

Suburban living in America has evolved dramatically from when America (including Connecticut) was a subsistence farm-based economy to a place where almost everyone works away from the home. Prior to the 20th century families often built farmhouses with their own hands, creating the most intimate bond imaginable between them and where they lived.

But the family farm gave way to a manufacturing economy where people left home to work. Given that break it only made sense to make homes that turned their back on the workplace. With the advent of the automobile and later the interstate highway system following World War II, entire towns grew up as “bedroom communities” where people hung their hats, positioned to travel great distances to work.

Around the time *Leave It To Beaver* was cancelled, American culture turned on a dime and many American families now have to migrate from job to job, hopping around the country. Married couples now seem to bond for a finite number of years only to separate and recombine — creating the “blended-family” phenomenon by which children are simultaneously housed in separate homes and sibling and parenting relationships get extremely complicated.

As a result of these societal transformations, the American home itself has had to become quite fungible. Homes are coldly bought and sold just like any other commodity and were used as ATM machines when bizarrely increasing property values were leveraged to finance everything from vacations to boats.

But as we now know only too well, everything changed a few years ago. When the housing bubble burst, homes that were once seen as instantly swappable, one for another, became millstones around the necks of many families. Houses could no longer be changed as easily as underwear. Many families are trapped in homes they hate with unfulfilled dreams of having a place to live in that they love.

It's becoming undeniable to many homeowners that the place where they live has more impact on their day-to-day

A Home at Heart

An historic Madison Colonial returns to its family-focused roots

By DUO DICKINSON



PHOTOGRAPHS
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The dining room is anchored by a salvaged corner cabinet from Rhode Island (right). But the room remains connected to the home's central hearth (left).



The master bedroom was built over a 19th-century extension of the 1803 house. The added fourth bedroom enabled a family of six to settle in during the decade of full occupancy before children began to fly off to college. The room's vaulted ceiling springs from walls just over six feet high to keep its mass lower than the original house.



lives than any other possession. Unlike an automobile, there is no longer an easy trade-in for a misfit house — it has become time to think about where we live more along the lines of how our grandparents envisioned their homes — as a permanent locus for their family life, not this year's backdrop for family events.

There have always been families that naturally gravitate toward hearth and home much in the way earlier generations did. Encouraging this devotional relationship, the Internet revolution has brought work back into the home for many people, and many Americans now choose careers where work and home life are not just under one roof — the one roof is a beloved center of both family and career.

Physicians Lori and Tom Richardson have just such an integrated life locus. About two years into their own chiropractic practice Lori and Tom realized that they were ready to find a place where their life together, both professional and familial, could have a single center-stage.

The Richardsons had the throwback idea that they could create a home where children had one place to live for the entire duration of their childhood, and sometimes even actually shared bedrooms. It would be a home where not everyone who live there had a private bath and where the landscape was richly integrated by the homeowners themselves into how family members lived their day-to-day lives.

With that old-school sensibility, Lori and Tom reclaimed an antique home from its converted status as a typical suburban home to its roots as the central hub for a family. In 1990 they happened upon a classic 1803 center hall Colonial built by the fabled Chittenden family of Madison — the third in a row of homes the family built on the Boston Post Road.

Before 2008, 1990 was the last time when a cascade in property values allowed young couples like the Richardsons to be able to afford the house that could fully realize their deepest hopes and dreams. As Lori recounts: "Tom and I envisioned having a home/office with a fireplace in the waiting room. The house in Madison had been on the market for two years empty, had good bones, five fireplaces with two beehive ovens, an in-law apartment with a fireplace in the main room that was perfect for our office. But needed lots of work."

The house sits augustly on a wonderful



A backyard barbeque that grew to be a full chimney — and both a barrier to the street and a focal point for a completely designed site.



House and garden as seen from the east. The original 1803 center-hall house (left) address the street with the new master suite built over a later extension (center) and 1970s office wing (right), all fully exposed to the extraordinary gardens, paths, hedges, terraces, arbors and trees the Richardsons have installed over the years — a design so strong it 'reads' in mid-winter.

corner lot on 0.8 acres in a prominent stretch on the main drag of a classic coastal village. With one child in full flower (Kyle, born in St. Louis during the couple's time in chiropractic school) and newborn Colin, they moved in early to the two-bedroom ground floor in-law apartment that was to become their office. They had committed themselves to an antique home that needed every possible update.

Although most any house can be thought of as an "investment," the Richardsons clearly did not believe this was a boot-strapping economic vehicle to "surf" some cresting wave of economic value. Diligently focused on earning the money to build their dream, the couple's first construction project was to transform the downstairs two-bedroom "apartment" into an office — eliminating 40 percent of the home's bedrooms and one third of its bathrooms dedicated to family use.

Once they were installed professionally in the dwelling, Lori knew the need to provide safe harbor for their growing family was paramount. "In 1991 I was pregnant with our third child [daughter Taya]," recalls Lori, "so we started some work in the kitchen area and waited to upgrade at a later date." But almost instantly they discovered one of the major liabilities of owning an older home: lead. Not only in the paint, but ubiquitous to the point where, with little children fully exposed, the toxicity forced Lori and her brood to move out for nine months of lead-abatement. That mandatory detoxing meant the planned-for future renovation was pushed into the here and now. (Fortuitously, the renovated apartment that became the Richardsons' office was built in a post-lead entrained world — the 1970s — so the pair's chiropractic practice continued

uninterrupted.)

An unforeseen benefit of removing so much of the house's interior surfaces due to lead contamination was the opportunity to reinvent the entire second floor of the home to allow three bedroom to be built where two had been before. The potential for tightness was overcome when the full gutting of the home to literally "get the lead out" opened up the possibility of permanently removing the existing flat ceilings to reveal the full timber frame structure of the dwelling.

Fortunately, a previous occupant had added a layer of roof framing over the original timber frame shell that serendipitously allowed the timber posts and beams to be fully exposed and yet maintain an insulation level that made expansion into the attic space energy-efficient. Skylights were installed in several locations and ultimately colors and furniture and lighting took full advantage of these newly vertical spaces to create a sense of openness in a potentially tight floor.



Following these emergency repairs, a signal event took place. In 1994 Tom Richardson fell through the roof. "He was cleaning the leaves in the gutters and fell through the roof into the kitchen," recalls his wife. "We realized that even though we were going to make repairs to the roof when I became pregnant with our fourth child, Ian, once the damaged happened to the ceiling we decided we had to really do the kitchen."

Like the discovery of lead, Tom's fall gave the couple courage to immediately embrace the next major expansion. The original kitchen was in the one story "ell" that was added onto the original home in the 19th century.

A collapsed ceiling combined



Kitchen, new windows and several careful renovations make a tight space built in the 19th century come alive with detail and openness.

with a new pregnancy to beg the question of how the home actually fit the family. The Richardsons were forced to confront the stark math: four kids and two parents don't go into three bedrooms and one bath terribly well.

So a new master bedroom suite with its own bath was constructed over the single-story "ell," kept low to maintain the integrity of the lines of the original house. Lori and Tom gave the construction crew a real deadline, as they planned for Ian to be born in the space they were building — the new master suite. Through the diligence of the construction crew and the encouragement of the Richardsons, Ian was born 14 years ago in Lori's and Tom's bed.

The last major piece of construction was likewise precipitated by a structural collapse. The original 19th-century barn next to the home had been expanded in the 20th century to include a car port, and the structure's imminent collapse due to rot in 2000 meant that they could rethink the site, as the removal of the barn that had been tight to the office wing opened up the entire north side of the lot. The Richardsons hired Salem Country Barns

to create a post-and-beam three-car garage rotated 90 degrees from the original barn, positioned to address a saltwater pool that the Richardsons had installed. The garage's lofted second-floor rec room created a virtual paradise for teenagers — nearly a 20-year window for a family with four children. It's a space removed from Mom and Dad being "in your face," but still close enough.

All throughout almost 20 years of sporadic construction projects, the home's interior has received some extraordinary enhancements and inspired rethinking. Several ground-floor walls have been removed to open up the interior and the kitchen has been the subject of several serial renovations. Large-scale windows were added facing the side yard (while maintaining the "correct" symmetrical street-facing pattern surrounding a front door that over time ceased to be much used).

Built-in furniture was continually insinuated including a salvaged corner cabinet from Rhode Island, a layering of cabinetry around the central fireplace and the creation of a small home office desk area — transforming the first floor interior

into series of crafted events. Extraordinary lighting is used throughout, often eclectically dazzling in its crystalline modernity. The most recent artful devices employed by the Richardsons are wall appliques of calligraphed quotes throughout the entire first floor. The words of ancient and unexpected authors using a new technology of computer-generated sticky-backed cut plastic sheets effortlessly illuminate each room's function, provide unexpected art, and delight in the spoken word.

As part of their roaming eye for home renovation opportunities, Lori and Tom found an exquisite mahogany glass door/sidelight/transom array salvaged from the estate of actress Stephanie Mills' father in upstate New York. This unique piece became the central feature of the home's entire first-floor interior — a portal to a wonderful back yard that galvanized the love affair the Richardsons have had with their house and land.

Almost more than any other home, the surrounding landscape has benefited from the tender loving care and extreme devotion of its occupants. Virtually every corner of its 35,000 square feet has been

developed with a degree of thoughtfulness and composition that is exceptional for a single-family house.

Using a French design sensibility of axes, grid, line and plane, hedges, arbors, garden beds and an exceptional free-standing chimney barbeque were all executed by Tom. In endless after-hours devotion (mirroring Lori's interior obsession) working with a doggedness that astonished his neighbors, Tom channeled a bygone generation's personal devotion to the land. Virtually every interior space looks out upon his composition, bringing its large scale design into everyone's appreciation year round.

When you view a home as the fundamental focus of a family's life, that rejects jumping from home to home in search of a place to live in favor of changing the place you live in to fit how your family evolves. So six people live in a four-bedroom, two-bath house, one doorway away from the location of their life's work — not exactly the suburban norm in Madison, where isolated McMansions typically have more bathrooms than human within their walls.

This is a perfectly modern family where Taya goes to college on a soccer

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scholarship, Mom is a full partner with Dad in a medical practice, and children are encouraged to find their muse, whether working at SARAH in Guilford or going

down south to earn a degree in advertising. All this diversity of activity has a rock-solid base of operation, physically as well as emotionally, in a home rebuilt to last for more than the passing fancy of the opportunistic migrations lived out by so many other families.

An essentially quality of the human condition has been lost in the last generation or two, when the ascendance of career-focused serial house inhabitants makes all of our roots ever shallower. It's a new era where a better deal always seems to be over the next horizon or on the next cul-de-sac — where movement is prized over commitment. What's lost is the sense of an inside-out life, where a family is bonded to a place called home.

Here in an ancient home, thoroughly reinvented and invigorated by a vibrant family, the old traditions have a vitality and life that is mirrored in the (seemingly) spontaneous effervescence of its spaces, surfaces, furniture and art that give this archetypal Colonial a lightness of being that is both active and loving. A house always reflects its family's values, one way or another. ❖