

Redo of Palm Beach Volk home, for sale at \$39M, was 'passion project'

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REAL-ESTATE

Redo of historic Palm Beach home, priced at \$39M, was a 'passion project,' investor says

Palm Beach real estate investor Tommy Morrison re-imagined the historic Phipps Plaza home of the late architect John Volk. The restored-and-renovated house is on the market for \$39 million.

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- The restoration and renovation of the former John L. Volk house at 206 Phipps Plaza took four years to complete.
- The house is a prominent part of Phipps Plaza, one of the few designated historical districts in Palm Beach.
- Agent Jim McCann of Premier Estate Properties has the house priced at \$39 million.

Over his real estate career, Palm Beach resident Tommy Morrison typically focused on investing in office and retail buildings through his family's Lake Worth Beach-based firm Sympatico Real Estate Inc.

And after the coronavirus pandemic arrived, he changed his focus to upscale condominiums, working with his father, Carlos Morrison, also of Palm Beach, and other partners. Their in-the-works projects in West Palm Beach include two residential towers — The Berkeley on Clear Lake and the Mr. C Residences downtown on Okeechobee Boulevard. Also on the list is an affiliate of the Maryland-based Celebree School, a private early-childhood facility.



For one of his personal projects, however, Tommy Morrison shifted his focus a bit further when he purchased, in 2018, the long-time residence of the late society architect John L. Volk in Palm Beach's historic Phipps Plaza enclave off South County Road. He admits it was a bit outside his portfolio.

"This is my first house, and I wanted a challenge," he says. "I jumped in headfirst and it became a passion project. I fell in love with it.

"I grew up in New York City and loved the townhomes. To me, this property emulated one of those old Fifth Avenue apartments with an intown feeling, but with a garage and pool. And you can walk anywhere," he says, mentioning nearby schools, the beach and the recently opened Palm House hotel.

"I (renovated) it thinking it would be good for a family, and I considered living there myself, but I have a beautiful home nearby."

As for the aforementioned challenges, the house is considered a landmarked property, because it is in Phipps Plaza, one of only a few town-designated historical districts in Palm Beach. The exteriors of designated buildings can't be altered without the permission of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Morrison began seeking approvals from the town in 2020, working with architect Keith Spina of Spina O'Rourke + Partners in West Palm Beach and Gulfstream Builders of Tequesta. The project took four years to complete.

“We had to do it in sections, from the ground up. Every single wall is brand new, and the original elements we kept, rebuilt or repurposed,” Morrison explains.

Completely restored with gut-renovated interiors, the house at 206 Phipps Plaza is for sale at \$39 million. With six bedrooms, eight bathrooms, three-half-baths and 11,786 square feet of living space, inside and out, the property is represented by [agent Jim McCann](#). He is co-listing it with his Premier Estate Properties colleagues Hill Scaff and Christopher Bode.

Morrison is quick to point out the home’s features, some of which he says could appeal to young families like his own: A door in the courtyard wall offers access to Seaview Avenue, where the Palm Beach Public School and the upper campus of the Palm Beach Day Academy are just down the street.

Describing the house, Morrison also calls two of the guest suites upstairs “the boy’s bedroom and the girl’s bedroom.”

He even suggests that the downstairs bar in the family room could be stocked with kid-friendly drinks and snacks.

The house itself, he says, represents an important piece of Palm Beach’s history. The property is on the north side of the oval street that anchors Phipps Plaza, the 1924 commercial-and-residential enclave that earned its designation as a historic district in 1982.

Developed by John “Jay” S. Phipps, the enclave lies just north of Royal Palm Way and west of South County Road. It features buildings, apartments and houses designed by a who’s who of the island’s early architects, including Volk, Addison Mizner, Treanor & Fatio, Howard Major, Belford Shoumate and Marion Sims Wyeth.

Known as Casa de Los Arcos because of its distinctive front arches, the former Volk house was designed in 1925 by first-generation architect, Marion Sims Wyeth. Volk bought and renovated it for his own home after his marriage to his second wife, Jane, in 1947. After the architect’s death in 1984, his widow — a longtime chair of the landmarks board — lived there until [she died in 2010](#), when ownership passed to their son, John K. Volk, and [his late wife, Lory](#).

A two-story foyer and stair hall are central to the layout. To the west are the living room, the family room, a dining area and the kitchen. Sliding-glass doors with fanlights above them open from the living room to a hedged front patio. A portion of the living room ceiling is covered in decorative, white-washed pecky-cypress, while the parquet floors feature bleached French oak.

The nearby family room opens to the pool-view enclosed loggia, which has the home’s second wet bar and floors with a marble mosaic pattern.

The oak-paneled dining area is topped by a decorative coffered ceiling, and the kitchen is finished with white custom cabinetry, a counter-to-ceiling stone backsplash, quartzite countertops and stainless-steel appliances. Nearby is a butler's pantry.

To the south and fronting the plaza is the garage, and behind it to the north are the laundry room and staff quarters overlooking Seaview Avenue.

Explaining some of the intricacies of the restoration projects in these areas, Morrison says that his team discovered and uncovered the limestone archways that front the living room.

"That section of the room was once the covered walkway of the home, which Volk expanded as part of the living room," he explains.

The prominent arcade fronting the street, meanwhile, presented a major challenge. How could cars access the garage behind the arches, which could not be removed because of directives from the landmarks board? The design team came up with an innovative solution: Some of the columns can be electronically tilted up out of the way so that cars can drive in.

"From the town's perspective, the arches needed to be kept, but to be playful and knowing that people have car collections, I wanted to have a James Bond-like experience, where with the push of a button, the columns and windows retract to a private garage," Morrison explains.

On the second floor, the main bedroom suite encompasses the west side of the house. The bedroom features built-in cabinetry, a breakfast bar, a library and banks of French doors that open to the pool-view terrace. The suite also comprises custom-fitted closets/dressing rooms and two bathrooms, both with steam showers and one with a marble freestanding tub.

Also upstairs are two guest suites with doors that open to loggias overlooking Phipps Plaza. The beamed ceilings in these bedrooms were uncovered and rebuilt by Morrison's team, and both rooms feature built-in cabinetry. One of the bathrooms is finished in marble, with the other bathroom features mosaic tile.

A sitting room, an office, a bathroom and a utility room are on the north side of the layout, as are two additional bedroom suites. These are the bedrooms that Morrison says would be well suited to children.

For the design of the grounds, Morrison worked with SMI Landscape Architecture of Palm Beach. The pool's original shamrock/clover-leaf-like shape was retained. The pool courtyard also has a tiled fountain.

Summing up the project, Morrison says: "As a child, I spent a lot of time (in Palm Beach) and I wanted to create the typical Mediterranean home with Moroccan themes throughout. This house had those elements already, and I highlighted them."

To see more photos of 206 Phipps Plaza in Palm Beach, click on the photo gallery near the top of this page.

For more than 20 years, Christine Davis has written about Palm Beach real estate in the "On the Market" feature in the Palm Beach Daily News.