really a gift” for town arts organizations, saying he envisioned the use of it “as a path into a larger expansion of new projects for us.”

And new projects have begun. The home is filled with art in Joe Sheftel’s “Intimate Companions” exhibit — viewed by appointment — of work by artists who include (just in the entry room) David Hockney, John Dowd and Peter McGough. This week, the house’s piano has been used by Broadway composer Scott Frankel as part of a Provincetown retreat for him, lyricist Michael Korie and writer Jonathan Tolins to work on creating “The Last Diva,” a musical that is New Works Provincetown’s first major commission.

Fulk is hosting small-group suppers with local chefs using vegetables from the house’s garden. Christine Walker, who leads the film festival’s Women’s Media Summit, was recently at the house to lead a teleconference with women filmmakers. Last weekend, a small, socially distanced panel discussion with young artists was held in the garden, led by former New Yorker magazine editor Adam Moss. Actress/model/writer Hari Nef stayed on as the first houseguest, to work on a screenplay.

Next month, Drake plans a house video tour as part of a virtual version of the annual Provincetown American Playwright Award, which this year the theater will give (virtually) to writer/performer Charles Busch.

“I think it’s important we don’t throw in the towel and say this year is gone,” Fulk said about finishing this ambitious project in the age of COVID-19. “Provincetown is the most creative place on the planet so these limitations are what they are. We figure out ways to still help and create where and how we can.”

••••

Fulk leads a self-named 23-year-old company of more than 75 architects, designers and event specialists (described on the website as “creative visionaries and magic-makers”) with offices in San Francisco and New York City. The website describes Fulk as a “global stylemaker,” “design impresario” and “creator of experiences large and small ... renowned for his layered interiors, high-concept brand identities and unforgettable parties.”

Some of those parties have helped arts groups in Provincetown, which Fulk first visited with a friend 29 years ago while living in Boston just after college. (“I was mesmerized. ‘What is this place?’” he remembers thinking of Provincetown.) Soon after, in a Boston laundromat, he met Wootton, who had also just visited Provincetown. “It very quickly became a connector for us,” Fulk says. “We both instantly loved (the town) and we spent that first summer together coming down here.”

For years, they regularly vacationed in Provincetown, then bought their first house 15 years ago and visited during parts of summer and fall. Eight years ago, they moved to their current home, another “very forlorn” historic house Fulk had thought someone should save. It had been owned by longtime resident and civil servant George Bryant and filled with his collections.

For the restoration, Fulk kept his own house “very much like it was” because he’s so intrigued by the town’s history. “What I loved about Provincetown (was that) it didn’t look like everywhere else, and it wasn’t a place of perfect beach houses. It was sort of crooked, funny (with houses that have) historical little rooms; charming, crusty houses.”

Once in the Bryant House, he says, the couple “became more entwined with the town,” staying sometimes from late March to December, centering their lives and resources there.

“We love San Francisco, I love my life there and I have wonderful friends and a great business, and I have a studio in New York. But it’s really Provincetown that is the center of our universe,” he says. “When you do something here, it has a direct impact and you see it ... a little bit goes a long way in Provincetown. We began to actively contribute and give up our time, and host things at our home to try to do as much as we could for all of these myriad of arts organizations.”

Arts have long been important to Fulk and Wootton, and an artistic perspective is key to Fulk’s career. In 2018, he restored a long-abandoned San Francisco cathedral into the base for the nonprofit St. Joseph’s Arts Society. Its exhibition space and club was where, in January, he hosted Walker leading “A Celebration of the Trans Filmmaking Community” that included discussions, a dance party and an art exhibit.

That event “was a big success for us,” Walker says. Fulk “made that possible for us and his connections in San Francisco were so helpful.”

McCarthy describes Fulk as “super-supportive of all the arts ... so generous with his time, his home and himself,” and she and Walker say his impact on Provincetown only grows with what the Vorse house offers.

Fulk’s “legacy is going to live on as long as the artists that came 100 years before because of all the preservation work he’s doing,” Walker says. And, she notes, “He does it with such modesty and generosity. At first, (I wondered) ‘What’s his angle?’ I’ve come to really know and love him and have so much respect for his integrity and sincerity.”

After St. Joseph’s, the Mary Heaton Vorse House became Fulk’s next arts-oriented project. “One of the defining things about Provincetown ... is its long history with the arts,” he says. “One of the things certainly defining about this house was its history with the arts.”

....

Vorse was a novelist, crusading journalist and labor activist who, according to David Dunlop’s “Building Provincetown” website, owned the house at 466 Commercial St. from 1907 to 1966. Multiple reports say she died in the house at age 92.

She wrote in “Time and the Town” about “falling in love at first sight” with Provincetown and expecting to live there always because it was “as though I were invaded by the town and surrounded by it, as though the town had literally got into my blood.”

In the early 1900s, Vorse and husband Joe O’Brien entertained a pioneering and literate Greenwich Village crowd there and helped to create the Provincetown Players. She owned the wharf where they had their theater and where playwright Eugene O’Neill’s play “Bound East for Cardiff” debuted and changed the course of American theater.

Drake calls himself “a history nut” and says it was “very exciting” when he first entered Vorse’s house. “The people who floated through the space, worked there, possibly ate there,” he says. “The people who have been in the room! A magical ...

legacy is present there.”

“There was always a cast of characters in that house,” McCarthy says. “I always imagine (them) sitting around the fireplace, throwing out a topic, and having a heated and spirited discussion.”

Vorse’s spirit remains with her books and typewriter still in a small library, and her hats adorning a glass-front bookcase in the large gathering room. An upstairs bedroom has her 19th-century double-sided Swedish wardrobe.

Prager believes the house’s history will be a draw for speakers and artists for Twenty Summers, which hosts events in the Hawthorne Barn that housed legendary art schools run by both Charles Hawthorne and Hans Hofmann in the art colony’s early days. “To perform (in the barn) and sleep (in the Vorse house) would be a one-two punch that would be very special.”

•••

Besides Fulk’s love for the town’s old interiors, that storied past is why he insisted the house be preserved as it was — which resulted in writer Michael Cunningham describing it as “impeccably restored to its original, fabulous semi-decrepitude.” Fulk calls it a “privilege” to collaborate on accomplishing the restoration with builder McKean.

Fulk calls the Provincetown High School graduate “the true artist,” someone who understood “the DNA” of re-creating the old house from the new foundation up. “It’s a love letter to this town,” Fulk says. Without McKean and his crew, saving the house “wouldn’t have been possible.”

Fulk describes McKean “figuring out the jigsaw puzzle,” which included taking each wide floorboard and piece of trim, many dating back to 1780, and cleaning (not altering) them before replacement. Walls were replastered, four brick fireplaces completely rebuilt. McKean used parts of the old subfloor to sheath rooms, Fulk says, and old wood to build kitchen cabinets. Driftwood and found wood was used for fences and a shed.

“Not everyone wants to live this way,” Fulk said, looking around the house. “But it’s more interesting.”

The crumbling house had to be engineered carefully to remain intact, and new electricity, plumbing, heating (plus air-conditioning) installed, as well as new shingles, roof and upstairs deck. But “it doesn’t look like we’ve added all of those things,” Fulk says. “There’s not a lot (that’s) shiny and new in the house.”

He adds: “I’m the guy with the fancy clients and the name, but (McKean) is really the fellow who made this happen. ... He’s so ingrained in understanding what makes Provincetown Provincetown.”

Fulk’s love for his adopted town is clear in the money he’s spent, the support he’s given, and in conversations about Provincetown’s history and its pull on him and his husband. The “why” behind all that Fulk has contributed can likely be summed up by his Instagram response to a New York Times story earlier this month about the Vorse house restoration.

Along with a photo of the story headlined “Can a new arts center save Provincetown?” Fulk posted: “More like the town saved me. Grateful for this magical place and this magical life.”