



# The Mary Nohl House Restoration

Captioned photos provided by John Michael Kohler Art Center. Additional photos provided by Douglas Frazer



**THE MARY NOHL HOUSE**, one of the village's most significant cultural assets, is being restored. In 1924, Mary Nohl's father built the beach cottage at 7328 North Beach Drive from a \$950 Sears Roebuck kit. The property is almost two acres but less than half of that is taken up by the house and yard.

Mary inherited the property and for over 50 years lived and worked in the house, using her skills as an Art Institute of Chicago credentialed painter, sculptor, potter, and printer to transform her home and property into a total art environment inside and out, and on virtually every surface.

The site has attracted attention from scholars, art lovers, and curiosity seekers who have come to appreciate the distinctive, original, and sometimes haunting creations along with her experimentation in virtually every media. Mary Nohl, according to the Milwaukee County's Landmark Designation, "was one of only a very few women to undertake such a total artistic transformation of her personal world."

Inside the house were hundreds of oil paintings, mixed media sculptures, and stained glass windows. She transformed walls, carpets, window treatments, and even door jambs into art.

Outside are large sculptures of concrete, stone, or wood—often in combination. These include stylized figures, mythical animals, and massive Easter Island-inspired heads. She decorated the façade of her home with panels holding driftwood figures and brightly painted cut-out wooden patterns.

The property is owned and maintained by Creation and Preservation Partners, Inc., a supporting organization to the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan. In March 2015, the Arts Center announced after much deliberation that the house would remain on site and be occupied by a tenant.

**Phase One** of the project, which began in September 2015, involves the reconstruction of much of the infrastructure. The general contractor is Scott Thiel Builders. Located on the terrace below the bluff, the house is vulnerable to flooding during severe weather events. The storms of July 2010 were particularly devastating—the home was left uninhabitable. Thus, the first priority of the construction phase was to stabilize the structure. A large section of the backside of the home, an add-on, had no foundation. Thiel installed a foundation, replaced the

mechanical systems, and moved the equipment from the basement to the ground floor. For backup, a Kohler Co. generator will be installed. Engineers will also redesign the landscape to channel water away from the structure.

The Arts Center crated up many of the outdoor sculptures for protection. The crates have now been removed and conservation of the sculptures will continue this summer.

Also repaired was a significant amount of wood rot and carpenter ants infestation damage to various flooring and floor supports. The trees surrounding the house and woodland growth a bit farther from the structure have been thinned.

Much of the exterior wood art has been removed and taken to Sheboygan for restoration. What is left is delicate. Areas over the garage should remain much the same as they now appear.

**Phase One**, which is nearing completion, will cost almost a million dollars. It is funded principally by generous contributions to the Arts Center and Creation and Preservation Partners.

*(Below) To protect them from damaging winter weather, concrete sculptures on the grounds of the Mary Nohl Lake Cottage Environment were covered in October 2015.*



Mary Nohl Lake Cottage Environment (interior site detail, Nohl and others in her cottage living room, Fox Point, Wisc.), c. 1960–2001. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation Inc.

Mary Nohl Lake Cottage Environment (site detail, fountain on east side of house, Fox Point, Wisc.), c. 1960–2001. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation Inc.

Part of a concrete feature on the Mary Nohl site undergoing conservation in October 2015.



**Phase Two** is a much longer term project involving the restoration of the interior objects and furniture. The Arts Center has plans to restore these in Sheboygan before returning them to the house. The Arts Center may display interior objects on a periodic basis in Sheboygan.

The cost of Phase Two is uncertain; the Arts Center is now determining the needs and costs for restoration. Fundraising efforts are underway to complete the restoration of the entire art environment.

When the project is finished, the Mary Nohl House will not look like a new structure nor is it meant to. Rather, both inside and out will look like it did when Mary Nohl lived in the house—when the site was most active.


The Mary Nohl house is a special part of our village heritage. It's world class. However, it sits in a quiet residential part of our village and should be appreciated in that context with sensitivity and respect for the special character of its surroundings.

For an explanation of the site and an opportunity to view some of the art, visit the John Michael Kohler Arts Center exhibition, "Of Heart and Home: Mary Nohl's Art Environment" on display through August 21. It's well worth the trip.

(Right) Mary Nohl Lake Cottage Environment (site view, Fox Point, WI), c. 1960–2001. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation Inc.



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Douglas H. Frazer is a Fox Point resident and neighborhood contributor. The views expressed are his own and not necessarily those of Best Version Media, LLC.