Vacation-Home

After this historic beachfront home burned to the ground, its high-profile owner decided to never let it happen again

by Charles Wardell

When you hear the term *security system*, you're apt to think "burglar alarms," and that's the extent of what most homes have. But if you're building a coastal resort home that will be unoccupied much of the year, you may want to consider some added protection. Installing systems to protect the home against fire and flooding using the best technology the budget will allow could make the difference between a minor incident and a major catastrophe. That was the lesson learned in Massachusetts after a devastating fire ravaged a one-of-a-kind 19th-century seaside home. When the owners made the decision to rebuild, they included state-of-the-art systems to safeguard their investment.

RETURN TO GLORY... THEN DISASTER

The Corbin-Norton House is the grandest of a cluster of Victorian-era summer homes encircling scenic Ocean Park in the heart of Oak Bluffs, one of the six towns on the island of Martha's Vineyard. When software entrepreneur Peter Norton bought the home in 1991, neglect and a series of remodeling nightmares had erased much of its original look, but he was determined to restore the house to its former grandeur. Architect Christopher Dallmus of Design Associates in Boston worked with local contractor Neal Galligan, president of Doyle Construction in West Tisbury, Mass., to return the house to its glory days. The completed project was an exact replica of the house as it stood in 1891. "The Corbin-Norton House stands out among all restorative renovations I've worked on because the result was largely museum quality," says Dallmus.

Then disaster struck. In February 2001 a short circuit in an electrical wire set off a blaze that reduced the unoccupied home to cinders. The home's smoke detectors malfunctioned, letting the fire quietly smolder in one room for approximately four hours, until it got hot enough to melt the windows. When that happened, the rush of oxygen caused the room to burst into flames, which then spread quickly throughout the house. Firefighters made a heroic effort to keep the fire from spreading to adjacent homes, but that was the best they could hope for. The blaze was unstoppable.

Without hesitation, Peter Norton decided to rebuild. Galligan's crew completed the second Corbin-Norton House in the fall of 2004. The new incarnation is identical to the original except for one big difference: It now includes the ultimate in burglar and fire protection, including a commercial-grade sprinkler system.

FIRE PREVENTION

Black Lab Alarm of Woburn, Mass., installed the home's alarm systems. (It wasn't the same company that installed the faulty fire alarms in the first house.) The rebuilt Corbin-Norton House is now guarded by a Napco Gemini 9600 combination burglar and fire alarm system. The system is continuously monitored by a communications center that contacts the caretaker, along with the police or fire department, whenever an alarm goes off. The alarms connect to the monitoring service via the phone line, but the system also includes a long-range radio backup — a must in remote areas.

As required by code, the house has smoke detectors in every one of its eight bedrooms, at the top and bottom of each staircase, and within 10 feet of every bedroom. But while code-mandated smoke detectors are placed to protect people, Black Lab President Todd Broyard says that the Nortons wanted a system that would protect the home as well. The first step toward reaching this goal was to install heat detectors near all mechanical equipment: in the basement, the kitchen, the garage, and in a mechanical room in the third-floor attic. All the heat detectors except those in the attic will set off the alarm system when the temperature reaches 135°F. In the attic, which tends to be hotter than the rest of the house, the system reacts to temperatures of 200°F or higher.

Although heat detectors aren't required by code, Broyard says that they will provide extra insurance against another devastating blaze. "Just satisfying the fire department's requirement is not enough," he explains. "Heat detectors are an important part of protecting the property. One of the best things you can do is to install them over any mechanical equipment."

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

Detecting a fire is one thing; actually stopping a fire is another. The Nortons wanted to make sure that the house would never succumb to fire again, so they decided to include a sprinkler system in the rebuild. That alone put them in a minority of homeowners. "Builders tend to avoid including sprinkler systems in homes because of the expense," notes David Smith of HFP Corporation in Westfield, Mass., who installed the Nortons' sprinkler system. But the cost wasn't an issue on this job. While most people balk at the $7,500 it usually costs to put sprinklers in a house this size, the Nortons didn't hesitate to spend $50,000 for a commercial-grade system that would make their historic property virtually fireproof.

One feature that makes the system so effective is the number of sprinkler heads. In most single-family residences that have sprinkler systems, the heads are positioned to allow safe pathways out of the house. But if you want to protect the structure itself, too, you need enough heads to quickly douse a fire anywhere in the house.

The new Corbin-Norton home seems to have sprinkler heads everywhere. That includes the attic, closets, and other combustible concealed spaces. Smith's crew even installed sprinkler heads in the ceiling of the exterior porches, as well as in the garage. The sprinkler heads inside the house are continually charged with water pressure, but the exterior heads remain dry until activated. The pipes that feed them are filled with compressed air, which keeps water out of the pipes by holding an interior valve closed. When fire causes a sprinkler head to open, the air pressure is relieved and water instantly rushes to the head from inside the house.

According to Smith, architects tend to worry that sprinkler heads will detract from a home's aesthetics, but he says that doesn't have to be the case. The sprinkler heads in the Corbin-Norton home are flat disks that fit flush against the ceiling, dropping down only when activated. In rooms with painted ceilings, the disks are linen white. Unlacquered copper covers are used in rooms with wood ceilings. Unless you're looking for them, you really don't notice the sprinklers at all.

BURGLAR ALARMS

The home's burglar alarms were less complicated than the fire protection system. At a cost of around $20,000, the security system is in the average price range for homes this size, notes Broyard. It protects the home against unwanted visitors with magnetic contacts on all doors and windows, plus motion detectors in central areas.

Although the Corbin-Norton House doesn't have remote video surveillance,

BETSY CORSIGLIA

Shortly after the renovation of the Corbin-Norton House on Martha's Vineyard, a fire sparked by an electrical short circuit reduced the unoccupied home to cinders. Faced with the ruin of the once-grand Victorian, its owner decided to restore it immediately — adding a state-of-the-art fire and security system in the rebuild.

Broyard says that this technology is becoming popular with owners of second homes. Such systems consist of cameras tied into a digital video recorder that the owners can monitor remotely from their primary residence. Besides providing security, they also have a spy function: Owners have been known to use them to check on the comings and goings of everyone from work crews to the meter reader. "At the very least, these systems can help you keep tabs on your caretaker," says Broyard. "About half the owners of summer homes are now opting for surveillance systems."

OTHER SYSTEMS

The Corbin-Norton House includes another alarm system that's a good investment for any vacation home in the Northeast: a freeze alarm to signal a burst pipe in the wintertime when the home is unoccupied. The alarm can be set to alert the monitoring service when temperatures in the home fall below a certain level. Flood detectors in the basement complete the home's environmental protection system. "Low-temperature alarms are very important in summer homes," notes Broyard. Unless the owner plans to have the pipes drained seasonally, a freeze-alert system is all but indispensable to protect a house from what can be a very expensive situation. "Almost all second homes I work on have these," he says.

Of course, most second homes don't get nearly the amount of protection that went into the new Corbin-Norton House. But you don't have to be working on a historic mansion to realize that true security goes beyond simple alarms. A live-in caretaker may be the ideal, but barring that, monitoring systems that alert a communications center and on-site systems that protect the home itself may be a good investment. ~

Charles Wardell writes on construction topics from Vineyard Haven, Mass. All photos by author except as noted.

The Nortons invested in a commercial-grade sprinkler system (above) capable of feeding a large number of sprinkler heads distributed throughout the interior and exterior of the house.

SPRINKLER **SMOKE DETECTOR**

HEAT DETECTOR

A complete fire system in the Corbin-Norton house includes not only discrete sprinkler heads (top left) and smoke alarms (top right), but also heat detectors (above). These heat detectors were installed in the kitchen (between lights at left) as well as in the basement, the garage, and in a mechanical room in the third-floor attic.