

# A Whimsical Castle is Brought Back To Life — in Connecticut

PROJECT: Gillette Castle, East Haddam, Conn.

ARCHITECTS: *Phase I:* Roger S. Clarke, AIA, Hartford, Conn.

*Phase II:* Barkin Andrade Architects, New Haven, Conn. David Barkin, AIA, project architect

CONTRACTOR: Kronenberger & Sons Restoration, Middletown, Conn.; James Sabith, project supervisor

**W**illiam H. Gillette, the actor best known for his portrayal of Sherlock Holmes a generation before Basil Rathbone, left an-

other legacy — his eccentric 24-room medieval-style fieldstone castle in East Haddam, Conn., on a 122-acre estate overlooking the Connecticut River. Now owned by the state of Connecticut and maintained as a public park, the 80-year-old structure recently underwent a three-year, \$11.5 million restoration. It reopened on May 27, 2002, Memorial Day.

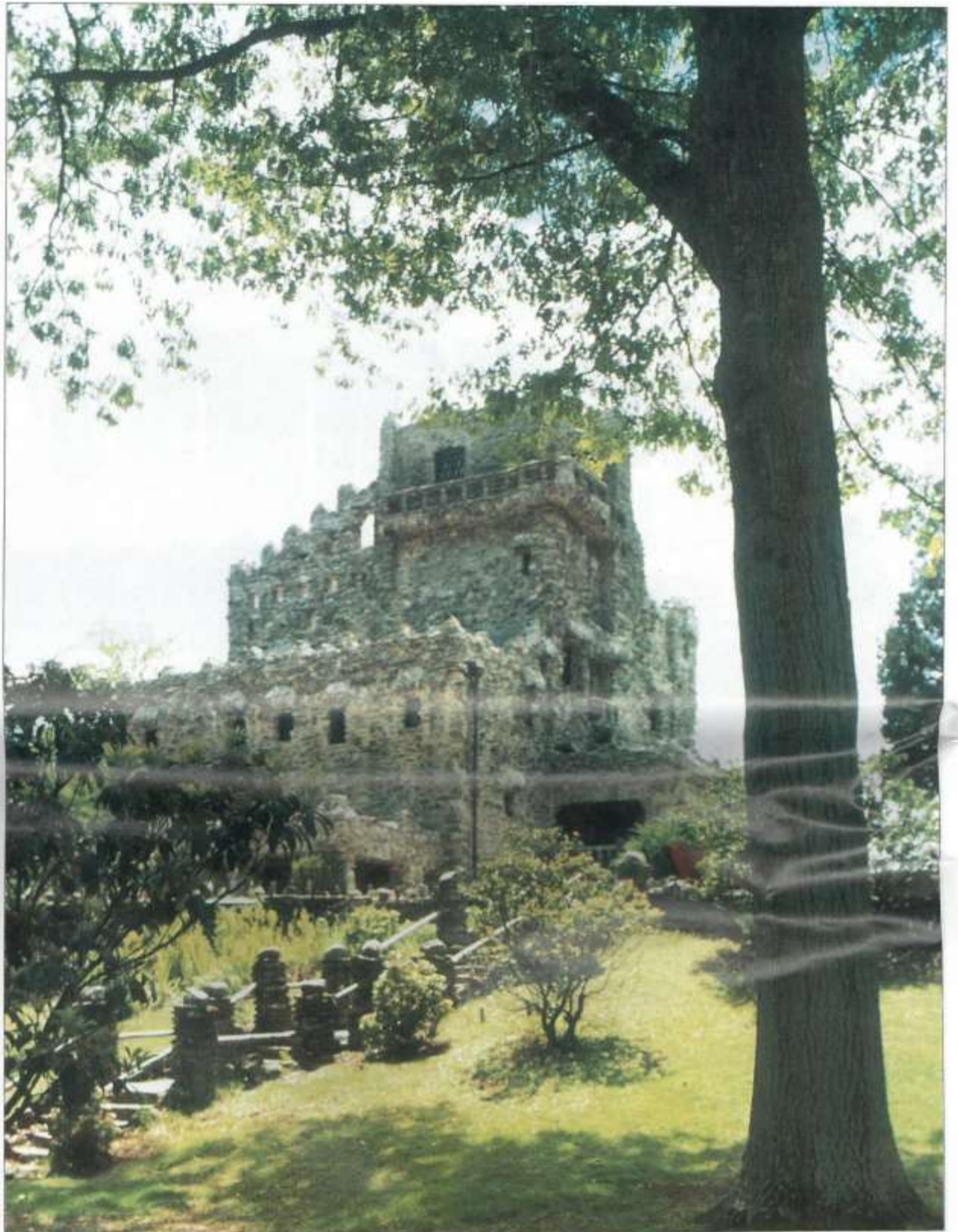
Designed by Gillette and built from 1914- 1919, the castle was modeled on the medieval ruins of a German fortress on the Rhine, with sturdy towers and turrets. It reflects Gillette's vivid imagination, with features such as trick locks, a secret room, a hidden staircase, and 42 doors that feature elaborate hand-carved latches designed by Gillette himself. Gillette also designed the built-in furniture, including a dining room table that moves on tracks, heavy oak bureaus in the bedrooms, and an elaborate wood bar in the lounge that locks with an ingenious mechanism. The estate also includes a three-mile narrow-gauge railroad that Gillette used to show guests around the property.

Gillette died in 1937, and the State of Connecticut purchased the property in 1943. Over the years, the 14,000-sq.ft. castle began showing its age; the deterioration became so extensive that it became unsafe and was closed in 1998.

"The castle is unprecedented in terms of its style,"



Project supervisor Jim Sabith stands in front of Gillette Castle during the restoration, which took three years and cost \$11.5 million. The west and south elevations required repointing, which was "quite an undertaking," according to Sabith, because of the random fieldstone layout. Kronenberger, Sabith's firm, removed and replaced about one inch of the mortar.



Designed by William H. Gillette, the Victorian actor known for his portrayal of Sherlock Holmes, Gillette Castle was modeled after a medieval fortress in Germany. A crew of 15 masons and five carpenters worked for five years, from 1914-1919, to build the 24-room, \$1-million mansion. When he was dying, Gillette said he would rather see the house sold at a loss than see it go to "some blithering saphead" who had no appreciation for it.

says David Barkin, project architect for Phase II of the restoration. "It doesn't fall into any architectural style; it's a reflection of William Gillette and his eccentricities. His chosen method of construction was bearing wall with fieldstone masonry rubble. The walls were over two feet thick, and there was a lot of water infiltration over time that had caused a lot of damage. The challenge was trying to preserve a building that had flawed construction."

Phase I of the restoration project involved the exterior of the stone parapet, roofing, and the railroad station on the grounds. It was directed by Roger S. Clarke, AIA, of Hartford, Conn., at a cost of \$2.3 million. Portions of the parapet walls (some as tall as 12 ft.) had to be removed so through-wall flashing could be installed. The walls were then rebuilt to look like the original castle. The whimsical dragon in the wall over the veranda area was also rebuilt. A bluestone patio that was not original to the castle was removed and replaced with crushed quartz and granite rock with a binder from Arizona, to give it a more natural look.

Another part of this phase included the restoration of the pavilion where Gillette had stored his narrow-gauge railroad. The train was sold to an amusement park many years ago, but it has recently been reacquired by the State and is being restored. The pavilion is now used primarily as a picnic area. Made of stone and native cedar poles with cedar shakes, the building had to be taken down and rebuilt by Kronenberger & Sons. New cedar truss framing was installed, and one of Kronenberger's artists hand-carved the two missing wood cats that had once adorned the roof.

The next step was the restoration of the stone walls leading to the castle. Engineers Szewczak Associates of Avon, Conn., replicated the stone walls and stone arch, using reinforced concrete to look like the original fieldstone. The mortar on the top is designed to age and darken with weather to match the small original segment left standing.

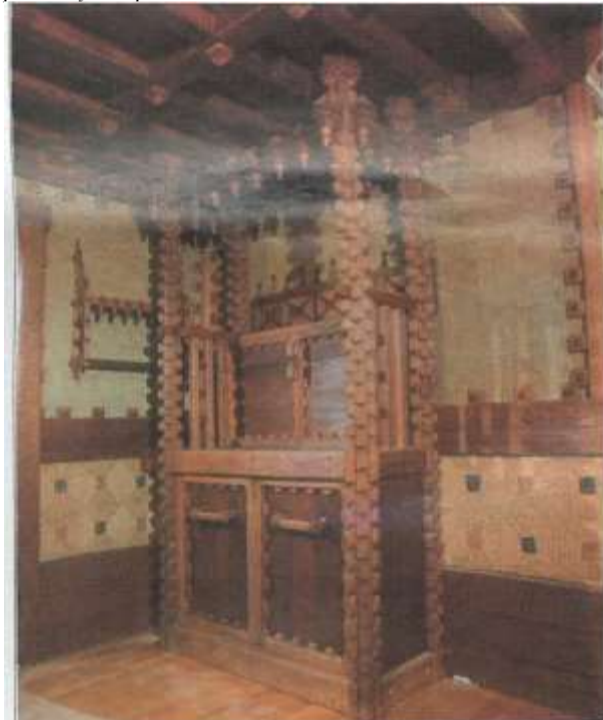
Phase II involved repointing (and rebuilding) the castle wall, installing new heating and fire-protection

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systems, and restoration of the interior of the building. David Barkin of Barkin Andrade Architects of New Haven, Conn., was the architect for this work. The castle walls, which are 24-30 in. thick, were repointed by Kronenberger & Sons, and 140 light fixtures were cleaned and restored by Griffin Bros. of Collinsville, Conn. Seventy-five percent of these fixtures were hand-carved. James Sabith, Kronenberger's superintendent for the project, points out that each fixture was documented, tagged, removed, rewired, and then reinstalled in the castle.



Ihor Budzinski, master carpenter with Kronenberger, carved the two missing wood cats — this black one and another gray one — that had sat on top of Gillette's outdoor train pavilion. Originally called "Grand Central Station," the pavilion was the main boarding area for Gillette's miniature train. Now rebuilt, it now serves primarily as a picnic area.



This intricate white-oak bar, designed by Gillette, features a unique locking mechanism that he also designed. This elaborate wood locking mechanism is one of the many that Gillette designed for his castle. Each of the 42 doors in the castle is different and each has a different Gillette-designed latch.



All of the woodwork, including the ornate wood doors, had to be washed with a mild detergent and hand-rubbed with a urethane finish. The castle's 42 doors (all designed by Gillette) are each unique. In addition, about half of the fir and oak floors were rebuilt; the others were restored. "The woodwork had to be washed three to four times," says Sabith, "to get years of general dirt and grease from people's hands off. It was then resealed with penetrating urethane oil."

"The castle has a gingerbread quality," says Barkin, "and has been open to the public for 50 years. A lot of pieces had been picked off so they had to be recarved or re-created." The New York City preservation firm, Allanbrook Benic Czajka, was brought in to provide guidance here.

The windows were another big project. Kronenberger & Sons removed, repaired, and restored 80 wood windows with either diamond-shaped or rectangular panes; where necessary, they replaced the glass. Paint colors was microscopically analyzed, and the windows were repainted to match the original color — a dark charcoal gray. The muntins and mullions, some as deep as four inches, were restored with epoxy. "It was not just a question of taking the windows down," says Sabith. Each piece of glass had to be labeled and numbered so it could go back into its original sash, in both the doors and windows."

One of the interesting aspects of the castle was the raffia-type material that covers 4,000 sq.ft. of its walls. At the time the castle was built, this material was sold as inexpensive floor covering, but Gillette favored using it on the walls. Over the years, it had deteriorated severely and become discolored. Camile Breeze, of Museum Textile Services of Andover, Mass., directed the restoration of the wallcoverings. Her team of four worked for more than six months, cleaning the surface,

repairing missing areas, stabilizing weak areas, and coating the material with an invisible varnish to protect it from UV rays. Using raffia from Madagascar in areas where reweaving was necessary, the team reweave 12 yards for the library walls alone. The wallcovering was also dyed, painted, and stencilled in bright turquoise, orange, pink, and green.

"One big challenge," says Barkin, "was making the building meet the life-safety requirements for a museum. There were three pages of violations from the fire marshal's office. You can't make a building like this meet the codes in the same way you would with new construction. You can't change the width of the corridor, for example." The firm did add a fire-alarm system throughout the building and a sprinkler system with 9,000 gallons of on-site water storage. "The sprinkler system is almost invisible," he says. "It's solid copper where exposed so it blends in with the architecture."

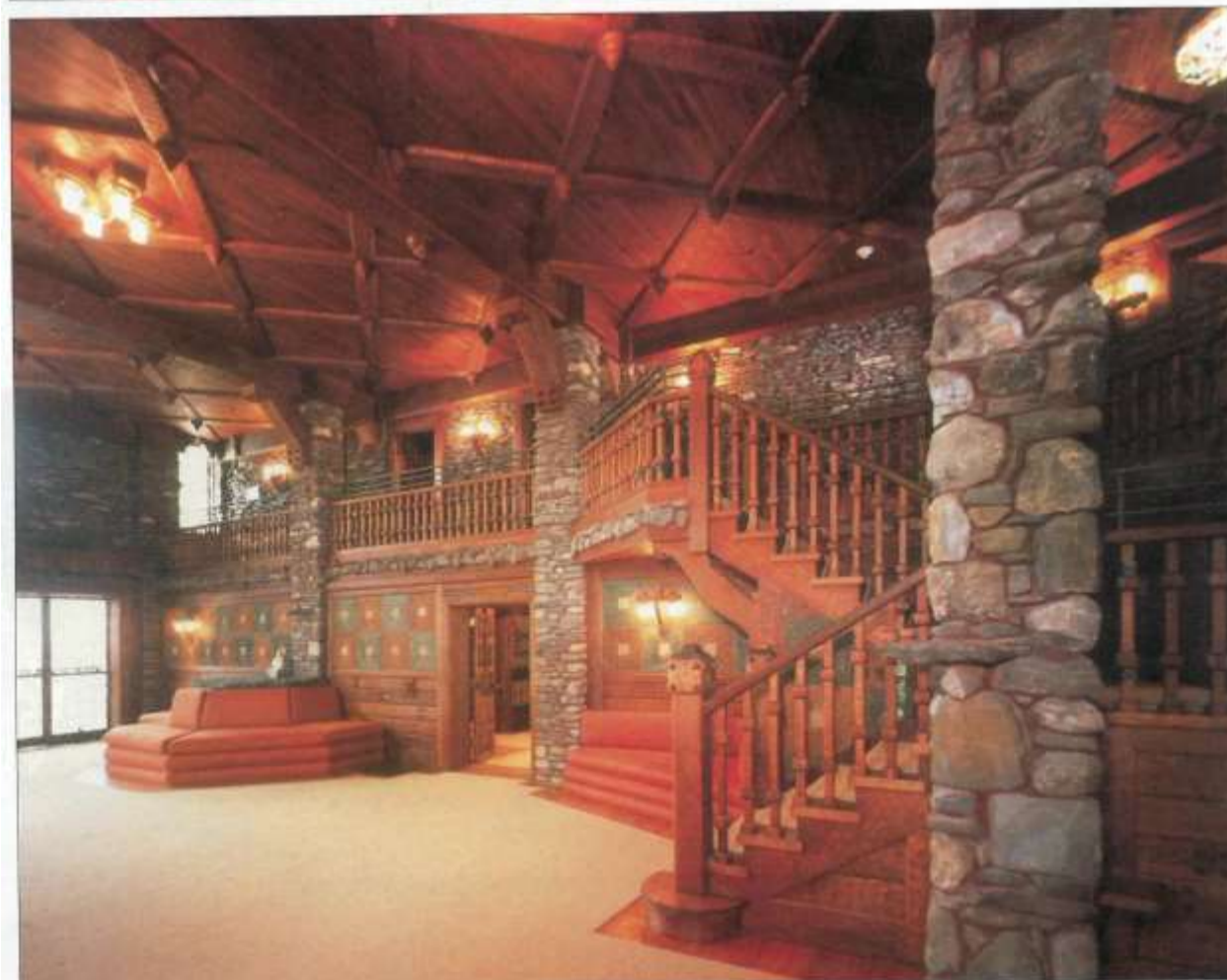
Kronenberger's Sabith points out that the installation of the new sprinkler system, electrical wiring, plumbing and hot-air heating required that portions of walls, ceilings, and floors be removed and then put back.

Barkin Andrade also provided a new egress from the third floor to the outside, so an ugly fire escape could be removed. "This is sympathetic with the castle," Barkin notes. "It's a very intricate stair with special metal railings and fieldstone paving on the landings and stair treads."

Originally called Seventh Sister, named for the hill it stands on, the Gillette estate is now once again open to the public. The renovation and restoration, which involved the highest artistic standards and quite a bit of one-of-a-kind work, was *not*, even remotely, as Gillette (Sherlock Holmes) might have said, "Elementary, my dear Watson." **— Martha McDonald**



A built-in oak bureau designed by Gillette and sisal wallcovering are two of the outstanding features of this bedroom. All of the light fixtures in the house had to be removed and restored or replaced. In addition, all of the woodwork was cleaned, repaired, and resealed.



The restored living room, with its 18 ft. coffered white-oak ceiling, balcony, sisal wallcoverings, and fieldstone columns, is an impressive room. The staircase leads to a second-floor balcony open to four bedrooms. A mirror above the French doors leading to the outside allowed Gillette to see who was coming in the main door.