

## The King's House

One of the most unusual and interesting projects we were involved with was the renovation of some houses for the King of Morocco in the early 1980's.

King Hassan II had purchased a 491-acre estate in Somerset County, which had been known as the Kate Macy Ladd Estate. Kate Macy was heiress to her father's shipping and oil refinery fortune, married to New York attorney/merchant Walter Ladd. The estate's main building was finished in 1912 for them, and is a 40-room 33,000 square foot Tudor style brick mansion. It sits on top of a hill with a commanding view of rolling hills and fields. The Ladd's were very philanthropic, and had set up a fund, which allowed the estate to be run as a convalescent home for women after Mrs. Ladd's death. It operated this way from 1949 until the King bought it in 1983.

Well, the King had grand plans to turn this estate into a palace that would be fit for, who else, a King! The plans included not only complete renovation of the mansion, but several terraces with Roman style swimming pools that reminded this writer of the Hearst Castle in California. This was a project only a King could afford, budgeted upwards of \$30 million (in early-1980's money)!

But this dear reader is unfortunately not the project J. Moore & Co. did. The Kate Macy Ladd project was going to take quite a while to design and build. So in the meantime, the King bought a comparatively modest, 20-acre property adjacent to it, which contained an 11,000 square foot, L-shaped 2-1/2-story clapboard house. The Frelinghuysen family of New Jersey political fame is reported to have owned this house at one time. The idea was to renovate this house, on a rush basis, so the King could have a place to go while the big project was being done.

The King had a French construction management firm named Andre Paccard doing all his work in Morocco. Paccard came to the United States for this job, and discovered that they had no licenses or credentials to do work here. Somehow they came across a small, 2-man "country architect" firm that had done a kitchen renovation in the Frelinghuysen house some time earlier, and hired them to be their New Jersey liaison. These guys quickly realized the magnitude of the planned work, and they called in their friend Lee Kirk for help (remember him from Story #2, the Van Dorn Mill?). Lee had contacts with not only J. Moore & Co., but with general contractor John O'Hara Co. and Nordling Dean Electric Co., and he brought us all into the project. The conversation went something like this:

Lee: I want you to come out and look at a house with me.

Us: Lee, we don't do residential work.

Lee: It's a very big house, for an important client. Believe me, it's worth your while.

Us: (humoring him) OK, Lee, we'll come out and take a look at it with you.

So we went to a very strange meeting at the architect's office. They drew the blinds (no kidding!) and in whispered voices told us about the overall project, and the desire to fast-track the Frelinghuysen house. They also told us we had been carefully selected and approved by the State Department for the job, and swore us to secrecy. (Of course, within a week, we were getting a half dozen calls a day from people saying, "so, I hear you're working on the King's house!")

About a dozen people from Paccard's offices in France flew in, and we met them at the Frelinghuysen house. They gave us room-by-room drawings of the house, which were artistically beautiful renderings of furniture, drapes, artwork and so on. And told us we had 24 hours to prepare firm prices for the renovation work, based solely on these drawings and our walk through, with no other engineering details available! They were going back to Morocco, had to present this to the King and get the project jump-started.

Preparing these budgets proved extremely challenging. We had to consider not only the lack of information, but also the level of quality and detail we assumed the King would demand. Not to mention the many unforeseen circumstances encountered in a renovation of any old building. And this in the days before we had cell phones or fax machines, when

the cost estimates were done manually with paper and pencil, and the proposal letter was typed on an IBM Selectric typewriter!

They wanted an HVAC system where any room could call for either heating or cooling at any time of the day or night, regardless of outside temperature or other system requirements, and it had to be quiet and unobtrusive to the room occupants. Every one of the 8 bedrooms had a private bath, with the King's room very elaborate. In fact, they were bringing the plumbing fixtures in from France, which raised all kinds of questions about metric sizing, code requirements and the like. The kitchen was essentially a small commercial kitchen.

The job progressed with the usual amount of problems one would expect in any old house renovation. We installed modular boilers and a chiller, with 4-pipe fan coil units in every room so they could have their choice of heating or cooling in any room at any time. Each system had back up redundancy. There was a state of the art electronic ATC system. The plumbing fixtures they brought in from Europe were pretty fancy and we had some trouble connecting the metrics (remember this was 20 years ago, it would be easier today). Some of Paccard's French staff were difficult to work with, especially with the language problems. Others were very charming and continental, and we fancied ourselves as ambassadors entertaining them while they were here in the USA.

At one point the job shut down when Paccard stopped making payments (some things never change, do they?), explaining that they ran out of money and were awaiting an audience with the King before they could get more. It seems that one does not simply go to the King's palace and knock on the door; one requests an audience then waits for the King to grant it. If the King grants it! We spent a couple of weeks wondering exactly how one goes about collecting against the King of a foreign country, in a land where there were still beheadings! But fortunately the additional funding came through.

As the job went on, the King bought two other houses adjacent to the Frelinghuysen house. We renovated one into an elegant guesthouse and the other one into barracks for his security forces.

The big job? It never happened. There was a huge devaluation in the French franc, which raised the King's cost of the project by about 25%. We also heard rumors that he ran into some diplomatic friction when Ronald Reagan bombed his neighbor, Libyan terrorist Moammar Gadhafi. We understand that it's possible the King never even saw the houses after the renovations were completed.

A few months after the houses were finished, we got a call from the French caretaker. He was pretty agitated, said there was no hot water. So we sent one of our plumbing service techs out to take a look at it, and he reported back that everything was working fine, but they wanted to fill up all 8 bathtubs at the same time and they didn't have enough hot water to do so. We explained that nobody fills up all their bathtubs at the same time; systems are designed with some expected diversity. But the caretaker told us that, when the King comes, everyone "attends" to the King. And when it's time for the King to take a bath, everybody takes a bath! Since we now understood the situation, we installed three more water heaters, manifolded together so they could fill all the bathtubs simultaneously.

The King died in 1999, and the Kate Macy Ladd portion of the property was purchased from Morocco by Somerset County. As this is being written the newspapers are reporting that Sir Richard Branson (the owner of Virgin Atlantic Airlines) is negotiating with the County to open up a luxury spa in the mansion and about 40 acres, leaving the rest as open space.

This proved to be one of the more unique and somewhat prestigious projects we've ever been involved with. Aside from the royalty of the client, working with the French construction managers was a challenging experience.

If you find this story interesting, and think we can help you with your unusual project, please give us a call!

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