

Divine Design

10 HOMES AND THE CREATIVE FORCES BEHIND THEM

By H.M. Epstein

The journey to create a truly beautiful home begins long before the architect is hired; it starts in childhood. Architecture requires both art and science, drawing and math, three-dimensional design and limitless imagination. That's why architects are born, not made. They join a secret society in elementary school, constantly drawing, viewing the world through a different dimension than the rest of us. Perhaps there's even a secret handshake. My neighbor Jack, a buoyant 8-year-old, is a member. He announced at Christmas that he plans to be an architect. "I'm designing a new cruise ship," he told me, and then proceeded to describe it in detail. I'm a believer—I've booked its maiden voyage for 2033.

Architecture is more a calling than a job. Great architects have the ability to turn empty space into livable art or transform a dispirited shelter into a sanctuary—with an amazing kitchen thrown in for good measure. These 12 architects and the 10 divine homes they've designed are the culmination of personal paths drawn from diverse backgrounds around the globe and realized in the fulfillment of their visions and their clients' dreams.





Douglas Wilk

From the bottom line to the horizon line

"IT'S NOT AS SEXY AS MOST ARCHITECTS' STORIES," Douglas Wilk says about his circuitous road to an architecture career. But it took bravery, financial sacrifice, and four years' separation from his wife.

Wilk says that, as a kid, he would "have lots of conversations with my mother about how we could renovate our house—and I would draw floor plans."

Somehow, he took a wrong turn into banking. While he realized quickly he didn't want to be a banker for the rest of his life, it took some urging by his wife to take the hard road: Get his Masters of Architecture at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in upstate New York while his wife worked as an attorney in Manhattan. It quickly became clear it was the right decision. He found he "didn't mind staying up all night doing work." Instead of being "laborious," like banking, "it was just fun."

The work may be fun, but Wilk takes his clients' needs and finances very seriously. "We're dealing with people's nest egg," he says. His experience in banking means he pays very close attention to the bottom line, but Wilk's vision is also fixed on the horizon. The resulting home should "fit its setting perfectly, look like it always belonged there, and stand the test of time. Architecture is complex geometry and it needs to be dynamic. If you try to force the home design to make it fit a vision, you make a "compromised home." And that just doesn't add up.

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This page, clockwise from top left: The entrance's original Tudor arch shape is employed "as a reliable detail" to doorways, arches, and surrounds; all millwork throughout the house is quarter-sawn white oak stained to match the front door, one of the few original elements still in the house; the kitchen wall was replaced with three arched windows and a custom hood so the owners can enjoy the distant views while cooking. Opposite page, top: The main-floor wine-room addition, with custom-designed iron doors, barrel-vaulted ceiling, and Spanish tile floors, holds up to 700 bottles of wine. Bottom: The living room's three seating areas work equally well for evenings of pizza, TV, and games with grandchildren as for entertaining peers. Every feature of this room is new, from the coffered ceiling to the millwork to the hand-hewn white oak floors. Previous spread: The new master bedroom above the entrance offers a three-sided view of the Long Island Sound. To match the bedroom and second floor's heights, the portecochère was disassembled, every stone labeled and then reassembled, two courses of stone lower.



Mark LePage
Exceeding expectations

Mark LePage always knew he wanted to be an architect growing up. "I enjoyed building things," he says. "I always had a pencil in my hand. I was always drawing." He went the extra mile and became a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Accredited Professional and his firm, Fivecat Studio, has received the prestigious American Institute of Architects (AIA) Westchester Mid-Hudson Design Award, among others.

So it's startling to learn that LePage's inspirations come from the likes of Richard Branson (Virgin Group) and Jeff Bezos (Amazon), two entrepreneurs who build companies, not homes. "I'm probably an atypical architect. Most are inspired by other architects or other designers." While he loves the design process, Fivecat's three architects—LePage, wife and partner Annmarie McCarthy, and John Whalen—collaborate on each design and then divide the rest of the project work.

LePage says he's in charge of "client happiness." His number-one priority is managing expectations with an extensive pre-design process which includes having the clients answer a questionnaire, assemble two folders of images (Love it! Loathe it!), and holding an in-depth meeting to learn more about the clients and their lives. They also get a contractor involved early, so clients don't fall in love with an approach they can't afford.

THE HOUSE: This 1907 home was nearly destroyed twice—by fire in 1947, then by the subsequent renovations, including a stuccoed exterior. In order to "reclaim the authenticity of the house," LePage designed, replaced, or restored everything visible in this photo. Only the chimney is original, and it was repaired.



Fivecat Studio | Architecture

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Photography by Scott LePage



This spread, clockwise from top left: LePage replaced the stucco exterior with shingles, restored the missing front porch, traded in the stucco knee wall with an upper deck railing, and updated all the windows; by removing the wall that separated this front parlor alcove from the living room, the curved room has become a favorite space for quiet conversation during parties; to return the house to its proper period, LePage custom-designed an integrated venting detail and a curved railing that looks straight until you view it from an angle.



Christina Griffin:

Passionate about passive energy

CHRISTINA GRIFFIN HAS HAD A LOT OF "FIRSTS" IN HER career: She designed the first Habitat for Humanity affordable housing project in Westchester; she received the first Platinum LEED for Homes certification in Westchester; along with a group of other architects, she's assembling the first Sustainable Design Database for the Westchester chapter of the AIA; and she received one of Westchester Home magazine's first design awards for her renovation of a 1950s ranch home in Mamaroneck, the same home for which she won an AIA award later that year.

Griffin says she always had a passion for architecture—as soon as she learned what it was. "Getting the license just made it official," she says. She did her undergraduate work at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London, became a LEED AP, and, just last year, she became a Certified Passive House Consultant, meaning she can apply the physics of building design to create a home that requires very little energy for heating or cooling.

The demanding technical requirements of LEED certification don't get in the way of Griffin's imaginative designs, which "elevate the spirit" and have "meaning for the homeowners and their dreams and life."

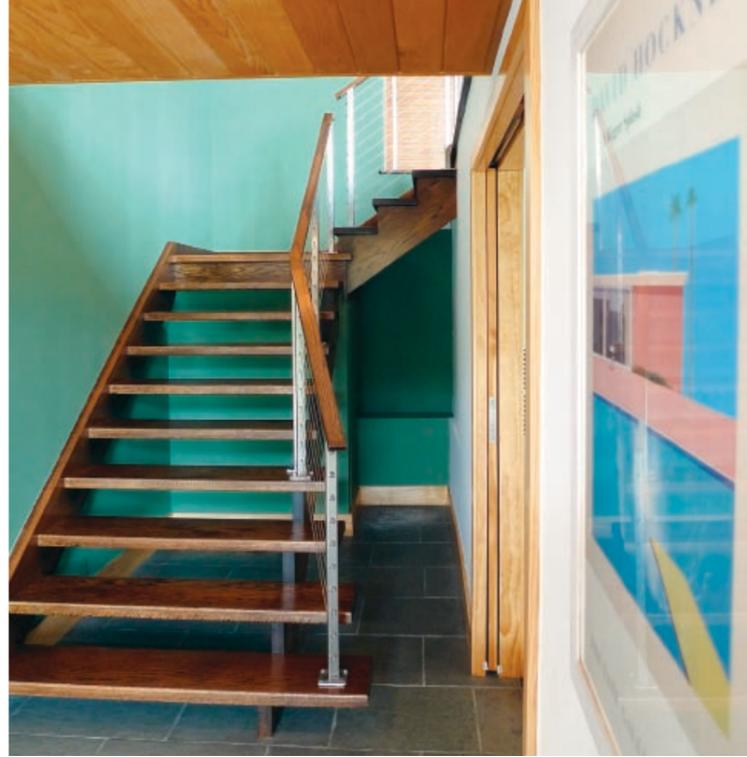
THE HOUSE: The design challenge of the Taylor residence was three-fold: It was "a dull 1948 ranch" with a treacherous stone staircase as the main entrance; the couple would only live in the suburbs if the "house was really special"; and it had to incorporate the husband's collection of images of minimalist modern buildings that inspired him.

Christina Griffin Architect PC

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This spread, clockwise from top left: Griffin replaced an original exterior stone staircase that was treacherous in rainy or wintry weather with this interior floating staircase; Griffin removed all impediments to the view of the Hudson River: Caramelized bamboo cabinets are below counters. A glass backsplash lined with rice paper replaces a wall and an unbroken line of windows turn the corner; Griffin says, "Architecture is like sculpture." Because horizontal lines dominate the Taylor house design, she recessed the mortar so shade and shadow create patterns on the exterior stone wall.



Photography by Josepha Mulaire and Suzanne Levine



Rosamund Young

American spirit,
global influence

ROSAMUND YOUNG IS A WORLD TRAVELER, STARTING WITH her childhood in South Africa, where she also earned her Masters in Architecture at the University of Cape Town. Her personal library of images from her globetrotting informs her design, as do her eight years working with her mentor, the world-famous architect Robert A. M. Stern – the man who named postmodernism and then redefined it – in Manhattan. Postmodernism is architectural poetry; it's the search for meaning and feeling in the choice of shapes, details, techniques, and references.

Yet Young's passion is American homes and "all the styles that are evident in the American tradition." At the start of any project, she's inspired by "the immediate context," meaning the surrounding geography, the neighborhood and its architecture, "whatever tells the story," and from the clients' "own vision, their own style and their own dreams."

THE HOUSE: The clients for the featured Scarsdale home were looking for a "timeless home" with "clean, transitional lines." The cabinetry is simple, although the detailing is traditional. The house is "a country manor house that happens to be made out of stone and shingle."



Opposite page, top: The entry hall is within the main gable, with a mahogany front door and a matching mahogany bannister on the custom circular stair. Bottom: Young calls the dominant gable with the chimney "the beacon" at the end of a long driveway. As you arrive, "the rest of the house unfolds."

Left: The classic all-white kitchen has walnut accents inside of bookcases and the white quartzite island top has a 2.5-inch built-up edge detail; perimeter counters are raven-colored Caesarstone and the backsplash is Calacatta marble tile. Bottom: The long hall with three "floating cozy nooks" connects the three children's bedrooms.

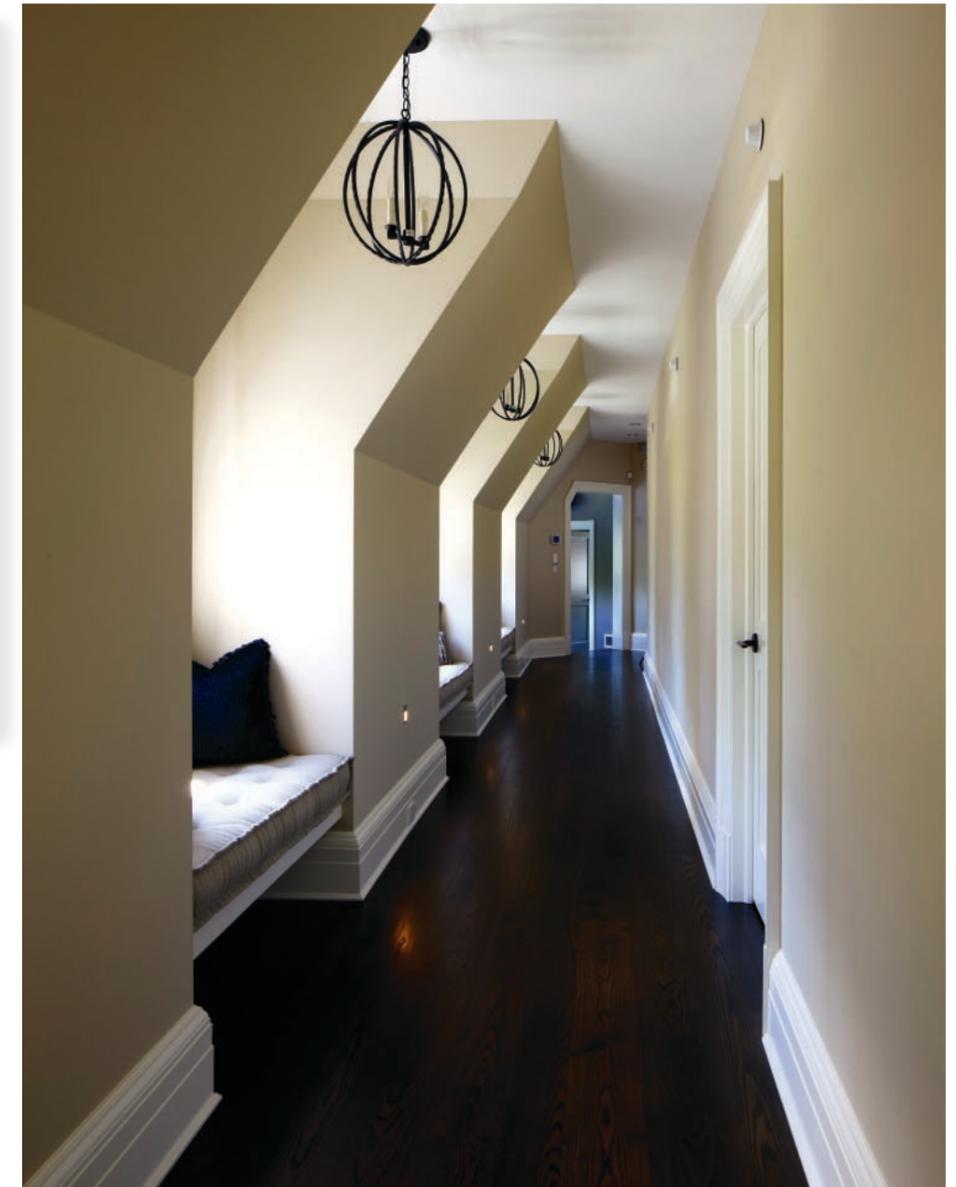
Rosamund A. Young, Architect

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Photography by Phillip Ennis





Timothy & JoAnn Lener

Architecture at the intersection of love and life

IF WORKING WITH TIM AND JOANN LENER IS ANYTHING LIKE INTERVIEWING THEM, EXPECT LOTS OF LAUGHTER, some playful back-and-forth, and a couple of Cavalier King Charles Spaniels hanging out with you. He loves to design using “my old oak drafting board, some paper and a marker,” while she loves to design on the computer. Tim’s a “big picture” guy, overseeing the exteriors and engineering; JoAnn’s a wiz at floor plans and flow, shaping the space and making every inch count. While they’re both very social as adults, Tim says that, in school, “I didn’t hang out anywhere but my drafting table or my wood shop,” and JoAnn admits the other girls played with Barbie’s hair and clothes, while she was busy designing Barbie’s house, complete with floor plans and elevations.

THE HOUSE: The Leners transformed a small, down-at-the-heels Yorktown cabin into a picturesque New England cottage-style home with a simplified Arts and Crafts influence. Wonderful touches throughout include a back-to-back fireplace that is shared by the breakfast room and the screened porch.

Timothy P. Lener, Architect, P.C.

Timothy Lener AIA

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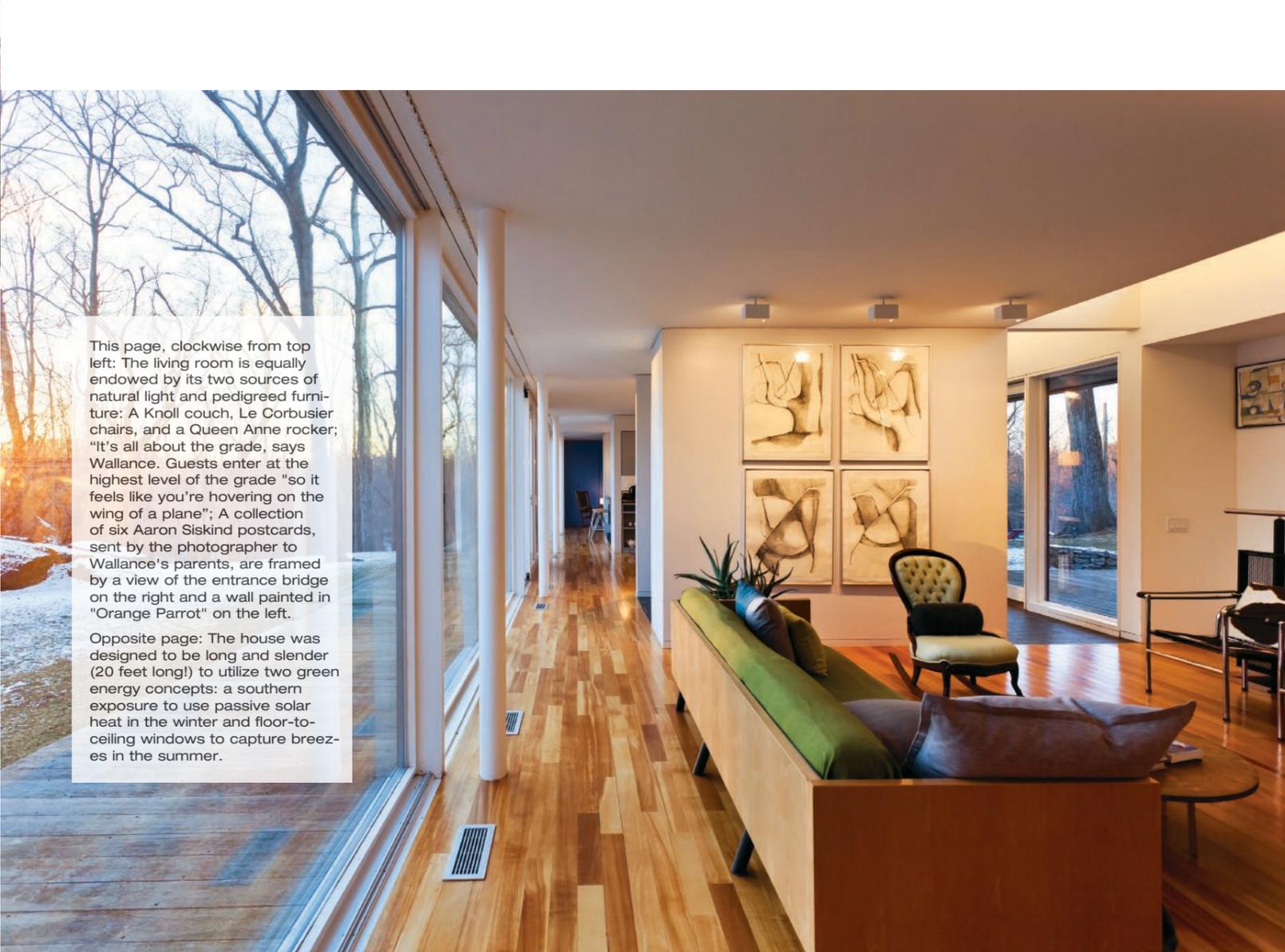
KITCHEN: *Silva Cabinetry, Buchanan*



Clockwise from top left: The Arts and Crafts style starts at the front door; As the central hub of an open-concept plan, the kitchen has no doors or barriers. To visually distinguish it, Lener gave it a higher ceiling; The black granite-topped Arts and Crafts-style kitchen island was co-designed by the owner and cabinet fabricator to complement the existing Stickley furnishings; Lener deemed that natural materials, like the stone foundation and wood shingles, were “a necessity” for this house in the woods.

Photography by Peter Krupenye (exterior)

Timothy P. Lener, Architects (interior)



This page, clockwise from top left: The living room is equally endowed by its two sources of natural light and pedigreed furniture: A Knoll couch, Le Corbusier chairs, and a Queen Anne rocker; "It's all about the grade," says Wallace. Guests enter at the highest level of the grade "so it feels like you're hovering on the wing of a plane"; A collection of six Aaron Siskind postcards, sent by the photographer to Wallace's parents, are framed by a view of the entrance bridge on the right and a wall painted in "Orange Parrot" on the left.

Opposite page: The house was designed to be long and slender (20 feet long!) to utilize two green energy concepts: a southern exposure to use passive solar heat in the winter and floor-to-ceiling windows to capture breezes in the summer.



David Wallace

Contextually sensitive modernist

WHEN DAVID WALLACE WAS JUST 5 YEARS OLD, HE STARTLED HIS industrial and graphic designer parents as they drove home from a tour of Washington, DC, by asking, "Why are there three different kinds of columns?" Somehow, he had discerned the differences among what he'd later learn were Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns. After graduating from Cooper Union, Wallace worked

eight years with modern architecture master Edward Larrabee Barnes, who has gifted Westchester with many beautiful structures, including the Katonah Museum of Art, IBM's former headquarters in Mount Pleasant, and homes in Bedford, Chappaqua, Mount Kisco, and Pound Ridge.

Where does an architect go from there? At his next firm, then called the Polshek Partnership (now Ennead Architects), Wallace helped design another iconic building: the Rose Center for Earth and Space at the American Museum of Natural History. In 2008, Wallace chose to also focus his practice, now split between Manhattan and Croton-on-Hudson, on residences. After years of designing museums and institutions, Wallace says, "I could be very happy designing houses until the end of my days."

Known as both an innovative technologist and a designer, Wallace does "contextually sensitive" modern architecture, meaning he pays attention to "the surrounding landscape, to the climate, to the light, even, perhaps, to the culture and history of the location." The context and use of natural materials are two of the reasons design review boards are relieved that "someone's proposing modernist architecture that isn't alien."

THE HOUSE: Nothing alien here. Triple threat—client, architect, builder—David Wallace built this Croton-on-Hudson house for his toughest client: himself.

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SLATE FLOORS: Vermont Structural Slate Company, Inc., Fair Haven, VT (802) 265-4933

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House Photography by Raeford Dwyer
Portrait by Loretta Reilly





Peter Cole

Heritage hero

AS A CHILD, NATIVE WESTCHESTERITE PETER COLE USED TO SPEND HOURS PLAYING quietly as a kid with building blocks on the floor of his dad's toy store. Now, he builds beautiful homes in every style of architecture for clients who value his discretion almost as much as his design skills, including a mega-bestselling novelist and Wall Street titans and their friends. "One-third of my business is repeat business," Cole says, and the rest is referral.

Cole has long-term experience dealing with business leaders and bold-faced names. His first job was with the world's largest architectural firm, HOK, headquartered in St. Louis, right after earning his Masters of Architecture from Washington University in St. Louis. When he, and his native New Yorker wife, were ready to head back to New York, HOK transferred him to the Manhattan office. Twenty-five years ago, Cole started his own residential firm based in Chappaqua and has never looked back. Now, he says, the "relationship is as important as the design challenge." His favorite clients don't need to have deep pockets or be "masters of the universe." Cole loves a client who "enjoys the process and is excited about participating with us."

THE HOUSE: Originally built in 1908, this brick and shingle was in such disrepair that Cole received approval from the Scarsdale Historic Preservation Committee to have the house taken down to the ground, then painstakingly recreated, enlarged, and reconfigured for use by a 21st century family, as long as he maintained the original central façade of the house.

Peter A. Cole, Architect

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This spread, clockwise from top left: Cole located photos of the house from the 1920s, which enabled him to replicate the front facade in minute detail. The two wings were designed to match the look of the original section; guests approach via a stone bridge over a brook originally sized for horse and buggy. Cole says he rebuilt it without changing the width and "it just fits" today's car widths; For the service entrance (there are two approaches to the house), Cole used the steep grade to "tuck the garage doors underneath so they're "hidden from view"; The client chose Edwardian-style interior finishes, reminiscent of the original home's time period, for the formal spaces in the original footprint. In the rest of the house, more casual styles predominate.

Photography by David R. Sloan





Robert Keller
Architecture for the "Circle of Life"

WE'RE GLAD ROBERT KELLER LISTENED TO HIS heart and not his high school guidance counselor, who didn't think he should attend architecture school. Luckily, this AIA award-winning architect was accepted, and excelled, at Pratt Institute without her help. In fact, Keller was so respected there that one of his design professors hired him just before graduation and another faculty member recommended him for a loft project shortly after. One project led to another, and, within three years of graduation, Keller had his own independent architecture practice.

Lofts led to apartments and brownstone renovations; New York City clients became suburbanites with young families and they hired Keller to design or renovate their homes. Young homeowners became prosperous vacation homeowners and Keller designed those as well. Now, Keller says 20 percent of his projects are for empty-nesters moving back to Manhattan, which is convenient. While his practice followed his client base into Westchester, Keller still lives in New York City. He says the majority of his new clients are the next generation of young families moving into Westchester, in neighborhoods where the properties are historic homes built closely together and where context is key. Even though many of the exteriors are historic, "I do consider myself a modernist, so the interiors are done in a updated, cleaner way," he says, and new residences can be modernist or traditional depending on the client's wishes and the neighborhood context.

THE HOUSE: This Victorian in Larchmont Manor sits at the corner of two quiet streets in a neighborhood developed in the late 1800s, close to Long Island Sound. The client actually grew up in this home, which had fallen into disrepair over the intervening years. He bought it back, and hired Keller to restore it, enlarge it, and correct its flow, which stopped making sense when the old servants' hallway was turned into a kitchen.



Bana Choura
Practical fairytales

DAMASCUS, MONTE CARLO, NEW YORK. BANA Choura has lived, studied, and worked in locations exotic and familiar. Hers was a visual storybook existence: a father who was a famous painter, studying at a Beaux Art fine art school in Damascus where she grew up, working on "small villas" from the 1920s near the palace of the prince in the old town of Monte Carlo, studying and working in Manhattan.

Yet Choura is "fascinated by Westchester," particularly the architecture of lower Westchester. She's on a mission to restore and renovate the vintage 1920s homes. She likens them to the fairytale-like villas of Monaco and finds inspiration in both. Choura describes her work as having a "softness and sensitivity" and says "there's always something whimsical" in her designs. While she obviously has tremendous experience and technical skill, Choura says, "I try to feel, not just build. Homes shouldn't just look good, they should be comfortable and easy to live in."

THE HOUSE: Choura lives near this storybook home in the Fox Meadow section of Scarsdale and had always admired "this very rare" home that "kept its quality and charm." Every detail reminded her of Monte Carlo. "The turret," she says, "even had stairs in it!" Restoring and enlarging it was a dream come true for her as well as for the clients.



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Top: The turret and chimney form the pre-existing end of the house. Choura built the family room (seen far right) and kitchen additions, and renovated other parts of the house. To match the original steel casement windows, Choura worked with two local salvage companies that specialize in Tudor homes. Bottom: A modern-functioning kitchen that retains the home's enchanted storybook feel but provides all the state-of-the-art bells and whistles.

Photography by Kaniel Loughran

Top: Keller placed the 750-square-foot addition so, from the street, the house looks restored, not enlarged. Among the dramatic exterior improvements, he "reinvented" the third-story tower that had blown off years before and built the second-story porch. Bottom: The renovated entryway—with fireplace!—now leads to the dining room, living room, and the new stairs (it was previously blocked). The new staircase is located where the narrow kitchen had once been placed. Now, the hall between the dining room and stairs gives easy access to the new family room and kitchen.

Photography by Wiseman Images, Inc.



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Paul Benowitz and Dipti Shah

Brooklyn meets Bombay meets beautiful

THEY ARE POLES APART IN EVERY WAY BUT ONE. THEY ARE NOT A MARRIED COUPLE; they come from worlds so divergent they border on unknowable; he's humorous, she's earnest; he loves shingle and stone, she loves wood; he's a public school boy – Brooklyn Technical High School and City College of New York; she's a private school

girl – University in Bombay, Washington University in St. Louis. And yet, working together for more than 20 years, this award-winning team has taken buildings with no soul and no sense, and breathed life and beauty into them.

What they agree on is what is key to their success: Architecture should be conceptual as well as contextual. It should be indigenous to the area but still have panache. "There's a lot of emotion that goes into a custom piece of work, whether it's a new house or an addition," Shah says, noting they have done more than 500 projects together and "one-third of those are repeat clients."

THE HOUSE: Benowitz says the house, set on a vista with a beautiful view of the surrounding lands, has a unique use of shingle and stone. "Geoghegan" is a totally new and larger house, which occupies part of the site of the original, torn-down residence. While they were free to site it differently, Shah says they rethought the locations of the private and public rooms, which worked far better than the original home's layout and location.

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Photography by Dipti Shah

Left: This custom-designed shingle-style home's first-floor roof and colonnade form a continuous eavesline to tie the use of natural materials (stone, cedar shingles) and architectural elements (towers, turrets, clear story monitor) together. The house turns a corner on a gentle bend, following the flow of the land. Right: The bay window on the second floor allows the family and visitors to view the beautifully landscaped property and terrace, which has a dramatic drop to a tranquil pond. Benowitz and Shah utilize a technique they call "interpenetrating space," a mixture of intimate and public spaces, that is "akin to open planning."

H.M. Epstein (hmapstein.com) is a frequent contributor to *Westchester Home* and *Westchester Magazine*. She writes a national column on parenting and policy issues for examiner.com and other publications.