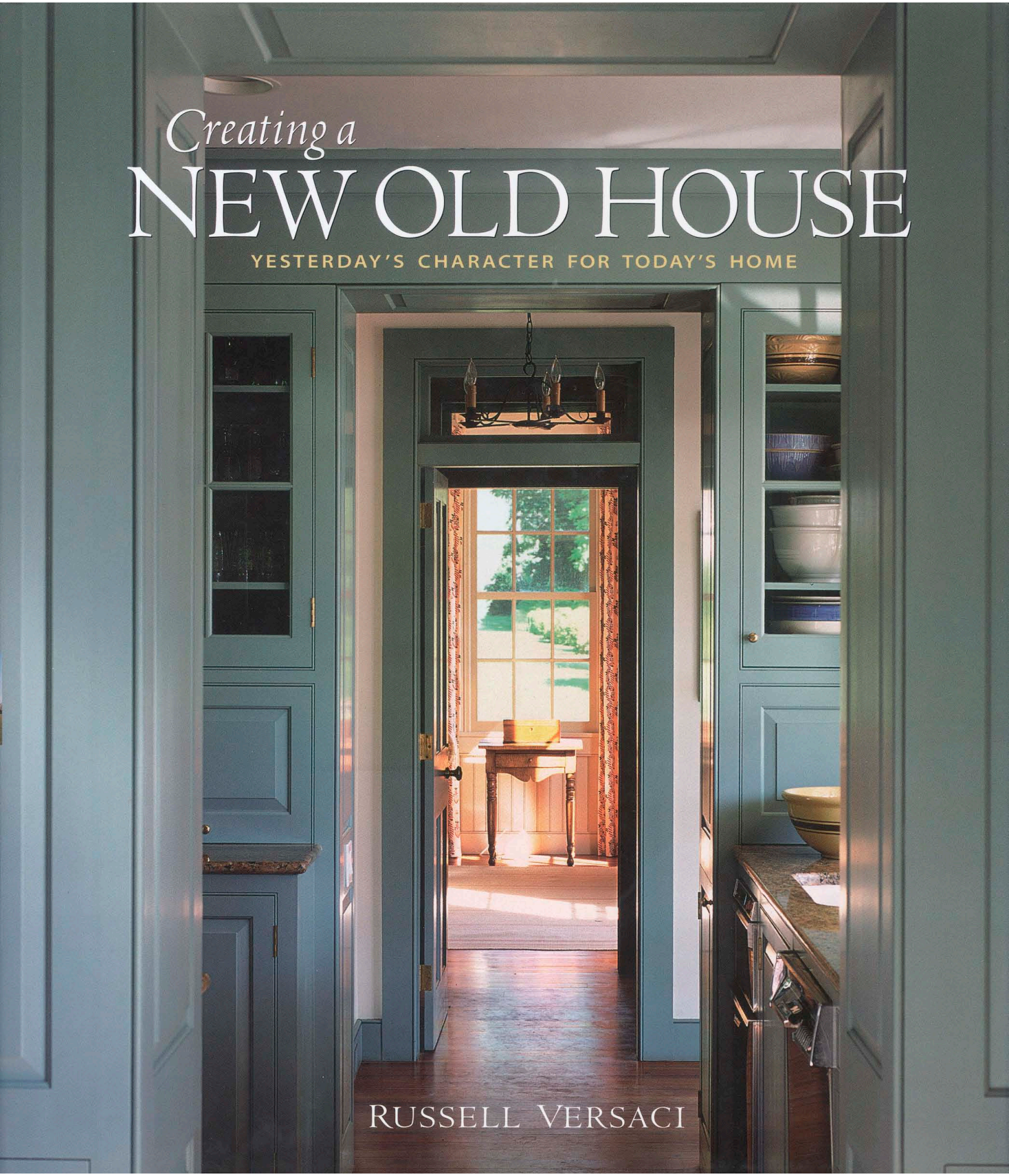
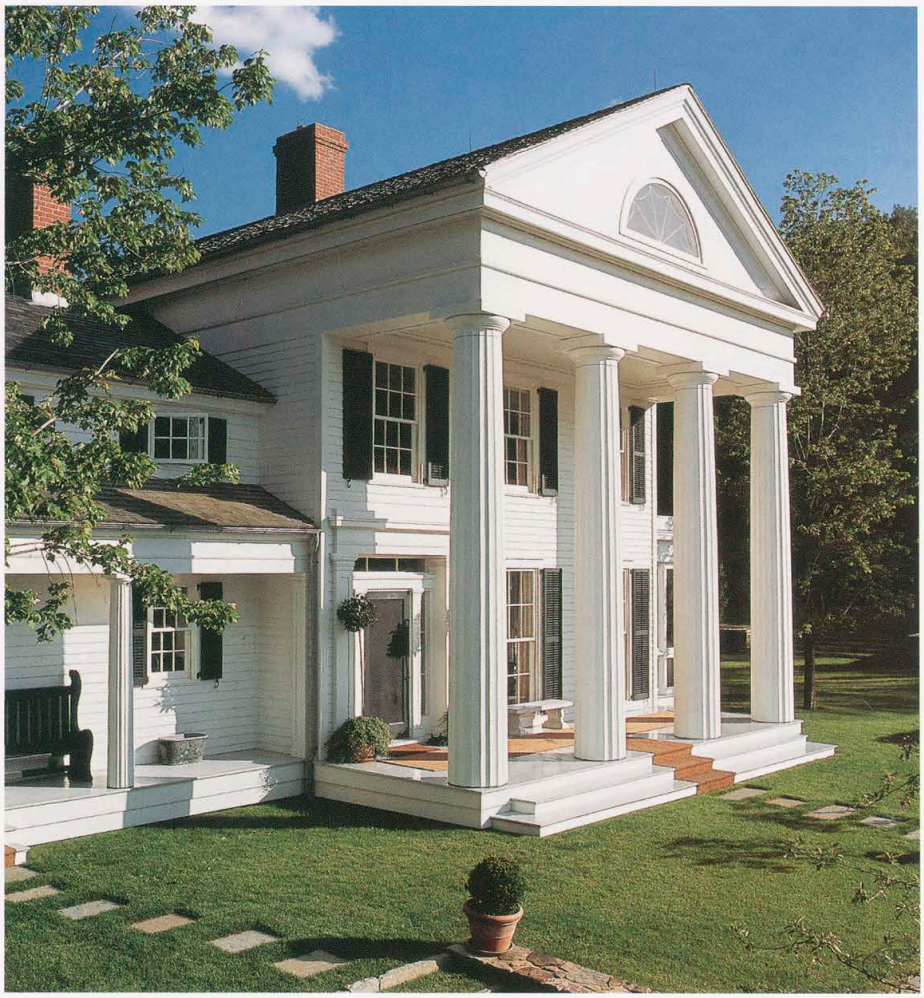

Creating a
NEW OLD HOUSE
YESTERDAY'S CHARACTER FOR TODAY'S HOME
RUSSELL VERSACI

BUILDING BY THE BOOK

When you have your heart set on an old house and then decide to build new, there is a special incentive to make the new house look authentic. Getting there means becoming an architectural sleuth who tracks down examples of old houses to learn from. Architect Gil Schafer used his professional observations and research tools to help him create a new vintage house.

The entry hall floors *are 200-year-old heart pine finished with tung oil and then carnauba wax to preserve their original surface patina. The unusual panel-within-panel design for the new front door is inspired by measured drawings of regional Greek Revival doorways.*



Drawing on the Greek Revival style *of classical farmhouses in Upstate New York, the new design re-creates the proportions and details of houses from 1820 to 1850. A monumental row of Greek Doric columns supports the front portico.*

Gil had already spent years looking for an old farmhouse to restore in the Hudson Valley when he finally decided to buy vacant farmland and start from scratch. Then he hunted for old houses and surveys of historic details for the regional Greek Revival style of 1820–1850 that he admired. This footwork helped him design an authentic new old house and cultivate convincing period interiors by incorporating antique materials and reproduction fittings. By adding *Details for Authenticity* and *Creating the Patina of Age,* Gil recreated a Greek Revival home for himself that looks like it has a long history.

The architect built his new version of a classic Greek Revival house of the 1830s on a piece of idyllic, rural country property. He chose a house site on a green saddle of land between two hillsides. Stone walls and hedged gardens form a frame of landscaping around the house, features that attach the house to the land and extend the reach of the architecture into the fields. The new house *Respects the Character of Place*, complementing the lay of the land so that the setting looks established.

USING PATTERN BOOKS

The architectural details of the house are so convincing that is hard to believe the house is new. From the pristine white exterior to the proportions of the columns and profiles of the moldings, every aspect falls into place with the precision of an old house. To achieve this, Gil studied the same early-

From the pristine exterior to the proportions of the columns, every aspect falls into place with the precision of an old house.

nineteenth-century pattern books that guided the original Greek Revival craftsmen in building houses.

Gil also used Carl Schmidt's modern study, *Greek Revival Details*, as a source for design ideas. He adapted the arrangement of the front doorway with its sidelights and transom window from measured drawings in the book. He also selected other period details that were suitable for his design and integrated them as elements, using the measured details he found in the text to authenticate his new house.

SIMULATED HISTORY

The house sits like a classical temple on its own acropolis. Upon closer study, the house has three distinct parts that look as if they had evolved over time. The main part of the house is shaped like a two-story Greek temple, with a majestic portico of columns across the front. Attached to one side is a story-and-a-half kitchen wing, with a small covered porch and attic windows. Running along the other side is a long, one-story screen porch. The temple front is monumental in scale, befitting its importance as the formal center of the house, while the modest kitchen wing is of simpler details that suit its secondary role, and the screen porch is a minor addition for an outdoor sitting room.

Each part simulates the changes that mark the history of an early-nineteenth-century Hudson Valley farmhouse. In this architectural fiction, the simple

hallmarks of style

GREEK REVIVAL STYLE

The Greek Revival style that flourished from 1820 to 1850 was born with the founding of the new American republic and was called the "national" style. The style derives its forms from the classical Greek temple, such as the Parthenon, where columns and beams support a shallow-pitched roof. Like a classical temple, the gable roof faces forward, creating a pediment, or triangle, which is supported on an entablature, or decorated beam, carried on top of columns.

The temple form of a Greek Revival house is often designed as a front portico that features a row of monumental columns, as in this new house.

Early-nineteenth-century Greek Revival houses were made of wood and sided with clapboards that were usually painted white. White had symbolic importance because it expressed the classical virtues of nobility and purity aspired to by the citizens of the young American republic.

kitchen wing might have been built first, followed by the elaborate main house and front portico, when prosperity allowed for a stylish addition. The scale and complexity of the details distinguish one building period from another: The details of one part are plain and of the other, fancy.

Proportioned Facades

This new old house's Greek Revival architecture is derived from the classical traditions of ancient Greece. The builders of antiquity used columns and horizontal beams as both the structure and the decorative scheme for buildings that were designed using strict rules of proportion. Columns support a deep beam, called an entablature, that in turn carries the triangular pediment of the roof. The size of the columns governs the scale of the other details and decorative moldings.

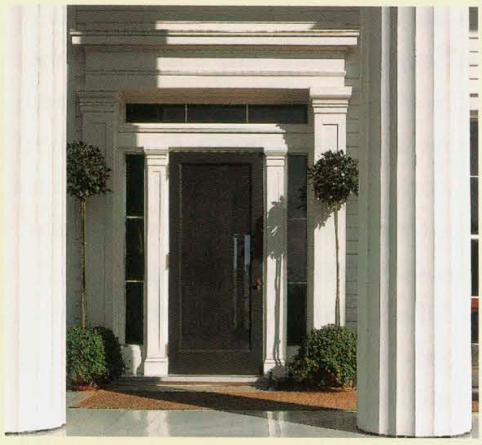
Columns of different sizes distinguish the main house from the kitchen wing. Four robust Greek Doric columns support the two-story front portico, whereas three slender columns carry the covered porch of the wing. Though the sculptural details of the columns are the same, the smaller columns are half the size of the larger ones and the details are diminished proportionally. These changes of scale and proportion are the way classical architecture sets up a hierarchy of building parts.

ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS

OLD PATTERN BOOKS

Throughout history, American builders have used pattern books to learn the building elements, rules of proportion, and finished details for popular architectural styles. Most builders of the 1830s depended heavily on published pattern books of Greek Revival details for instruction. American architects Asher Benjamin in *The Architect, or Practical House Carpenter* (1830) and Minard Lafever in *The Beauties of Modern Architecture* (1835) published handbooks found everywhere in nineteenth-century builders' toolboxes. Gil used these pattern books as guides to build his new old house.

For details of the Greek Revival in Upstate New York, Gil turned to the surveys of local examples published in the 1960s by architectural historian Carl Schmidt. In his *Greek Revival Details* of 1968, Schmidt includes meticulous measured drawings of columns, entablatures, doors and windows, mantelpieces, and molding profiles. Gil used this book as one of his guides, modeling the front entrance on a plate in the book.



A PLAIN BARN

Sitting beside the house is a simple barn turned garage. The barn's plain carpentry details of flat window casings and exposed roof rafters contrast with the elaborate main house. The board-and-batten garage is a respite from classical formality. Walls of vertical boards and the standing-seam metal roof are common details of barn architecture. Designed in the style of a small nineteenth-century carriage house, the garage is plain and simple, in the tradition of outbuildings on a Hudson Valley farm.

Simplified detailing continues on the back of the main house. The garden facade has no columns but retains the temple shape and triangular pediment of the front. Framed within walls of white clapboards, the three windows are evenly spaced across the facade in the perfect symmetry that is a hallmark of the Greek Revival style.

A graceful pergola, laced with climbing wisteria, provides a covered arbor over the back door. The pergola is an open grille of crossed timbers mounted on top of two columns, a form often used in turn-of-the-last-century garden architecture. Adapted to this Greek Revival house of the 1830s, the pergola illustrates how to *Invent within the Rules* of style.

AUTHENTIC HUDSON VALLEY INTERIORS

The homeowner not only wanted his new old house to look authentic but wanted the interior to create a portrait of the past fashioned for modern living, with finishes and fixtures that *Tell a Story Over Time* of a Hudson Valley farmhouse. Each detail adds color to the finished picture—floors that are centuries old, moldings that are pure Greek Revival, mantels that are nineteenth-century classics, and replica hardware that has a hand-rubbed patina.

Sided with vertical boards and batten strips, *the barn/garage is detailed with exposed roof rafter tails and windows framed in flat casings, beneath a galvanized metal roof of standing seams.*

Inside the front entry hall, the ornamental moldings have a commanding presence that is the hallmark of Greek Revival trimwork. Broad in width and cut in strong profiles, the door frames and crown moldings are striking to our modern eyes, which are accustomed to seeing spindly builders' trims. The crown molding at the ceiling rises in a deep undercut cove called a bird's beak, and the door casings are wide, flat boards edged with a carved backband that projects at the top corners to form dog's ears.

The house's age-mellowed wood floors have a 200-year-old story to tell. Bare-wood floors in the

Seen through French doors from the screen porch, *the living room is informally furnished around a nineteenth-century mantelpiece. As an alternative to costly antique heart pine, the floors are carpeted with less formal woven sea grass. The doorway is trimmed in a typical Greek Revival casing with dog-eared corners.*

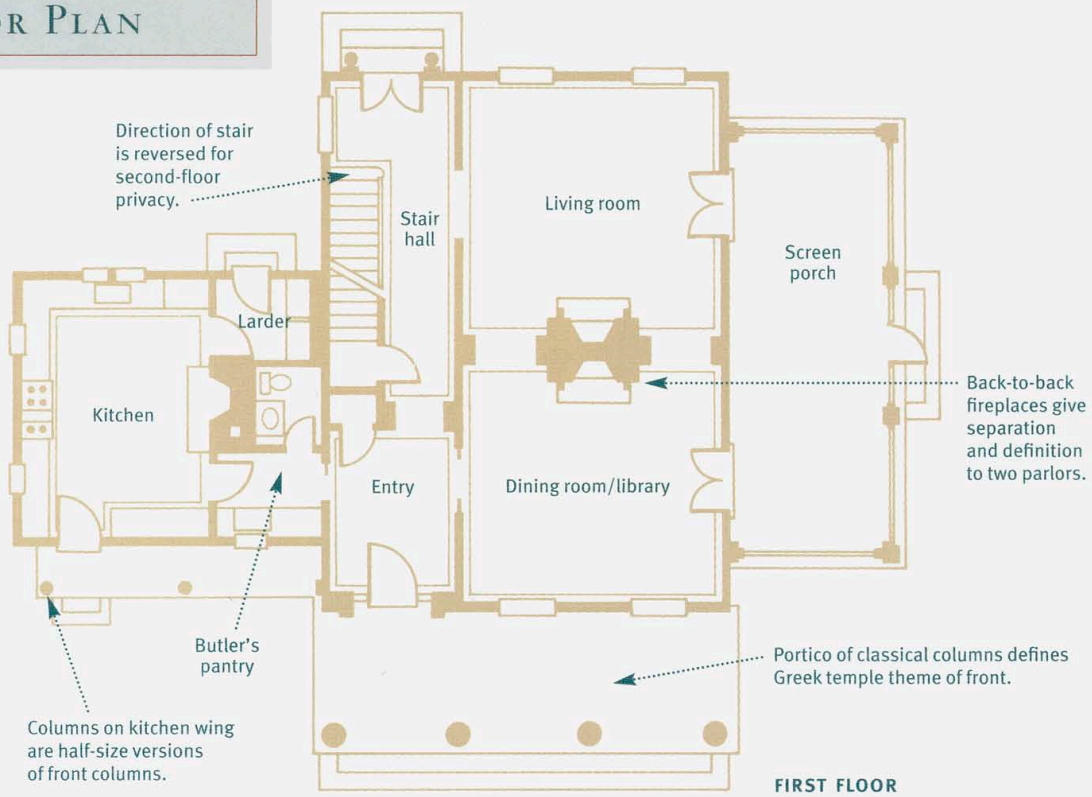
front entry and stair hall are true antique boards reclaimed from an old house, with all the marks of age still showing. The floorboards preserve the scarred and warped surface patina that shows their age, but the backsides have been planed smooth so that they lay flat on the floor frame. They are finished with tung oil and carnauba wax for a dull luster that avoids the sheen of polyurethane.

Hand-finished hardware adds period touches. All of the doorknobs, hinges, switch plates, drawer pulls, and light fixtures in the house are new, but they have a well-used patina. Each piece of hardware is refinished with an antiquing process that recreates the mottled effects of age.

A SENSE OF SPACIOUSNESS

The home's floor plan has an off-center stair hall that runs down one side of the house from the front entry vestibule to the back door. This arrangement opens most of the first floor for double parlors, one for the living room and the other for a dining room/library. The parlors are separated by back-to-back fireplaces set in a thick partition wall, with doorways on either side to connect the two rooms in a free flow. The fireplaces are centered between the parlors, where a wide passageway would have been located in a historic Greek Revival floor plan. This new plan arrangement offers more separation and definition to both rooms.

A Classical Floor Plan

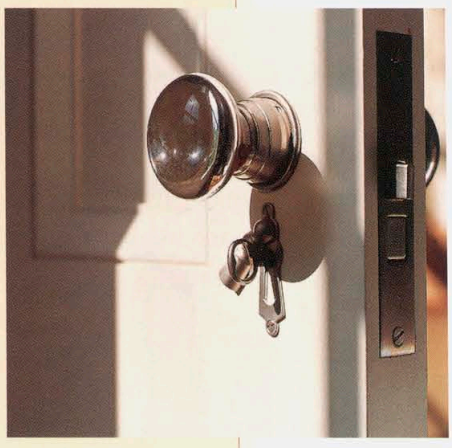


TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP

SILVERED GLASS DOORKNOBS

The silvered mercury glass doorknobs throughout the house were custom made from a mid-nineteenth-century pattern. The blown glass spheres are silvered on the inside for a brilliant appearance, which simulates the look of a precious metal. Each silvered knob is mounted on cast-brass backing plates, or shanks, that have an antique distressed patina.

Glass doorknobs were considered the epitome of elegance when they were first introduced in the 1800s, signifying purity and cleanliness. English glassmakers discovered a way to make silvered glassware using mercury in 1849, and then Enoch Robinson patented mercury glass in America in 1855. Today, Robinson's methods have been rediscovered. The silvered knobs of the 1850s are slightly later than the Greek Revival era, but the hardware has a period aura that reinforces the refinement of the house.



A long screen porch runs along the outside of the double parlors, with walls of beveled clapboard siding left exposed, as if the porch were screened in at a later date. The screen panels can be exchanged for glass panels in the winter to use the room in four seasons, a modern innovation that adapts the classic porch for contemporary living.

The new kitchen is detailed in turn-of-the-last-century style *using glass-front wall cabinets and bin-pull drawer handles. The homespun interior is detailed with a hearth, beadboard paneling, and wide plank floors.*

Few interior doors interrupt the flow of the floor plan between rooms. Where there are doors, they are pocketed into the depth of the wall and seem to disappear, creating a sense of spaciousness that defies the old house stereotype of small cramped rooms. The interiors are drenched in sunlight drawn in through oversize windows. French doors open the formal parlors to the screen porch, adding an outdoor room to the sense of space. The windows and French doors have slender mullions that divide the glass into large panes, producing proportions that are intentionally overscaled in Greek Revival designs.

In the most dramatic change to the traditional Greek Revival floor plan, the formal stair is turned around to ascend to the second floor from the back door rather than from the front hall. By reversing the stair, Gil created a more enclosed front vestibule and closed off views to second-floor bedrooms for more privacy. Doorways connecting the front entry hall to the stair, parlors, and kitchen wing make the vestibule a pivotal space.

A delicate vine-covered pergola, *or arbor of lattice, supported by a pair of Doric columns, covers the back door. Criss-crossed layers of timbers create the lattice roof, which is cantilevered out beyond the columns on projecting beams. This refined structure showcases handcraftsmanship and authentic detailing.*

Bonus Living Spaces

The screen porch is a bonus space that becomes a four-season outdoor living room when glass panels replace the screens in the winter (shown on page 102). The room looks like an open porch that was enclosed with screens in the late nineteenth century. Leftover details create the renovated look, because the painted clapboard siding and dark green louvered shutters of the "old" wall are still visible inside the room.

The small wing on the side of the main house includes the kitchen and work rooms. It is countrified in character to create the fiction that this part of the house was built first, with narrow beadboard paneling on the walls and wide painted pine floorboards. The large brick hearth and plain details of its mantelpiece suggest that the fireplace was once used for cooking. Gil designed the kitchen with this story of country informality to contrast with the high-styled Grecian details of the main house.

The house is a fictional account of an 1830s Greek Revival house, but it is also an architect's vision fully realized. Gil's story illustrates the value of thorough historical research, the pursuit of authenticity and proper scale, and the investment in period fittings when building a new old house.

The main stair rises from the back hall *to the second-floor landing rather than from the entry hall. The stair's turned newel post and spindles and scroll-cut brackets are patterned after measured details of Greek Revival millwork.*