



STEPHEN WOODS

A RESTORATION PROFESSIONAL FROM SCOTLAND DESCRIBES HIS EXPERIENCE IN BUENOS AIRES

By Catherine Mariko Black Photos Lisandro Gallo

Stephen Woods fell into conservation "by accident," much the same way he ended up in Argentina. Luckily, both accidents were serendipitous and helped shape his life today. Originally from Scotland, Woods lived in London, Madrid, Miami and the Caribbean before falling in love (with an Argentine) and settling in Buenos Aires in 2003. His business (www.interestingproperties.net) buys, sells and rents historic properties both here and in the United Kingdom, and puts a premium on their conservation both in ideas and practice.

Like many Europeans who discovered Buenos Aires in the past decade, Woods was astonished by its beautiful historic buildings, as well as at the state of deterioration that many were in, and decided to purchase and restore a turn-of-the-century French style apartment on Chacabuco street in San Telmo, where he lives his wife Eloisa and young daughter, Kalia.

As a professional buyer and restorer of antique properties, Woods offers a unique perspective to the current debate on historic preservation: "All the emphasis being put on conservation here begs the question of whether it's actually profitable, and the truth is that it definitely can be. Instead of knocking buildings down and putting up an extra three stories to get more return on your investment, which is what conventional wisdom seems to dictate, quality restoration and preservation is a high-end international niche market."

Woods' experience has taught him that this type of "high-end" work must be carried out with both knowledge and attention to detail, yet he's found that in Buenos Aires there is often a large gap between the discourse of preservation and its practice.

"What's often lacking here is knowing that to do a quality restoration you can't simply go to the nearest *Easy* store and buy the \$350 peso home improvement kit. Often property owners will just sand the floors and polish them and say it's all original and fully restored."

Carrying out a high-quality restoration project, he says, doesn't have to be expensive and in some cases is even cheaper than its modern equivalent—if and when one takes the time to research and locate the right skills and materials.

When working on his apartment, he discovered that much of the market for original antique fittings had disappeared. "For example, hardly anyone was still producing or selling the moldings that we were looking for," he remembers. "We were lucky enough to

find a single antique *rosatón* (rosette molding) in Juan Bautista Alberdi." Using this as a base, they made a silicone cast and were able to create the proper plaster reproductions for their interior walls at only a few pesos apiece.

For heating, they found a workshop in Parque Chacabuco that could produce the same antique radiators that would have originally come with the apartment. "They literally remake the radiators with the number of 'velas' that you want, all in the original finish and style, in less time than modern manufacturers like Peisa, and at a similar cost!"

From the hand-cut floor mosaics to the restored chandeliers and furnishings (many of which were found at the Mercado de las Pulgas in Palermo because "its sadly not commercially viable to buy in San Telmo now"), every detail of the house was painstakingly researched and reproduced with as much original craftsmanship and materials as possible. The result, as one can imagine, is an impeccable restoration of a 19th century apartment that Woods will eventually put on the market.

Of course, his interest goes beyond the specific restoration projects he's undertaken to the political and economic importance of the Casco Histórico itself. Having lived in other historic centers, he emphasizes the "importance for the whole country of having its Old Town. Time is moving along and there are these increasingly aggressive developers targeting this area of Buenos Aires. There are a lot of buildings that have survived for 100 years but are about to reach their *fecha de vencimiento* (expiration date), and now they need some care."

Like many Europeans who invested in the burgeoning Casco

Histórico, Woods is struck by the government's "Jekyll and Hyde attitude" when it comes to conservation. "They do some good things, like keeping the streets cobbled and restoring some buildings, but historic heritage is still not as prioritized as in other cities like Prague, Paris or even Colonia de Sacramento in Uruguay. It's mainly a matter of political will," he says, adding that he believes that the lack of resources allocated to historic preservation coupled with ongoing demolitions pose a greater threat to the area's identity than tourism or gentrification.

Woods mentions English Heritage as an example of what can happen when political and public will work together: the semi-autonomous agency has successfully protected thousands of sites in the United Kingdom and wields considerable influence. In this vein, he hopes to see more effective cross-sector collaboration between property owners, the government, and citizen-based conservation groups in Buenos Aires.

"What you need is critical mass for these ideas to take hold," says Woods, describing an idea for selecting one block in San Telmo and voluntarily, at zero cost to its residents, restoring everything from the sidewalks to the lighting and the building facades.

"I know I could return a minimal investment and more if the government facilitated this type of initiative," he says. "It's not that difficult: you organize a charity dinner and raise funding under a non-profit umbrella organization. With volunteers to assist a paid maestro de obras, and out of date or free stock for the materials, you could restore the entire block for a really low sum (a year ago he arrived at a budget of \$30,000 pesos.) You would have a shining example of what could happen if everybody collaborated." **T**

Stephen Woods llegó a la Argentina en 2003 y se quedó. Ahora casado con una argentina con una hija, el escocés se dedica a la compra, venta y restauración de edificios históricos en Buenos Aires y en el Reino Unido, y cuenta que su experiencia aquí le demostró que una restauración de alta calidad puede ser menos costosa y más rentable que las tantas restauraciones "truchas" que se hacen. También opina que la preservación del Casco Histórico dependerá de gente comprometida a proteger y cuidar el patrimonio en todos los sectores de la sociedad, desde los vecinos hasta el Gobierno.

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