

RENOVATION

Good guys rode to the rescue of N.O. townhouse

By ED ANDERSON
Staff writer

Like cowboy good-guys riding into the sunset without waiting for thanks, two out-of-state developers have rescued a fading French Quarter townhouse and now want to ease out of New Orleans by selling it to someone who will care for it as much as they did.

Wealthy real estate investors Percival T. Beacroft Jr., a lawyer from Woodville, Miss., and Freeport, Texas; and Ernesto Caldeira of Houston have made a career of rescuing old properties around the country and turning them over to buyers who share their fascination for preservation and architecture.

Their latest project was a 4,716-square-foot, 156-year-old residence at 512-16 St. Philip, which is on the market for \$825,000.

The building consists of a three-story master home with slave quarters separated by a brick patio. It has 14 rooms including five bedrooms, three baths, a sauna, a library and a landscaped patio with a fountain, said real estate agent Dorian Bennett, who is handling the property, along with Brooks Ching and Mary Alice Longenecker of Audubon Brokers.

The property also has room for two small commercial outlets. Only one is now used, Bennett said.

The two men bought the decaying building in 1980 for \$150,000 and, by some accounts, have spent more than \$1 million over four years renovating the home.

Beacroft, who owns and operates his

family's Rosemont Plantation in Woodville, said it's time to walk away from the project and do other things.

"It's like a little hotel," the soft-spoken businessman-lawyer said recently. "I am always happy to renovate a building."

"I guess I am a frustrated architect. But when I feel I have done my best with it, and I have put it back to the way it was, then it's for somebody else to enjoy."

"I am glad to put this one in good hands."

"It was such a beautiful building," Caldeira said of the imposing structure with a balcony that has a view of the nearby Mississippi River. "We're glad to see it back. I draw pleasure from seeing it back. It feels good."

Bennett said there have been some serious inquiries about the home, built by noted architect Francois Corneilles, who designed the landmark Beauregard House in the Vieux Carre.

Beacroft said he never intended to renovate the townhouse for his own use as a private residence, although that is how it is being marketed by Bennett.

"We bought the house for investment purposes," he said. "We didn't want to cut it up into apartments. We felt it should be put back as a private house."

"But we are getting rid of it because our work is done. . . . We were out to save a building. I have a home and business in Texas, too. I didn't need this one."

Caldeira echoed the same sentiments. "A house in the French Quarter is not a high priority of mine now."

Caldeira, a former producer of the CBS-TV soap opera "Search for Tomor-



Peeking down into the rejuvenated courtyard: Balcony offers a relaxing view of brick paving and foliage.



512 St. Philip St.: Investors renovated faded townhouse in the French Quarter.



Archway leads into the brick-paved courtyard.

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row," and Beacroft began their buy-reno-ovate-sell partnership when they were in college. To date, they have done about 15 buildings together — in New York, Texas and Mississippi.

One of the properties they renovated is the Durazno Plantation in Brazoria County, Texas.

The St. Philip Street property was a victim of demolition by neglect when the two men bought it in 1980, Bennett said. "It was literally falling down," Bennett said. "He (Beacroft) didn't know he had to go so far with the development" when he started the renovations in 1981.

So what began as a residence and business for Pierre Hurtubise in the 1830s fell into a seedy disuse in more recent times, Caldeira said.

Before the two rescued the building, they said it was home to "a derelict, greasy spoon restaurant, a junk shop and a rooming house with 20 to 30 cubicle-like apartments."

"Mostly only pigeons lived there," Caldeira said of the building. "It was structurally unsound. We wondered what held most of it up. It was probably the termites holding hands," Beacroft said.

Besides replacing the parapet roof, tearing down the walls that divided the rooming house cubicles and stripping away interior walls that covered original millwork, the two entrepreneurs found fireplaces that had been concealed by walls built during earlier remodeling.

They installed new plumbing, wiring and three separate heating-air conditioning systems; restructured part of the slab; raised the foundation; and stripped the pine floors to give them a new lustre.

Besides the structural changes, the two invested heavily in antiques, which adorn a study and living room, installed new marble and refurbished a winding staircase in the foyer, directly off the carriage-way entrance.

"It took six months, full time, pulling

stuff out of here and carefully removing debris," Caldeira said. "We literally had to rebuild the center wall and the chimney going through the roof. It was from foundation to roof and from roof to foundation changes."

Beacroft and Caldeira said they were not looking for the St. Philip Street house as a project to undertake in 1980. They said they were looking for other French Quarter property and shrugged off the one they ultimately bought.

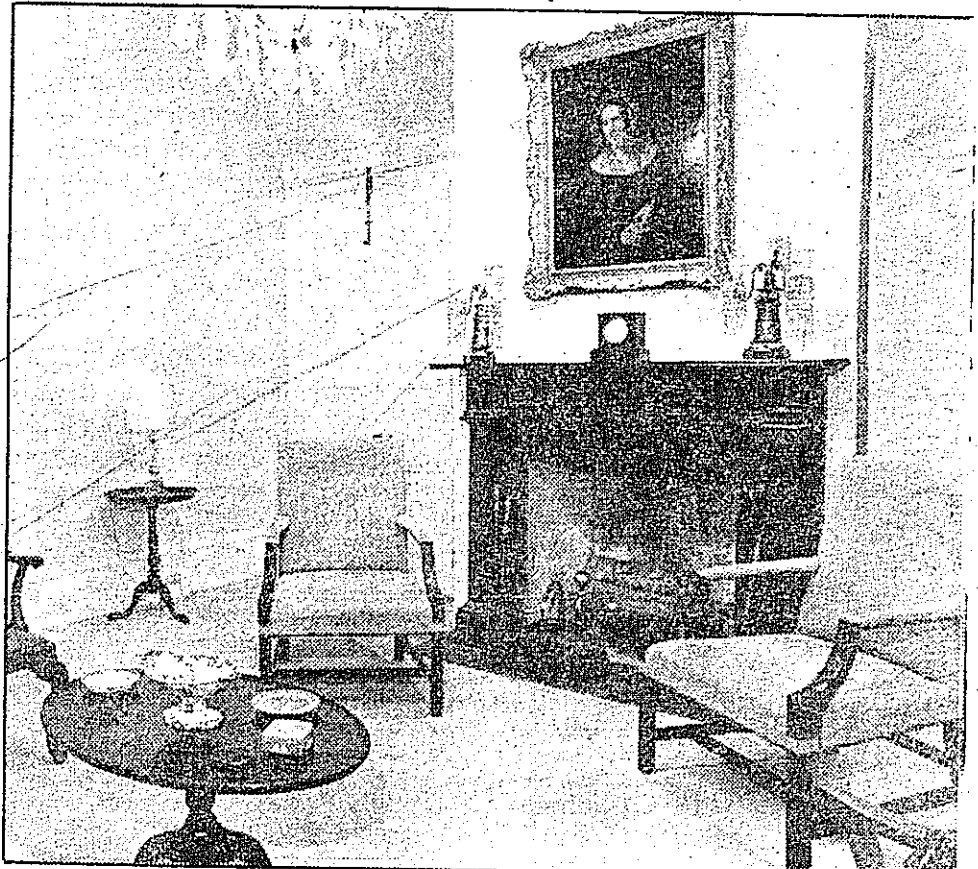
"I saw it the first time and thought that it would take a massive effort to fix that one up," Beacroft said. "I guess I passed it for a year or two, and I'd look in the iron gate and look at the state of neglect."

"I'd tell myself, 'I wouldn't want to tackle that. It's too far gone.' It looked futile."

Beacroft and Caldeira said it was only at the urging of friends who knew their background that they bought the property. Caldeira agreed.

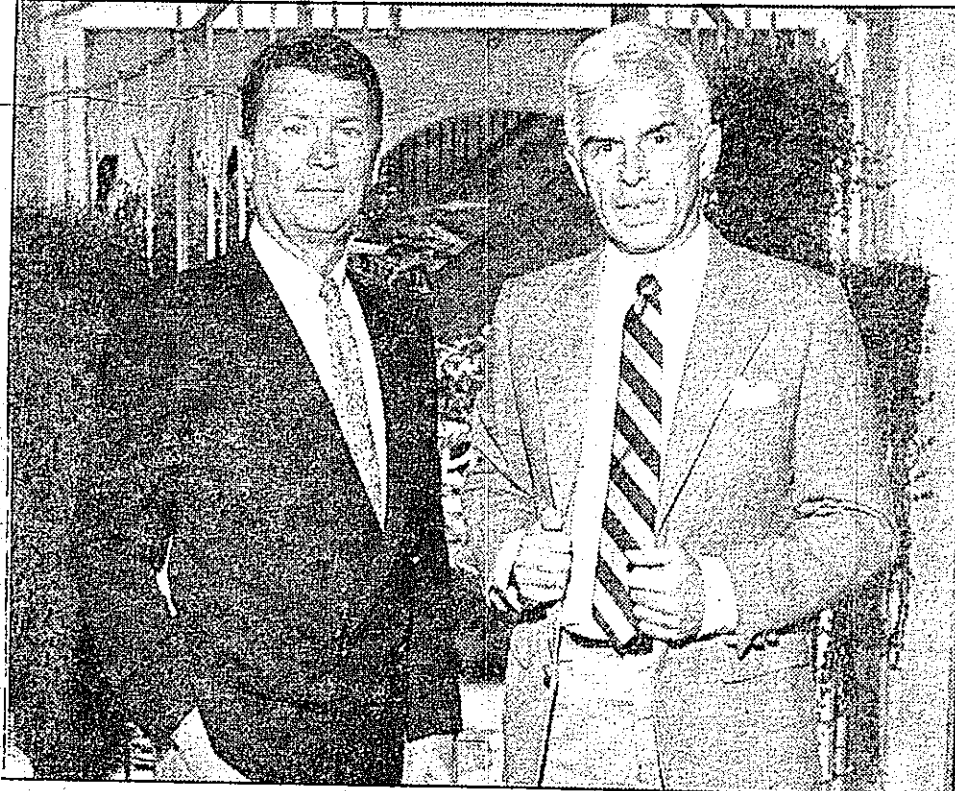
Both men agree there was a residual benefit from the project: the consolation that they had a small part in preserving a bit of the Vieux Carre and its heritage.

"This is important to the Vieux Carre," Beacroft said. "So many homes have been allowed to deteriorate into nothing here."



Inside: Antique fixtures enhance a sitting area.

STAFF PHOTOS BY NORMAN J. BERTEAUX JR.



Percival T. Beacroft Jr., left, Ernesto Caldeira: A fascination for preservation and architecture.