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A Saudi Sheikh Brings Boston's Ames Webster Mansion Back to Life

Sheikh Fahad M.S. Al Athel is converting the intricately detailed property into a trio of high-end apartments



A **Saudi sheikh** is testing Boston's luxury market with a \$35 million renovation of the Ames Webster mansion, a historic landmark known for its intricately detailed interior.

In the city's posh Back Bay neighborhood, the 26,000-square-foot mansion is outfitted with artistic trophies of the late-19th century. Owned in the 1880s by the family of Frederick Lothrop Ames, an art collector who was considered one of the state's wealthiest people at the time, it has murals by Orientalist French painter Jean-Joseph Benjamin Constant and stained-glass skylights by John La Farge, according to plans from the period.

The mansion is significant for its scale and finishes, said Tom High, founder of BackBayHouses.org, a website on the history of homes in the area. "It's like an aria in a beautiful opera or a center stone in a necklace," Mr. High said.

It's also a bit of a mess. In 1971 the home was converted to office space and occupied by the development firm of Ted Raymond, a developer whose company co-owned the building with a local architect. Mr. Raymond confirmed that he and his co-owners decided to sell amid his financial struggles in 2013. He filed for bankruptcy protection soon after, records show.



The 26,000-square-foot mansion was owned in the 1880s by the family of Frederick Lothrop Ames, an art collector who was considered one of the state's wealthiest people at the time.

Sheikh Fahad M.S. Al Athel, CEO of a holding company with interests in healthcare, technology, real estate and agriculture, bought the mansion sight unseen for \$14.5 million in 2013, according to Kahlil Hamady, the architect of the renovation.

Initially interested in converting it into as many as 18 condominium units, Mr. Al Athel—influenced in part by historic research done by Mr. Hamady and his colleague Leslie-Jon Vickory—decided to limit the scope of the project to three units. He has worked to preserve the original artistic details, Mr. Hamady said. The project is slated for completion in 2019.

The three units, which include a triplex penthouse, are coming on the market later this year starting at more than \$20 million apiece, according to Tracy Campion of Campion & Co., the agent who will list the homes.



The mansion's interior includes murals by Orientalist painter Jean-Joseph Benjamin Constant and stained glass skylights by John La Farge.

The architects brought in artisans to restore some of the home's historic details, including mosaic tiles in the entryway, crystal chandeliers and the murals, which are in part believed to depict Byzantine emperor Justinian I, his wife Theodora, the scholar Procopius and Antonina, wife of Justinian's famous general Belisarius. Years of smoke and gas damage were removed by a conservator from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

Art specialists also repaired and cleaned the original stained-glass skylight in the atrium, which was damaged and grimy, replacing some of the jewels, supporting the lead framework and ironing out cracks.

The developer replaced a parking area to the rear of the property with a garden. Parking was moved to a restored carriage house beneath the property; workers used a process called structural needling to fortify the structure with a new steel support frame.

Though named after Mr. Ames, the house was originally designed in 1871 by architecture firm Peabody and Stearns for Stephen V. R. Thayer, a wealthy Harvard University graduate. Mr. Thayer traveled to Brazil as part of an attempt to disprove Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, according to Mr. Hamady's research. Mr. Thayer died at age 24 and never got to live in the home. The brownstone was later enlarged and enhanced in 1882 for Mr. Ames and his wife, Rebecca Caroline Ames.

Heir to a railroad fortune, Mr. Ames served as vice president of the Old Colony Railroad and the Fall River Steamboat Line. He was also an art collector, with holdings that included porcelains, paintings, crystals and jades, according to a New York Times obituary in 1893. The Ames family were entertainers and would host grand parties in the oak great hall, with the orchestra playing above in the music room, according to Mr. Hamady's research. Mr. Hamady found old photographs of Mr. Ames dressed up as a Shakespearean character at a costume party, most likely Henry VIII.



Sheikh Fahad M.S. Al Athel is spending \$35 million to renovate the building. The project is slated for completion in 2019.

“The choreography of how you would enter the house was very theatrical,” Mr. Hamady said. “Guests would come from the carriage house through a back secret stair to the mezzanine, from which they would descend into the Jacobean great hall. It was at night, so the lamps would be gas lit at the stairs, lighting up the stained glass above. This place was on fire.”



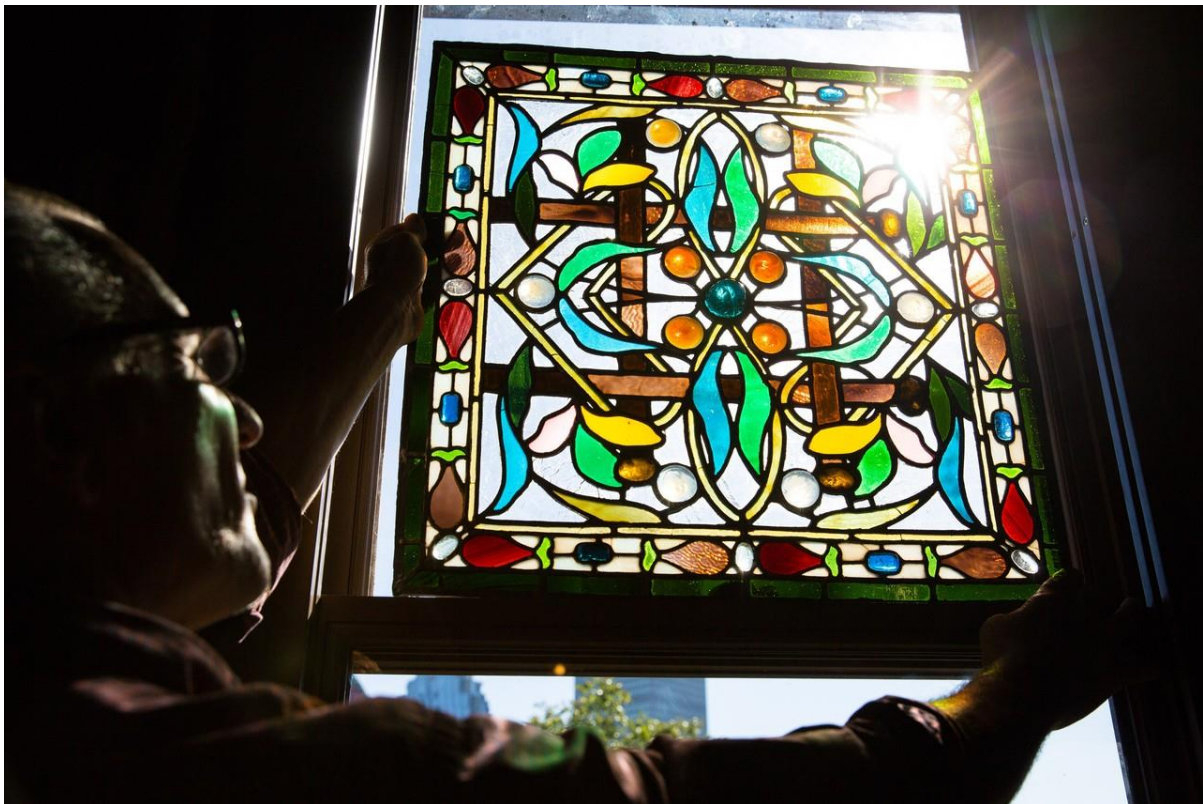
Architect Kahlil Hamady is overseeing the ambitious project.



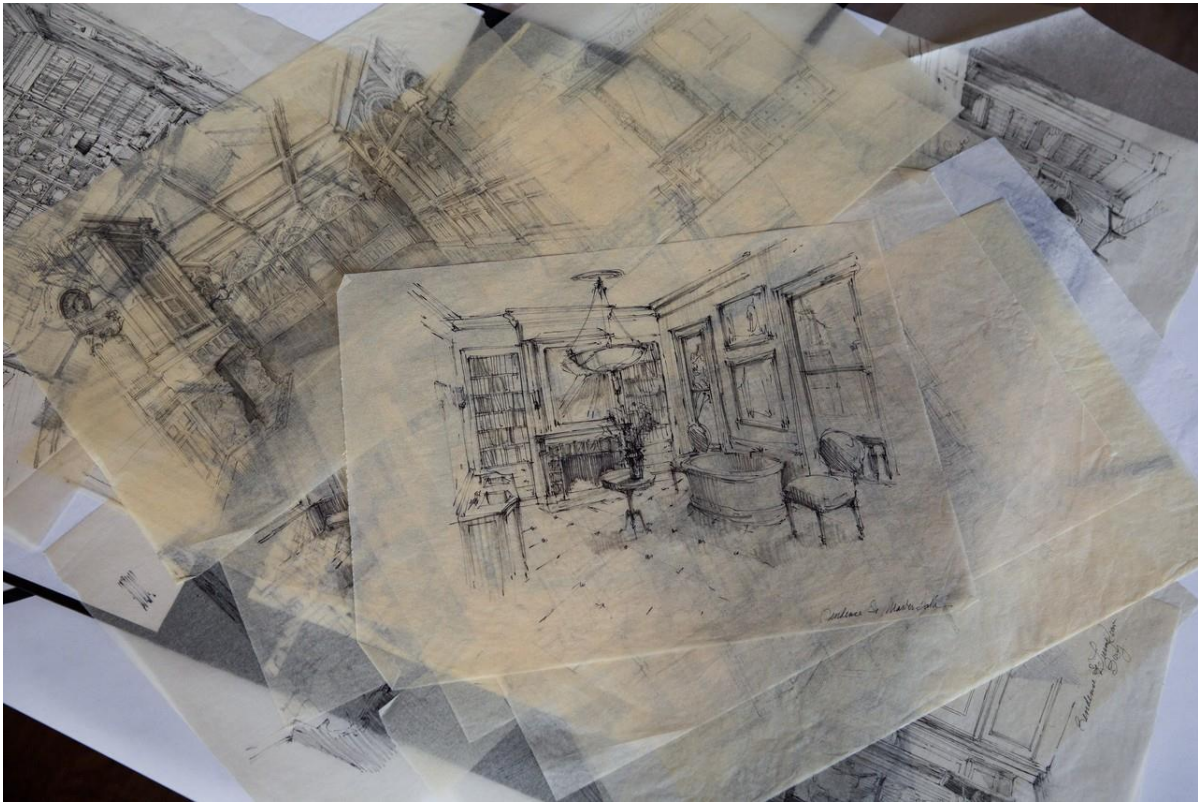
The property features murals by Orientalist French painter Jean-Joseph Benjamin Constant and stained glass skylights and window panels by John La Farge.



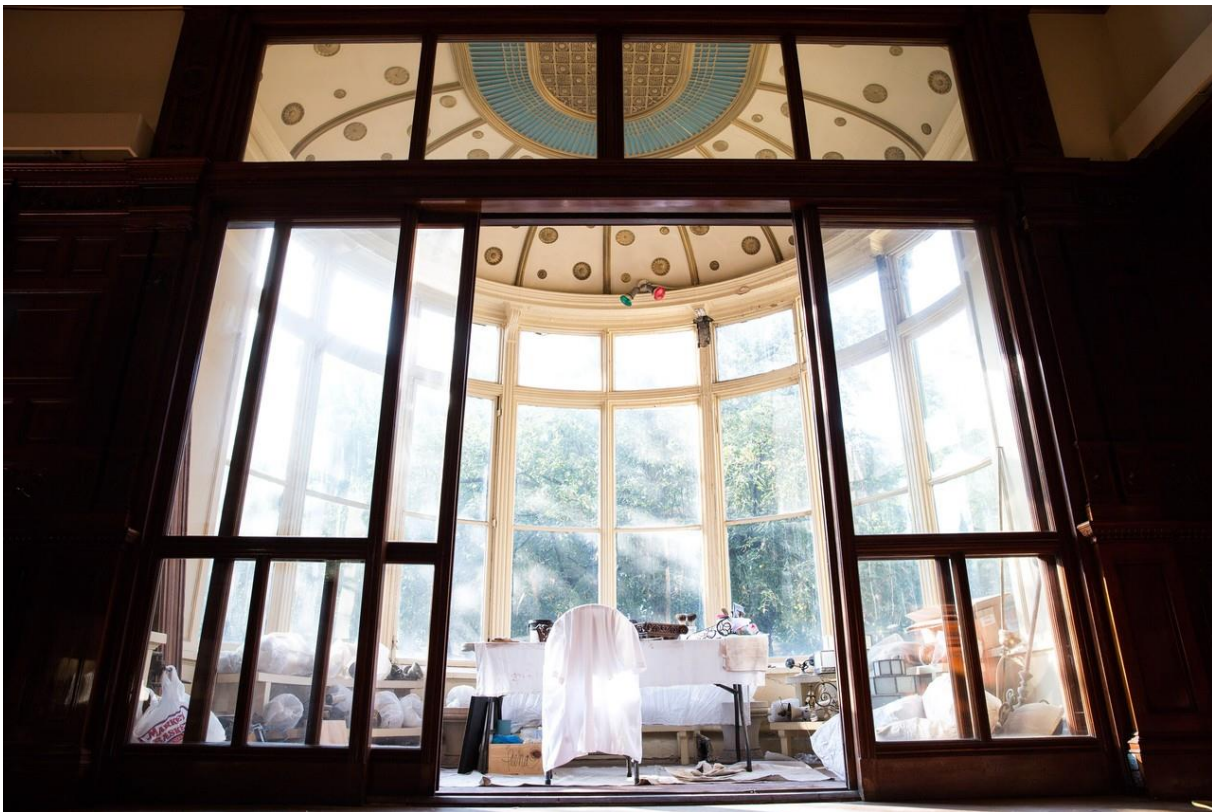
Mr. Hamady drew detailed plans as part of the in-depth process of restoring the property.



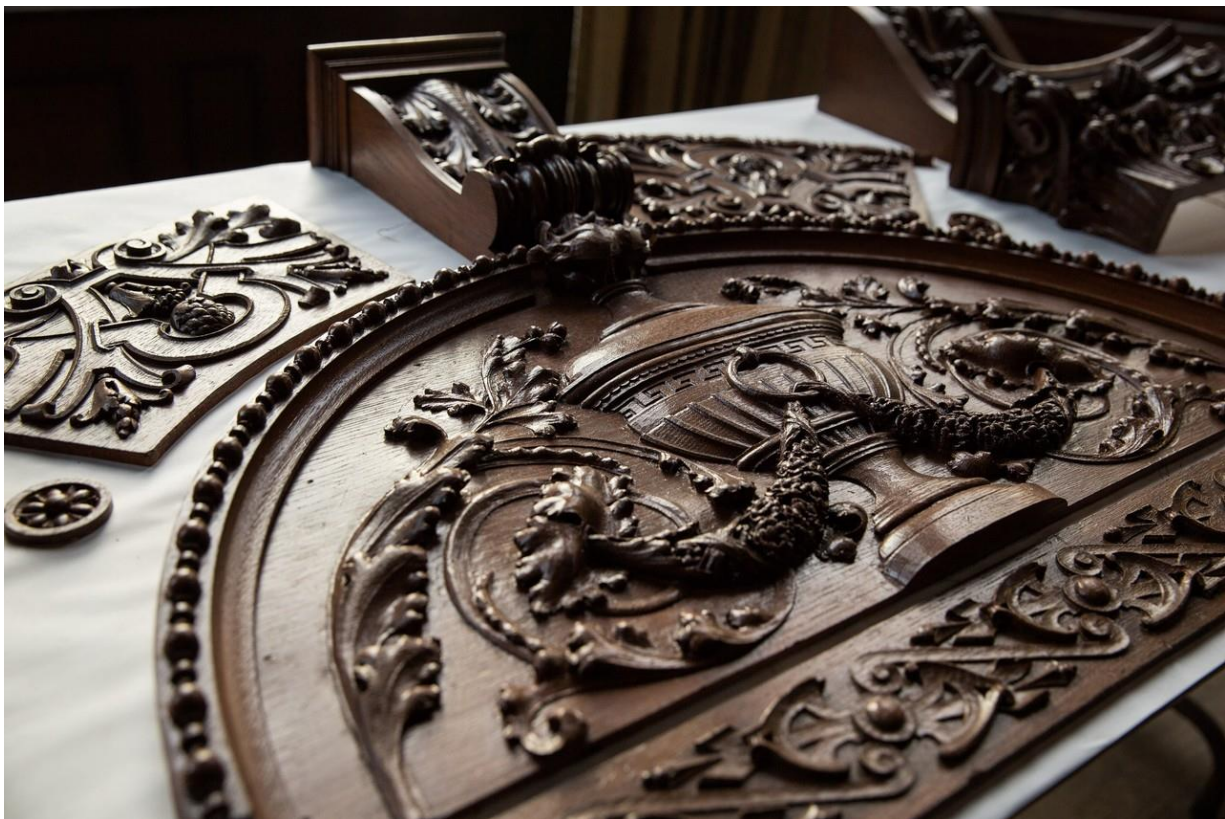
Artisans repaired and cleaned the original stained glass skylight and replaced missing jewels.



Mr. Hamady's colleague Leslie-Jon Vickory draws pictures of their vision for the completed project.



A breakfast room at the property is currently being used as studio space for artisans recreating painted wood work in order to replace damaged or missing pieces.



The pieces are created by making a plaster mold of the original woodwork and then painting and staining them to resemble wood.



Ms. Vickory's drawings are on display in the library.



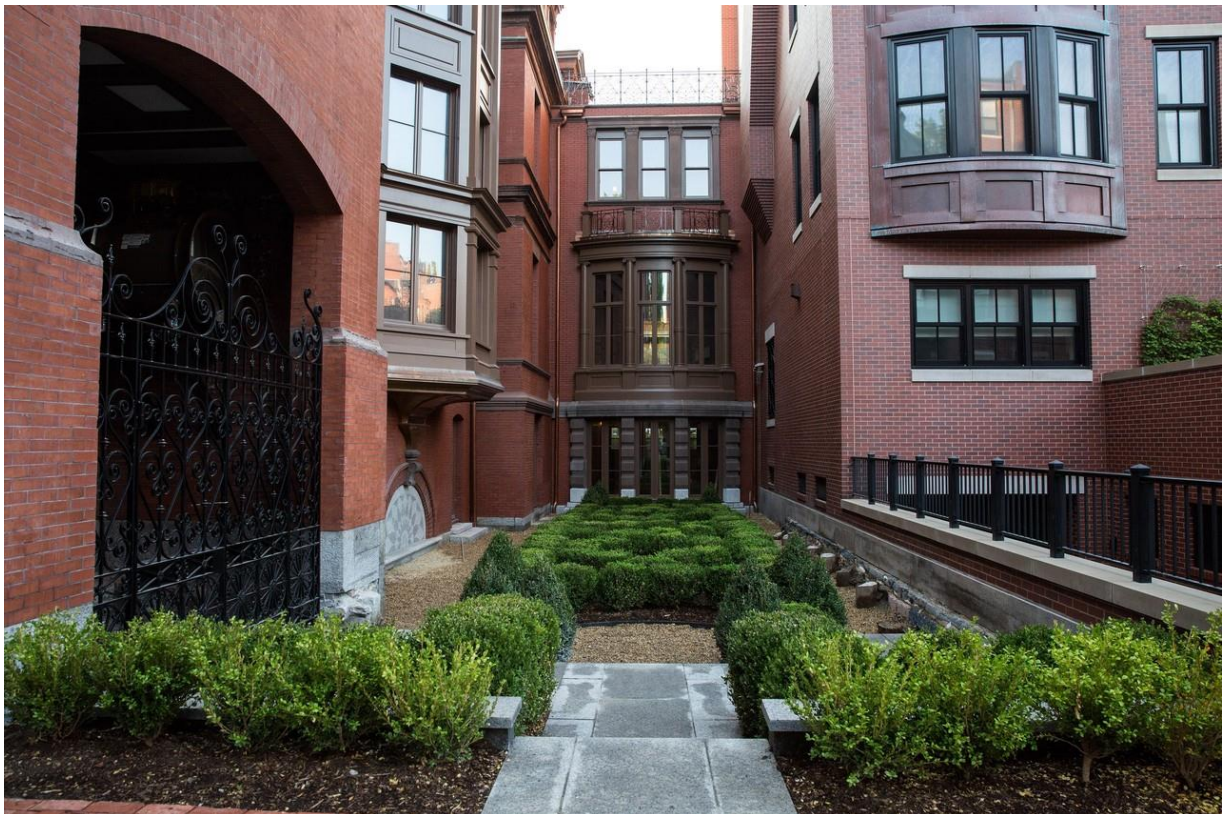
Prices will start at \$20 million apiece for the three units at the project.



A detail of the original woodwork.



In former owner Frederick Lothrop Ames's day, this space served as a music room, Mr. Hamady said.



A parking area was replaced with a garden by Mr. Hamady's team.