

Just Like Starting Over

A pair of Tinseltown refugees find life, love and a remarkable new home in Guilford

By DUO DICKINSON

As film students at New York University, Zinka Benton and Fran Rzeznik had every expectation of moving west. Hollywood beckoned and career opportunities in that industry were far more available there than anywhere else in the world. The last thing on their minds was a move to the Northeast, let alone the Nutmeg State — not exactly a hotbed of filmmaking.

So move west they did. They settled in media Mecca Los Angeles for 13 years where Benton worked in entertainment law and wrote for shows like *Rescue 911*, while Rzeznik worked for shows for cable networks such as HGTV. They also fell in love with residential architecture and saved a Craftsman home from demolition. Along the way they learned firsthand about the countless factoids of craft and personal preference that can be woven into the places where we live.

But then life intervened. Or rather, a *dream* about life or a specific aspect of it. On Christmas Eve 2005, Rzeznik had one of the most vivid dreams imaginable. “I was outside of the New York Public Library walking in slush,” she recounts. “I could feel the cold on my face.” The vividness of that dream made her realize how much she missed the change of seasons. That insight, combined with a political development, led to a return to the Northeast for the pair.

Back in 2006 Connecticut was the third state in the union that allowed people of the same gender to commit themselves in wedlock to each other. Meanwhile, the legal status of same-sex marriage rights in California was (and remains) in a state of flux. Desiring seasons and a marriage ceremony, Rzeznik and Benton returned

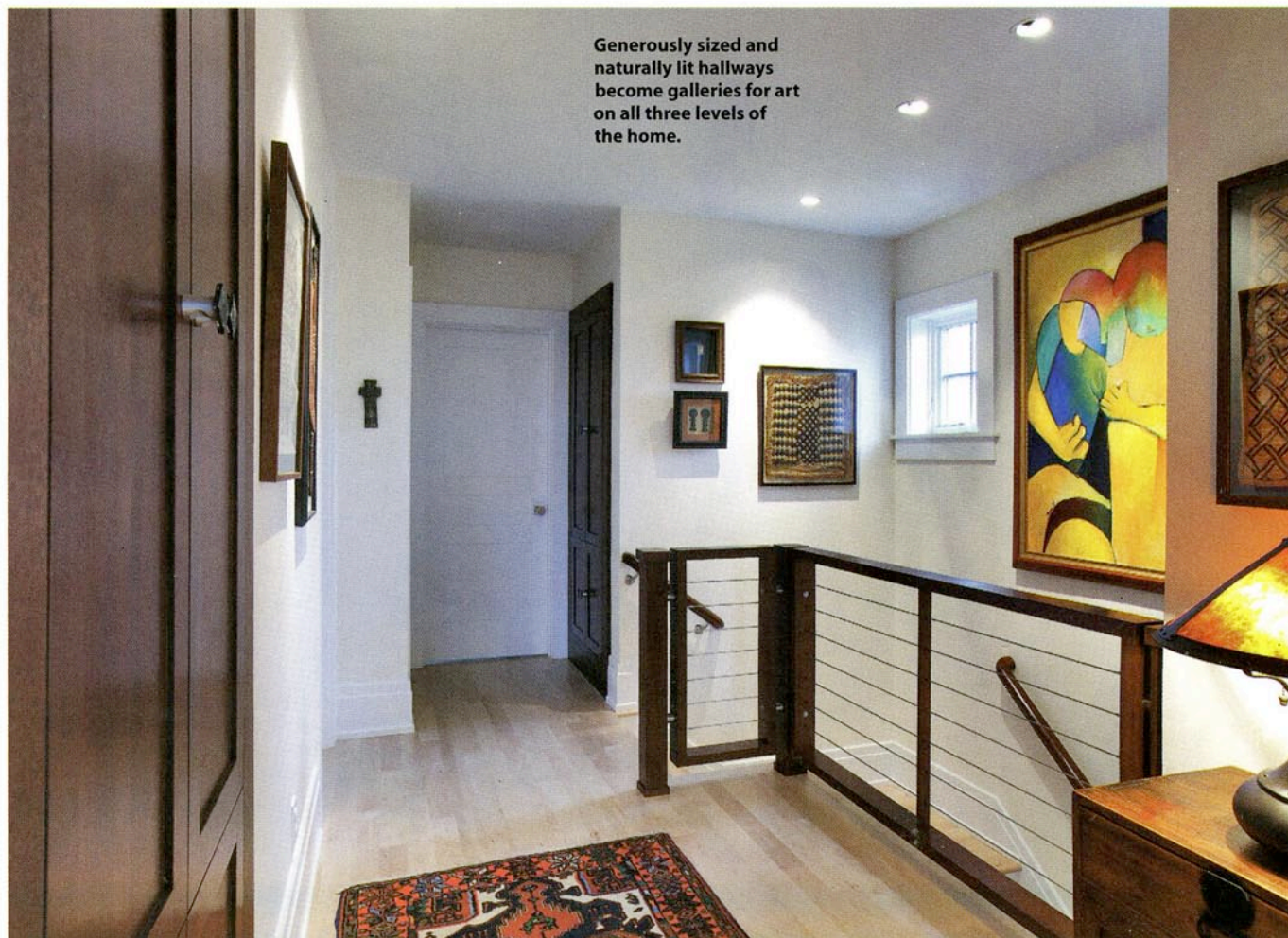
Steep-pitched roofs combine with shallower shed dormers to defeat the sense that a three-story home can be a looming presence on its downhill side. Careful banding of trim and extensions of eaves allow a small house to gain presence.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Olson Photographic

The living room is centered on a fireplace. Note the dropped beams providing for full-span openness while the playful colors of the home's furnishings enliven the simple white walls and ceiling.



Generously sized and naturally lit hallways become galleries for art on all three levels of the home.



east and settled on Guilford as a home base simply because they were attracted to that shoreline town's relatively diverse population, arts literacy and strong community spirit. Initially finding a classic suburban Colonial in remote North Guilford, the couple longed for a closer connection to that community. Both also found academic positions centering on the arts at Quinnipiac University—Benton in law, and Rzeznik in production.

Establishing themselves in Guilford, they happened upon Mary Jo Kestner and Russ Campaigne, the principals of CK Architects, whose crafty, typically small but always energy-efficient homes marry comfort with high-tech efficiency. Benton and Rzeznik also happened upon a site: a swath of rocky hillside with a shack on it in the Mulberry Point section of Guilford—a classic spit of coast whose ragged terrain and tiny winding roads make it an adventure to navigate.

Recounts Benton: "When Fran saw a dilapidated house perched on a bluff, she said, 'If that house were for sale, I would buy it. The house was not for sale that day but, incredibly, it went on the market the very next day. Two months later it was ours.'"

What followed was a collaboration among Benton, Rzeznik, Campaigne and Kestler as well as builder Tom Tolla to create a tight three-story home nestled into the hillside. The structure's ground floor accommodates offices, a library and a street-facing front door; a middle floor with a second entry that accesses the relatively generous backyard; and a top floor with three bedrooms and two baths—all carefully circumscribed within a 2,900-square-foot envelope that fulfilled the couple's dream of creating their own new home from scratch. Architect Kestner explains that, "The site topography which on one end leads to a community beach and rises 22 feet to the driveway access on the other" was the key design determinant. Its ascent also allow a terrific vignette view of Long Island Sound from the lofted master suite.

The pair's 15 years together galvanized a shared vision, as Rzeznik explains: "The kitchen has always been the heart of our home, so it was important for us to have a space where the two of us could comfortably work without feeling like we

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Perhaps the most important space in the house for the owners, this open kitchen (designed and built by Kitchens by Gedney) allows for multiple simultaneous cooking operations as well as having functional and visible access to the social core of the house.

Home

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would collide and where we would be able to watch our sons while they play. We love to cook for our family and friends and wanted a space where everyone could be comfortable. A light and airy space was important because we missed that famous Los Angeles light."

The openness was challenged by the desire to avoid variances as keeping within the zoning code's setback regulations meant the footprint was relatively narrow 24 feet.

Another event further packed function into their tight envelope.

"We learned that we would have to add some more room to our anticipated child's bedroom because now we were having two instead of one," Rzeznik explains. "The architects stole space from the upstairs hallway and added it to the bedroom as a vestibule for a closet and

added an additional dormer." Two-year-old twins Harry and Sam appreciate the consideration, and top off the occupancy with love.

Maple floors prevail throughout. Custom millwork including a warm and open kitchen built by Rick Gedney eliminates the need for furniture (although the Arts & Crafts pieces Benton and Rzeznik acquired while living in California are extraordinary). Natural light is found everywhere from skylights, light tubes, windows large and small and there is also plenty of wall space worthy of the provocative artwork that the couple has collected over time. The offices downstairs have their own on-grade access for clients. The inevitable need for stairs in a three-story home is made into an event with stairs that are wider than normal as well as having generous landings.

The flavor of the house is relaxed Arts & Crafts without any high-tech ambiance to it, although the house utilizes photo-

voltaics, geothermal assist for the HVAC system and extreme insulation to give it an energy performance that exceeds code minimums by at least 77 percent. There are also walkout decks on the top two storeys and an extraordinary view from the third-floor master bedroom half of the house. The house succeeds in creating a wonderful dynamic between "a whisper of mid-century modernism and the understated confidence of the Craftsman aesthetic," as Benton puts it.

The built result embodies why anyone would take the time, risk and headaches of building a home versus just buying a ready-to-move-in version, motivations perfectly captured by Rzeznik: "The new house, our home, is a tangible representation of our beliefs about the importance of community and our place in it, giving back, and working to make the world a better place ideas that are the cornerstones of our family and business life." ❖

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Frank Lloyd Wright and Steve Jobs represent the extreme distillation of the American character into divergent yet inextricably linked worlds of design: architecture and technology. Jobs did not invent the computer nor did Wright invent the building; both saw it with an eye that would have been lessened had it been crowd-sourced, think-tanked or focus-grouped

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Even in a home of asymmetrical 'balance,' centering elements like this extraordinary soaking tub in the home's master suite provide a sense of order.