

RACHEL'S HOUSE



“Rachel's House”

Aaron Friedman sold his retail clothing business in 1977. “I had plenty of time on my hands,” he said. “I played golf, traveled with my wife Sarah, did a little gardening and, yes, a little woodworking.” Friedman soon became concerned, however, because “I was beginning to spend too much time in front of the television, munching, eating popcorn and candy.”

He mentioned this situation while visiting his son Murray, daughter-in-law Lynn, and 7-year-old granddaughter Rachel in Atlanta. Lynn suggested that her semi-retired father-in-law build a dollhouse for Rachel that resembled the house they were living in. “I thought that

was a terrific idea,” he said later. The more I thought about it, the more I thought ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if I made her a dollhouse *exactly* like the house she lives in?’”

At that time, Friedman’s son and his family lived in a house in the Midtown neighborhood of Atlanta that was originally built in 1911. Rachel’s parents had bought the house in the early 1970’s. They restored the exterior to its original look, but gutted and renovated the interior into an ultra-contemporary design and layout.

Friedman took “at least a hundred pictures – inside, outside, light fixtures, kitchen cabinets, every little detail I could take a snapshot of.” He also took extensive measurements of the house and worked from the blueprints that were used in the renovation of the house. “I brought it back to Mobile and went to work.” Friedman said that it took him three to four weeks just to draw out his plans for the miniature house in one-inch-to-one-foot scale. Although the scale and dimensions of the miniature house are near perfect in virtually every detail, he did change a few of the overall dimensions on the house. In particular, he compressed the depth of the front porch by a few feet.

According to Betsy Lavanna of the *Mobile Press Register*, Friedman said “When I decided to build the dollhouse, I had no idea where to start.” While on a trip to New York, he shopped for dollhouses to find out how they were made and how much they cost.¹ He also did research and learned as much as he could about what goes into building a dollhouse. However, the books that he had access to did not provide as much help as he would have liked because they were either too simplified or too complex to be useful for the challenges he faced in building Rachel’s House. Friedman used his prior woodworking experience and a lot of inspired ingenuity to go beyond the more general information available to him in order to create solutions that reproduced the original home’s features.

Another challenge that Friedman faced was that the miniature enthusiast market was still in its infancy when he began designing and building Rachel's House. At that time, many of the building components and materials, furnishings, and accessories that are now made and sold specifically for use in dollhouse construction, such as roofing, siding, flooring, and windows, were not yet commercially available. In order to recreate an actual home, Friedman had to be resourceful and use his imagination. For example, Friedman said that he searched for a month before finding fabric that looked like the original carpeting in miniature scale.

The house is held together with about 200 wood screws. Friedman estimated that he assembled and disassembled the house between 15 and 25 times at various stages of construction for wiring, painting, and wallpapering, in that order. As quoted by Lavanna in the *Press-Register* article, Friedman said "There were certain stages that had to be done first, then later taken apart for additional work that could only be done on the workbench. Then there was the reassembling process."²

In order to duplicate the exterior as well as interior details of the house, Friedman put hinges on the exterior walls so that they could swing out to reveal the rooms inside. Eventually, this proved to be cumbersome for displaying the house on a regular basis so Friedman removed the exterior walls from one side of the house. By doing so, viewers can look in the now-open side and see almost all of the rooms and features of the house.

Friedman purchased ready-made wood clapboard siding and asphalt roof shingles in one-inch-to-one-foot scale for use on Rachel's House. According to the *Press-Register* article, Friedman bought dollhouse-sized windows and doors and added panes and door features identical to those of the Atlanta home.³ He hand made the French doors that open and close at the front and back of the house. He used the same paint formulas from the house in Atlanta to mix his paints and ensure they matched the exterior and interior wall colors exactly.

As reported by Lavanna in the *Press-Register*, Friedman explained that in order to replicate the stonework foundation at the base of the house, "I etched into plywood with an engraving tool and painted it different shades of gray to achieve the effect of granite."⁴ The front porch is screened with real screen. Friedman hand made the brackets supporting the roof overhangs, as well as the attic ventilation louvres at the front and back of the house. He installed aluminum drainage valleys and gutters on the roof and drilled drainage holes in the front window boxes, which are filled with tiny geraniums in full bloom.



Aaron Friedman with "Rachel's House." Photo courtesy of Alabama Department of Archives and History. Donated by Alabama Media Group. Photo by Charlie Baumhauer, *Mobile Press-Register*.

The original home has one skylight over the kitchen and another over the upstairs playroom. Friedman searched for a commercially available miniature skylight that he could use in these areas but was unable to find anything that was close enough to those in the original house to satisfy his high standards. In a testament to his improvisation and creativity, Friedman used the plastic bubble packaging from toy airplanes to duplicate the skylights. “I bought the toys, opened up the packages, and I threw away the toys and used the bubble packaging!” he chuckled.

“I put in every detail,” said Friedman, “which meant I sometimes spent hours and hours just making a door. I would say that the only difference in my house is that all of my windows open and close and all of [the windows on the house in Atlanta] don’t,” Friedman quipped.

The interior of the house reflects the actual house in Atlanta with the same detail as the exterior. Downstairs, the flooring in the entry area, living area and dining room is authentic wood parquet made in one-inch-to-one-foot scale for dollhouses. Friedman cut real vinyl flooring tiles to replicate the floors in the kitchen, bathrooms, and utility room. According to Lavanna in the *Press-Register*, the upstairs bedrooms and playroom are carpeted in the exact color and texture of the floors found in the original house. “To scale, that is,” explained Friedman. “Cloth substitutes for regular carpet, which would have been too thick.”⁵

Another detail that Friedman replicated was the interior doors throughout the house. When Murray and Lynn renovated the house in Atlanta, they had all of the interior doors stripped of their many layers of paint and left unpainted. So, Friedman left all interior doors in Rachel’s House unpainted.

One of the most realistic aspects of Rachel’s House is the bookcase in the living area. Friedman made the shelves and stocked them with books, some of which are miniature bound books with blank pages that he bought. His creativity shines through, however, on the ones that he made by cutting out pictures from book club advertisements he found in magazines and mounting them on strips of balsa wood that stand up on the bookshelves.



Living Area

Sarah Friedman needlepointed the multicolored blue shag rug in front of the bookcase in the living area. It is almost identical to the one in the house in Atlanta. Another example of Friedman’s creative problem solving is the aquarium in the entry area of the house. It is made from the inverted cover of a Plexiglas butter dish.

The downstairs layout exactly reflects the original house in Atlanta, with the living and dining areas separated by a semi-circular wall. Recessed light fixtures are positioned throughout the downstairs in the exact locations they have in Atlanta. Friedman could not find a light fixture that matched the original above the dining table, so he improvised by cutting the bottom from

two different sized plastic pill bottles, gluing them together, and adding a 12-volt bulb. French doors swing open to the outside from the dining area.

Friedman's greatest challenge and the most intricate and exacting work was involved in building the ultra-contemporary Scandinavian style cabinets found throughout the house, all by hand. The kitchen alone has 22 handmade cabinets, and every door and drawer opens and closes. As quoted by Lavanna in the *Press-Register*,



Dining Area

Friedman said "It took me at least four weeks to make those cabinets. I used balsa wood and thin plywood veneer, tiny brass hinges on the cabinet doors, and tiny brass pulls on the drawers. The brass nails that hold them together are so small they have to be picked up with tweezers and pushed in with a nail punch."⁶



Kitchen appliances include a double-door refrigerator with ice and water dispenser, stove, oven, and dishwasher. The sink, stove, oven, and hood are made of aluminum to simulate stainless steel. Friedman used metal washers to serve as the burners on the stove and dress snaps to replicate the stove's control knobs. Biscuits are baking in the oven, which is held closed by a tiny strip of Velcro.



A telephone and telephone book, Mixmaster, toaster with toast popping out, and cake are arranged along the countertops, which are made from real black Formica. Miniature bottles of Coca-Cola on the kitchen counter remind the viewer that Friedman's son, Murray, was an executive with The Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta. Lush plants in clay pots hang below the skylight, just like those found in the house in Atlanta.



Views of the Kitchen in Rachel's House

Friedman cleverly concealed the 12-volt transformers for the electrical system behind the workbench in the utility room next to the kitchen. Also downstairs is a small home

office. Here, Friedman made the file cabinets by hand because he couldn't find any available for purchase at that time. The office also includes a rolltop desk and chair and a drop front secretary desk with cubby holes above.

The second floor of Rachel's House showcases the master bedroom in the front of the house. Three other bedrooms are located on either side of a central playroom, where accordion doors open to reveal the washer and dryer, just as in the actual house. Friedman couldn't find a shower curtain to purchase for one of the upstairs bathrooms, so he improvised by cutting one of Sarah's plastic rain bonnets to size. He also hand made the working track lighting fixtures, which swivel in all directions, that match the ones found in two of the original bedrooms. Tiny pictures of young Rachel are placed atop a dresser in one of the bedrooms.

Sarah Friedman, who called herself "the carpenter's helper," was on call to help her husband at the workbench or at other times throughout the project. She also collaborated on selecting interior accessories and she made many detailed contributions for which there are no substitutes. She needlepointed a hammock for the front porch, many of the rugs, pillows, and wall hangings found throughout the house, a bedspread and window valences for one bedroom, runners found on several of the dressers, and even the welcome mat at the front door. Long-time family friend Pearl Brook also made various curtains, drapes and bedspreads.

Friedman completed Rachel's House in 1978. It took him about 14 months, "working day and night," to complete Rachel's House. "However," he said, "never again will I try to copy an interior exactly! This was my first experience in building a dollhouse, and I found that among my most difficult problems was the fact that I was trying to duplicate everything in [the original] house. I wouldn't compromise, which made it very difficult. Also, most of the things that I wanted I couldn't buy in the dollhouse shops because they weren't even available."

*Information compiled by Jere Friedman. All photos by Jere Friedman unless otherwise noted.
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Sources:

- Video of Aaron Friedman describing Rachel's House
- Lavanna, Betsy. "Grandfather builds replica for Rachel." *Mobile Press Register* 19 Mar., 1978: G-12. Print.
- Fields, Mary Durland. "Southern House Tour." *Nutshell News* Dec. 1992: 36-41. Print.



Above: Master Bedroom. Below: Playroom



Endnotes:

¹ Lavanna, Betsy. "Grandfather builds replica for Rachel." *Mobile Press Register* 19 Mar., 1978: G-12. Print.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

Additional photos of Rachel's House:



Front View of Rachel's House



Screened Porch



Side of Rachel's House with exterior wall removed so viewers can see inside.



Living Area



Living Area



Detail of Kitchen



Office



Bedroom #2 (note the tiny pictures of Rachel on the dresser)



Bedroom #3



Bedroom #4



Playroom Detail (showing Laundry Area)



Upstairs Bathroom (note the “rain bonnet shower curtain”)



**Utility Room with workbench;
Powder Room in back**