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Worth Saving

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A team of architects restores an unsung 18th century farmhouse for homeowners with a love of history



It's not just registered historic landmarks that are worth preserving. For a New Jersey couple, a derelict 18th century farmhouse deserved to be lovingly and meticulously restored. The structure represented beauty, authenticity and the promise of home in a unique historic structure for the couple and their three children.

The homeowners had grown up in rural surroundings and longed to return to an area offering quiet, privacy and a lifestyle reminiscent of their childhoods. All they needed was the right architect to undertake the preservation and renovation of the unsung—to preservationists—farmhouse sitting on 24 wooded acres in the Somerset County hills.



Ileana Martin-Novoa, R.A., and her husband Jonathan Katz, R.A., a husband-and wife-team who head up Millburn-based Katz Novoa Architects, signed on for the three-year project. It wasn't an easy job. The house had been vacant for some time. The original structure—a 1720s stone farmhouse—was in disrepair. A 1920s addition—a mostly clapboard structure with a few stone walls—had been poorly constructed and also was in bad condition. Both sections lacked up-to-date infrastructure and amenities.

[enlarge](#) | The 1720s stone farmhouse had been vacant for years before its purchase by clients of architects Ileana Martin-Novoa and Jonathan Katz. The pair's restoration of the home combined a meticulous preservation with construction of up-to-date amenities for a 21st century family. These include a bump-out at the front of the house for a new vestibule that includes a powder room and guest closet.

The homeowners wanted to retain as much as possible of the original structure and its unique characteristics. For the rest, they sought features that would preserve the architectural integrity of the original. "This was not a cost-efficient project," Martin-Novoa says. "The homeowners could have torn down the structure and put up a McMansion, but they wanted to preserve the house and do so faithfully."

Martin-Novoa says that as an architect she loves houses of all vintages and shapes and forms. But she and her husband had never worked on a house as old as this one. "When we found out how old the house was, I was just a little intimidated," she says. "However, we were super-excited to work on such an old structure."



In the Same Footprint

Little is known about the original stone farmhouse. A book on Somerset County's historic homes contains a line drawing of it but nothing about its history. The residence is L-shaped, formed by the 1920s addition that was constructed perpendicular to the original stone structure. A courtyard was created in the L.

"The homeowners wanted the cozy look and scale of the house to remain the same," Martin-Novoa says. So the L-shaped footprint was retained, and the homeowners and architects planned a renovation of the interiors. "We were waiting for surprises on the stone house but it was sturdy; it had been there forever," Martin-Novoa says.



[enlarge](#) | A poorly constructed 1920s addition had to come down even though the homeowners originally wanted to keep it. The architects kept the same L-shaped footprint and replaced the 1920s addition. On the far right of the new addition is a family room on the first floor and master bedroom and balcony on the second. To the left of the addition is the stone exterior of the new kitchen, where you can also see an old niche the architects preserved.

The addition was a different story. It contained an old kitchen and breakfast room on the first floor and, on the second floor, three bedrooms that were a maze of oddly shaped rooms with awkward connections.

The owners wanted to salvage the old addition but clearly it wasn't worth it—historically or practically—so it was torn down and replaced, Martin-Novoa says.

The architects refurbished each room in the original stone house: the dining room, living room and map room (now called a reading room) on the first floor and three bedrooms on the second floor. A fourth bedroom became part of a new

hall bathroom.

They furred out and insulated exterior walls; replaced old windows with new energy efficient ones; installed up-to-date electrical, plumbing and HVAC systems; and cleaned and restored fireplaces in the dining room, living room and map room on the first floor and the original master bedroom on the second.

The stone house lacked a powder room and coat closet, so the architects bumped out a small stone addition at the

front and constructed a new vestibule with a powder room on one side and a guest closet on the other.

They preserved the appearance of the exterior by saving the stone removed for the bump out and adding matching stone from Pennsylvania to reconstruct the façade. They also replicated the original front patio, doorway and windows. A new hall bathroom was added on the second floor above the new vestibule.



 enlarge | This view of the new addition shows the porch off the new family room on the first floor, the new master bedroom and deck on the second floor and, to the right, the library on the first floor and master bathroom on the second.

New Spaces

The new addition that replaced the 1920s structure includes a kitchen, walk-in pantry, butler's pantry, mudroom, family room and library on the first floor. On the second floor there's a new master bedroom and bathroom, a bedroom and bathroom for the couple's son, a cedar closet and a laundry room.

A finished basement in the addition contains a billiards room, wine room, playroom and shower room along with storage and mechanical rooms.

Before the renovation the original house and addition had seven bedrooms and four bathrooms on the second floor. The new home has five bedrooms and four bathrooms on the second floor, two half-bathrooms on the first floor and the full shower room in the basement.

"The house is now bigger than when we started the renovation but it doesn't look that much bigger; that was the homeowner's intention," Martin-Novoa says. The original house and addition totaled 4,250 square feet. The finished home is now 7,900 square feet.

They also expanded the living space with construction of a new barn that houses garages, a hunt room and storage space, a gym and stalls for two horses.



 enlarge | Top: Neither the architects nor the homeowners know the purpose of this stone niche, but the owners wanted to keep it as an authentic detail when the addition was rebuilt. Bottom: Another unique detail of the original farmhouse is the exterior of a beehive oven, a dome-shaped oven for baking bread in the colonial era. A mason dismantled the oven stone by stone, numbered them and reconstructed it on the new addition.

Original Details, Quirky Features

Throughout the project the architects painstakingly preserved original architectural details. They retained dormer windows. They also replaced single-pane uninsulated windows of different sizes at the rear of the stone house with energy-efficient insulated windows but kept the different sizes to maintain the original random look.

They kept the wide-plank pine flooring in the original stone house; however, the planks were removed for the installation of radiant heat and then re-installed. Wide-plank pine floors from a torn-down barn were installed in the addition. Old beams and fireplace mantels throughout the old stone house were stripped of years of paint and restored.

Then there were the quirky features the homeowners were intent on keeping. The exterior of a beehive oven on the old addition was dismantled, each stone numbered, and then rebuilt on the new addition as a memento to the original. The oven, which used to open to the kitchen and now is a mudroom wall, was named for its shape and was used at many colonial-era homes to make bread and other baked goods.

Niche, an arched recess on one of the old addition's stone walls facing the courtyard, received the same treatment. The mason dismantled it and rebuilt it with the original stones. No one is sure of its original use, Martin-Novoa notes.

The homeowners also insisted on keeping the multicolored ceramic shards that littered an inner courtyard between the former garage and the former kitchen in the 1920s addition. The previous owner's mother was a potter who had her studio above the former garage. "Our clients saw this as a personal thing that was a part of the house and should

remain," Martin-Novoa says.

That sentiment illustrates much of what the homeowners believe and cherish. "The clients appreciated the fact that the stone house had sat there all this time," Martin-Novoa says. "That's in contrast to so many people today who want everything new. It's refreshing to see people who appreciate history and the idea that smaller can be beautiful."

Robin Amster is a Madison-based writer and editor.



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Details Make a Difference

From left: A traditional rooster weather vane graces the roof of the new barn. • This gargoyle is one of two that sit on each side of a stone wall above steps leading down to gardens. • This new casement window is meant to look like a double-hung window. It's in the restored dormer of one of the original stone house's bedrooms facing the courtyard.



enlarge The architects preserved the appearance of ...



enlarge The architects' retained the original dormer ...



enlarge These are views of the side of the house. The ...



enlarge Shown are replicas of two doors at the rear ...



enlarge The architects designed a barn to house ...

SOURCES

Architectural design, Katz/Novoa Architects in Millburn; building contractors, John Ansede and Ed Dwyer of AVR Ltd. in Bernardsville.

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