

The Open-Ended Home

*To accommodate his extended family,
a Stony Creek architect 'extended' his house*

BY DUO DICKINSON

A classic street-facing 'four square' house was completely renovated and a new kitchen connection (right) attached it to new social and guest space.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Anthony DeCarlo



The existing living room and dining room were combined to create one large living space, with the existing chimney mass reworked to create a central fireplace — color and zesty lighting create a wholly new ambience in an older home.

ATHOME

Stony Creek is teeming with architects, many propagated by the nearby Yale School of Architecture. Quirky and at times ecstatically irreverent architecture (mostly in the form of new and antique houses) nestle next to each other in this town that still has a commercial fishing industry. The Branford neighborhood also has an outsized reputation in that its name is internationally renowned for the granite that was used to clad the “Chippendale Skyscraper” — the former AT&T Building in New York designed by Philip Johnson.

“Creekers” are those who live in the community year-round and are descended from families that have made a living there for generations. The architectural reputation of Stony Creek has attracted

a gaggle of aesthetically aware residents to find permanent homes in this classic coastal New England enclave. But even for newcomers who take up year-round residence, it takes a while for homeowners to become fully integrated into the fabric of this community.

Mark Simon and Penny Bellamy are at the core of what makes Stony Creek such a special place to live. Residents for more than 30 years, they’ve led high-profile careers: Simon as a partner at Centerbook Architects and Bellamy as a lawyer in private practice, a full-on grandmother and a former director of Planned Parenthood in New Haven. Both have served on a numerous local and national boards and support an unending list of social and arts-related causes.

But Simon and Bellamy are also heads of a family, and as such they initially needed a place to be together — a small house on one of the main streets in Stony Creek that Simon artfully renovated to include

the then-groundbreaking idea that a house could actually generate hot water from the sun. But as their careers and family flourished, Simon and Bellamy thought beyond the “starter home” to the “20-year home” — where kids are raised and from which they ultimately flee — and renovated their renovated house. But a few years ago they created what could best be called “The” home — not just a place where children can return (sometimes with children of their own), but where two careers could also be nurtured, all while remaining in the heart of their beloved Stony Creek.

But when Simon and Bellamy renovated that first house more than 30 years ago, they had little money to spend and needed to be resourceful. Once their careers were established, an opportunity arose to buy a house down the street from their upgraded starter home. They jumped on it, and a 2,000-square-foot, little semi-bungalow on a lot easily three times the typical size



The curving kitchen space, which spans the existing home and new social and guest space, has a vaulted ceiling and expressive cabinetry to play off the stolid interiors of the existing home.

found on the street presented both space and “good bones” for Mark’s architectural inspiration — to both respect the land and create a place that could respond to the next several decades of a very active couple’s need for safe harbor as well as family accommodation.

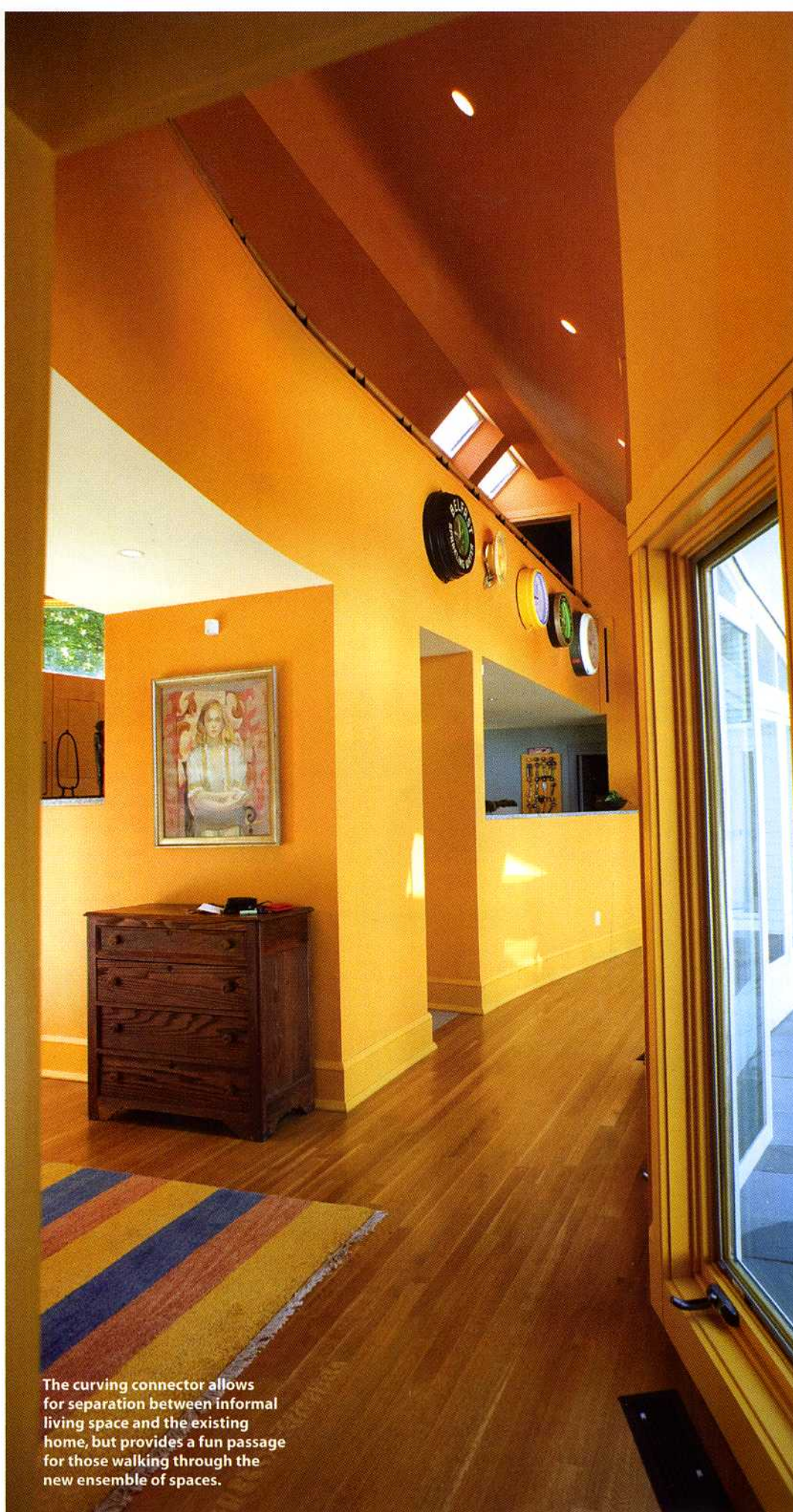
Despite all Simon’s careful design work to embrace his life partner’s life as well as his own, the final results were unexpected: “The house has been a wonderful surprise to us, despite our experience doing several other renovations,” says a bemused Simon. “It has been designed around the way we actually live, and ignores the classic arrangement of public and private spaces.”

The lot was not only large; the location of the existing house was tight to the northerly boundary of the site, giving Mark a large canvas to build upon. The site also had a wonderful rise to it — perhaps 15 feet above the street level — giving more than a peek-a-boo view out over to Bradley’s Cove.

But the existing house was an architectural singularity. It had a classic Four Square plan centered on a fireplace with a porch that fronted the street, a tiny rear entry and a kitchen that simply did not function very well given today’s socially focused cooking. Simon and Bellamy needed a home that could handle a large variety of social functions as well as personal accommodation.

First and foremost they needed a living room that could better maximize the terrific elevated view, so they combined the two front “squares” (living and dining rooms) and filled the water-facing wall with glass. Secondly they needed private living space. Architecturally, Mark Simon knew that to deny the existing house would be both wasteful and confrontational to a street that has a real presence, so rather than tear down and create a larger, single house, Simon decided to do a cast off “Mini-Me” house — a virtual pavilion of informal living and office space with guest accommodations on its second floor to afford visitors complete autonomy.

When you create an architectural duet, the connector becomes exquisitely important. The kitchen — the space that has changed the most in American domestic designs since the original house was built in 1918 — was relegated to a back corner “square” in the Four Square layout. The connecting “umbilical cord” between the existing house and its new smaller offspring allowed Simon to create an open kitchen.



The curving connector allows for separation between informal living space and the existing home, but provides a fun passage for those walking through the new ensemble of spaces.



Dining is a centered focal space amid the flow — and creative light fixture design and color make a small space inviting.

This connector has a curved shape that created a new generous kitchen with a great deal of incidental social space around it.

“Penny and I find that we spend most of our time together in the kitchen area; it’s right in the center of the house,” says Simon. “That space has wonderful water views and light and leads to all other parts: to the second floor as well as the family room, dining and terraces. It is ‘action central’ — the main stage of our lives now.”

This connection also created the now-mandatory legitimate rear entry (which Simon notes was intended to be the functional front door from the get-go, as it directly addresses parking). Additionally, new mudroom space provides for an effortless transition from outdoors to in.

Creating more than one architectural shape also makes the outdoor spaces in between the shapes very special. At the rear of the site, terraces could overlook the extraordinary backyard, but another terrace between the two buildings could fully appreciate the privacy provided by the site’s elevation and provide views of the water as well.

The interiors are redolent of the effervescent detailing, color and lighting that can be seen in Simon’s work over the last few decades, but the ambience is punctuated by natural wood appointments and zesty sculptures by Mark Simon’s father, Sidney Simon. Closets and built-ins fill every available nook and cranny, leaving the rest of the plan open and filled with sunlight provided by Simon’s new outsized windows.

The existing 2,000-square-foot house has effectively doubled in size. Its bedroom count of three grew by one and the house gained some “swing spaces” that serve as places for kids of kids to crash, but its bathroom count more than doubled. This expansion occurred in the new castoff wing but also by building a rear extension to the existing house mass as well.

By making a house that accommodates all the activities of its occupants now and into the future, the danger that their home might become a limiting factor in Simon’s and Bellamy’s doubly busy life has been eliminated. This is an open-ended house for a couple that is at peak performance and social engagement, a place where personal moments and public celebrations can occur effortlessly — designed-in by one of the best architects in America (and perhaps even in Stony Creek!). ❖