

A Winning Farmhouse Renovation

With a crack design team, a Manhattan couple invests in an 1830s clapboard home—and scores gently mixes tradition and modernity



By JEN RENZI

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WHEN YOU FIRST GLANCE at its exterior, this home appears to be a quaint early-19th-century clapboard farmhouse. But look closer and you notice a contemporary addition: a modernist black-painted-pine barn pierced with large spans of glass. This collision of old and new neatly sums up the dual personality of the 6,000-square-foot, seven-bedroom weekend residence in Cornwall, Conn. “The house has the spatial clarity of traditional architecture, but none of the stodginess,” explained designer Fawn Galli. Credit that to her inspired collaboration with fellow Manhattanite, architect Douglas C. Wright, and to the clients’ enlightened vision. “Their ambition was a balance of old-world and contemporary, [plain] and flamboyant, Shaker simplicity and tattered chic.”



This mix perfectly suits the clients’ lifestyle. In New York during the week, she is a literary editor, he a high-powered business exec. But their getaway home is all about chilling out: hiking, skiing, reading mystery novels by the fire, throwing dance parties, playing Ping-Pong with their three sons, aged 10, 13 and 16. “Both the parents and the kids have tons of friends nearby, so they have a real social life up here,” Ms. Galli added. “The way the house is designed, it can take relaxed living or more formal entertaining.”



Having rented the property for years before buying it, the clients were keen to preserve its historic charm. Mr. Wright sensitively renovated the 1830s structure, removing a wall here and there, shifting placement of a few windows, and aligning doorways for smoother transitions between rooms. Even the addition, though quietly avant-garde, takes cues from old French salt barns. Mr. Wright reused numerous original elements, including baseboards, door trims and painted floor planks. “Our Grizzly Adams-ish builder was even more manic than we were about salvaging old floorboards and moldings,” the architect said.

The décor is a similarly harmonious blend of old and new. Family heirlooms commingle with angular modernist furnishings, French flea-market finds with contemporary artworks. “Injecting pared-down elements that nod to a Yankee sensibility of restraint was key to keeping the interiors from looking too ‘ye olde,’” said Ms. Galli. “When things started feeling too grandma, we mucked it up a bit.” Contributing to the split-personality vibe are elements that help mediate climatic shifts in an area where temperatures can plunge from 100 to minus 10 in a matter of weeks. As summer segues to fall, reversible dining-room drapes switch from ikat to rich velvet; linen slipcovers are swapped for fur, and Moroccan rugs are pulled out of storage. “Seasonal moves change the look from lakeside chic to cozy-ski-lodge,” Ms. Galli said. The worldly élan, though, is in residence year-round.

A WHITEWASHING OF TRADITION

In his renovation of an 1830s farmhouse in Cornwall, Conn., architect Douglas C. Wright tore down a wall between the entrance hall and the living parlor to invite openness, a feeling heightened by whitewashed walls—and white-painted sisal floor covering. “That’s one of my favorite tricks,” said interior designer Fawn Galli. “Counterintuitively, it’s really low-maintenance. Just wipe it clean—it’s paint! And if it gets too dirty, just repaint it. The material wears beautifully. Showing wear is part of its charm.” The white flooring also sharply sets off the vintage and antique furnishings like sculptures in a museum.



AN EAT-IN, LIVE-IN KITCHEN

The heart of the home is the sunny yellow kitchen, anchored in one corner by a mod gas-burning stove (not shown). The antique table seats eight, with vintage chairs upholstered in mismatched fabrics. The room even boasts a commodious, twin-size daybed. Shiny tin tiles give the low ceiling—8.5 feet in the 1830s section of the house—a bit of lift and complement stainless-steel appliances. Mr. Wright had the newly laid wide-plank floors painted red and faux-aged by grinding gravel vigorously into the grain to match the patina of flooring in adjacent rooms.





SHAKER SIMPLICITY MEETS SENSUALITY

In the master bath—a study in simplicity—reflective textures, like those of the vintage industrial sink from Wyeth and plain-spoken subway tiles, are offset by rough-hewed wood ceiling planks. The clients bypassed a shower for a soaking tub, enfolded in picture windows free of curtains—the better to enjoy the view. “The lack of window treatments makes the room feel more immediate to the outdoors,” said Ms. Galli. Throughout the home, she largely avoided using draperies to keep things modern.

A SPARTAN RETREAT

Neutrals and pure geometry, enlivened by judicious touches of red, predominate in the master bedroom. By day, the space is flooded with sunshine; by night, hypermodern Snake sconces from Fabbian spotlight books for squint-free reading in bed. “I’ve used those fixtures in a number of projects,” said Ms. Galli. “They can be twisted in any direction, which makes them super functional. They are also a nice foil for the antique map that stands in for a traditional headboard.”





TWO-TONE OOMPH

The den's narrow Pullman-car proportions were accentuated with a built-in banquette that spans its 18-foot length. Tangerine velvet upholstery plays off the gutsy peach-and-eggplant walls (Farrow & Ball's Fowler Pink and Brinjal). "Doug picked out the paint colors," said Ms. Galli, who repurposed selections from the clients' collection of vintage tablecloths to make one-of-a-kind pillows that "gave the space soulfulness." Behind the banquette is a ledge for displaying artworks—or placing drinks: "There was no room for a coffee table!"