A Room of One's Own

By Christy Colasurdo

“"It seems as if nearly every job we do now has a private or hobbyist room for the owner," says Mark Finlay, a Southport-based architect. If anyone can spot a trend, it's Finlay, who has designed a number of these spaces over the years: a hunting room, a model-train room and several arts-and-crafts rooms. He's also created a variety of libraries and wine rooms for the collector or aficionado, and even a massive woman's closet made up of three separate rooms with hidden mirrors and enough storage and display to rival Bergdorf's. ("That client's hobby is shopping," Finlay explains, laughing.)

In fact, he enjoyed the concept so much that, for himself, he even designed a music studio in his basement, where he jams with family and friends.

Here, we visit three intriguing "specialty rooms" — a loft-like Westport photography studio and gallery, a pastoral Wilton cottage used for hooking rugs and a waterfront Wilson Point sculpture studio — that reflect their homeowners' passions.

**The Photographer's Studio**

For more than thirty years Tom Kretsch, a retired teacher with the Norwalk public school system, has lived in the same Westport home with his wife, Sandi, who is also a teacher. Despite several earlier additions to their house, the couple decided they needed to renovate in order to accommodate Tom's passion and second career: photography. His online company, peacefulplaces.com, sells fine art photography for professional and personal spaces.
Tom’s photos are a reflection of his love of travel and his ability, as he puts it, “to capture visual images that evoke a soothing and calming moment — a colorful building, a quiet beach, a back alley or just around the corner if you take the time to look.” (In September, Westport Magazine published Kretsch’s photo essay on the Saugatuck River.) When photography turned into a full-time endeavor, Kretsch turned to Westport-based architect Ann Lathrop, of Sellers Lathrop Architects, to design a home-based studio/gallery where he could work and display his artistic landscapes, seascapes and portraits.

“Initially, Tom wanted a studio on the ground floor to easily move large photos and equipment in and out,” Ann says. “But the allowable coverage was maxed out and the town would not let him build new foundations into any setbacks. As an alternative, they said, ‘Why don’t you build up? We’ll allow that...’” Thus began a second-floor addition, plus a ground-floor renovation to support it.

The project’s concept was to “create a fresh new look for a small cape on a quiet suburban street,” says Ann. With parameters in hand, she set out to achieve her client’s objectives of creating a large work studio with abundant light, enough room for a full bath, plenty of space for showing and storing large quantities of photographs and an entry that could bypass the main living spaces. Most important, she says, “the addition needed to blend with the existing house and reveal its inhabitant in a creative way.”

The spacious second-story studio runs the full depth of the house and has a loft-like ambience that would not have been attained had the project been erected on the first floor, as was originally intended. Ann recalls the serendipitous turn of events: “After we decided the second floor was going to be approved, we realized this was the better solution. This way, we captured the light and the views to treetops and river.” The architect used high ceilings, windows and natural light to her advantage.

From the outside, the new entry includes a handsome portico embellished with wall brackets and natural wainscoting, and a welcoming custom door to blend with the exterior windows. Inside, visitors are greeted by a grand, two-story entry hall with oak stairs and painted metal railings, which serve both the residence and the studio. From every vantage point, the clustered square windows provide a one-two punch — modernizing a dated cape with architectural interest while at the same time providing framed vistas of the outdoors. For a self-taught photographer who finds beauty in “peaceful places,” Tom Kretsch’s home-based photography studio serves as a cheerful yet serene setting in which to ply his creative passion.