Subtle Chic

Luxe yet livable homes welcome family and friends in carefree style.
A fearless city couple moves to Westport and takes on the renovation of a circa-1832 home with both family and a nod to history in mind.

The homeowners were living in Brooklyn, New York, and had never heard of Westport until they started looking for a home for their growing family. They were sold after one look at this iconic farmhouse on lovingly tended parklike grounds.
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The property offered the whole country package, including the farmhouse with its classic colonial facade, a renovated barn with a breezeway attachment, a striking fountain at the center of the backyard patio, and a cozy deck off the breakfast area (the new owners added the pergola).
Three years ago, the parents of two little girls (with a baby on the way) were living peacefully in a historic Brooklyn neighborhood, in a charming brownstone they’d renovated themselves, when they decided they needed more space. That, and the prospect of paying private-school tuition for three kids, says Jennifer, sent them packing.

They house-hunted in New Jersey, Westchester, and Long Island, but weren’t thinking about Connecticut. “It just seemed so far away, and we didn’t know anyone who lived there,” says Jennifer. They’d never even heard of Westport until a colleague invited them to visit. “We were blown away by their home,” Jennifer remembers, but more than that, she and Keith found the Westport landscape, the beaches, and the community positively disarming. The move was something of a blur. Within ten days they had put the Brooklyn house on the market, signing the contract the same day that they brought their baby boy home from the hospital. They spent one marathon day looking at properties, then came upon a farmhouse in the historic Greens Farms neighborhood of Westport, and fell in love—even though they both knew it needed work.

Two things sealed the deal: the outstanding barn addition the previous owners had found in Vermont, dismantled, and reconstructed on the site, and the yard, nurtured for thirty-three years by the master gardener who had lived there. Upon seeing the yard for the first time, the Driscolls’ older daughter asked, “Is this a park?”

The couple called in a trio of professionals to help bring into being the family home they imagined: architect Ann Sellars Lathrop, builder Bill Towle.
It all happened in short order, however. As the need for structural improvements was discovered, the project not only grew, it picked up speed. “Who knew,” says Jennifer, “that a simple remodel would end up being a full-blown restoration?”

The rear of the house was mostly gutted; walls were removed and steel beams added to create a more open plan (and to support future second-story roof loads). The team agreed to enhance views of the garden and natural light by adding transom windows throughout. “Remember, we came from a dark brownstone,” says Jennifer. The architect ticks off the rest: new insulation, windows, and doors; an all-new kitchen; new wall and floor finishes; built-in storage; reclaimed ceiling beams; a new mudroom area; and improved access to the garage below. Outside, the rear roof deck was rebuilt and a pergola added.

The Driscolls were on a roll. As soon as the downstairs paint was dry, they embarked on phase two. The master suite was expanded to include an almost complete gut renovation of the second floor, says Sellars Lathrop. They reconfigured bedrooms and opened the attic to create soaring beamed ceilings. Most of the couple’s decisions were made with respect for history melded with a modern sensibility. “The house has a historic designation, but we didn’t want it to be an 1830s house again,” says Keith, an artist and entrepreneur. “In every architectural detail we changed we gave a nod to the original—but with fresh, modern charm.”

They felt it was important to incorporate authentic materials. For example, they laid down beautiful wide-plank white oak floors throughout the house and opted for a natural finish. The first-floor beams came from an old pickle factory in Springfield, Massachusetts. They had kitchen cabinets custom made by a husband and wife team from Southbury. They chose two-inch quartzite for the counters because it...
looks like marble but is more durable and easier to care for. They opted for simple fixtures that helped the kitchen retain a farmhouse feel.

Interior designer Sara Jordan was involved from the start, recommending materials and finishes, even as she advised the couple on how to furnish their new home. “They wanted family-friendly, comfortable rooms with custom touches,” says Jordan. “We went with good lighting, well-scaled classic furnishings, and custom soft goods to add personality. The couple’s original art and books added soul.”

Because Jennifer commutes for three hours every day, she needed a haven at home. “I wanted the master suite to be spa-like,” she says, and it is. It’s simple, elegant, and calming: a sitting room with a white slip-covered sofa, lots of pillows and throws. A few steps up sits the sheltering, upholstered bed and an heirloom wing chair. Keith’s paintings hang on the walls. “The sofa is from Mitchell Gold, and the chandelier over the bed is from Pottery Barn,” says Jordan, “a perfect example of how we combined high and low.”

What didn’t they skimp on? “Anything that people touch,” says Keith, pointing to vintage-inspired faceted glass doorknobs.

Says Jordan: “The entire home was a careful walk between traditional and modern. Jennifer and Keith were wonderful to work with, always mixing and blending in an artful way. I like to say they brought a little bit of Brooklyn to Connecticut.”

RESOURCES For more information about this home, see page 138.

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The master suite blends an urban sensibility with a warm country feel. Keeping it neutral was an important part of the design strategy.

FACING PAGE, TOP: The children’s bedrooms (above center and right) illustrate the casual comfort vibe that the homeowners and designer were going for. FACING PAGE, BOTTOM: The master bath offers luxurious serenity.