

Creating Home

Design for Living

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AN ORIGINAL PATH

When you walk the woods, you discover pathways created by those who've preceded you. Most of these trails were forged by animals, others by two-legged creatures. Either way, what you notice, if you choose to follow them, is how naturally these routes carry you to your destination. This is because they have evolved from instinct—an intuitive feel for how best to navigate the terrain—rather than having a design imposed upon the land that is at odds with the way it wants to be used. Though this approach to a site may seem better suited to natural conditions, I have found it invaluable in deciding where, and how, to place a building on a property and even the best way to develop an architectural plan. If one can let go of one's preconceptions and open oneself to the immutable character of a site, one will often end up with a house that flows more naturally and inevitably, as opposed to a structure that has been twisted into something that was never meant to be.

Consider this house. It sits on an uneven parcel that tumbles down to the Long Island Sound in a somewhat exclusive New England town that is an enclave of tradition and prosperity. At a glance, the building appears rather formal. It's a Norman-style house with a steeply pitched roof that reflects the preferences of the owners, for whom I designed a home in a similar style down South—call it the 2.0 version of their primary residence. Yet the house is not entirely as it seems. My clients aren't formal people and pursue their interests in fine art and gee-whiz gadgetry with equal enthusiasm. Accordingly, their home reflects their character, which relies as much on instinct and emotion as logic—and thus has more in common with a “naturally designed” landscape than it does with its buttoned-up, stately neighbors.

Here I must confess that I didn't plan to take this approach. Ordinarily, when I design a house of this scale, I follow a pattern that reflects a codified program: you park your car here, you bring your groceries in there, that element transitions into the kitchen, and so forth. This doesn't represent a cookie-cutter methodology; it is, rather, the way the big-house typology works. But when I

OPPOSITE: A view from the library into the front-entry foyer. Painted wood paneling surrounds the doorway. OVERLEAF: The house sits at the highest elevation on its site overlooking the Long Island Sound; the lower wing encloses the pool. Both volumes employ large areas of view-friendly expressed glass.





The living room features a cove ceiling, a nod to my clients' previous home in Atlanta, on which we also collaborated. Both actually and psychologically, the high windows piercing the thick walls convey a sense of protection and permanence. They also project illumination into the tall space.





traveled up north to begin design development, I happened to stay in a hotel room in which the coffee machine was next to the bed. That arrangement offered a degree of convenience I thoroughly enjoyed, even though it would never occur to me to do the same thing at home. This led me to think about travel, how it opens you to different ways of living and makes you amenable to new kinds of thinking. Thus primed, when I arrived at the site and considered the terrain, I realized that the natural place to site the garage was not behind the house but beside it, and that the confluence of the two would be the living room. *That* meant that rather than following the usual route—from garage to mudroom to kitchen—the residents would enter the foyer and proceed through the living room to the kitchen.

That simple reconsideration of the way things are usually done, based on an openness to the site and how it might be most naturally occupied, changed everything. It meant that the space that's usually out of sight, out of mind—the formal living room—could be absorbed into the day-to-day life of the house and thus enjoyed and appreciated, based on nothing more than the flow of the plan. It also enabled me to bring the main stair, which connects the public rooms to the second- and third-floor bedrooms, down to the same dynamic connection point in the foyer.

This approach may seem unconventional, but in fact it pulled the design together in a way that was more impactful, enabled my clients to use more of their house (and to use it naturally), and also responded comprehensively to the ways in which the different members of the household really live. Thus what began with a coffee machine in a hotel room evolved into an effective design for living.

If on the main floor the plan responded to the site, on the second level we chose consciously to continue the lesson and tailor the design to my clients' predilections, as opposed to domestic convention. This is most evident in the couple's private quarters, which are entered via the room-size master closet. In all my years of practice, I've never designed a house in which you walked through a closet to get to a bedroom. It was my clients' idea, and quite a practical one, given how much the husband travels, how often his days begin and end at the packing station. The residents obeyed their hearts, and the result is effective functionally and aesthetically.

OPPOSITE: A vignette in the living room features a tall Miró and a diminutive Picasso. The interior design was created by my frequent collaborator Beth Webb.

RIGHT: The family room, a counterpoint to the library on the opposite side of the house, communicates directly with the kitchen and overlooks the lawn and, beyond it, the Long Island Sound. The reclaimed-oak beams are part of the tectonic language of strong, elegantly chiseled wood that extends throughout the residence.
OVERLEAF: Jeremy Smearman developed the landscape design, which at once enfolds the house and embraces its surroundings.





The design's open embrace of function and condition also produced another unexpected benefit: there is no house behind the house. Whereas in more traditional layouts, one finds the living and dining rooms in front and the kitchen and family room in the rear, the plan is such that there are axial views through all of the main floor's spaces and, indeed, cross-axial sight lines to the landscape and water. The plan makes what is undeniably a large house feel more graspable and welcoming, and the link to the out-of-doors produces the warmth and comfort that only an easy connection to the natural environment can provide. This formulation works vertically as well: moving up and down the stair, with its capacious landings and expansive glazing, one experiences a prismatic scenography of interior and exterior tableaux, at once sweeping and intimate.

The interior designer, Beth Webb, achieved an outcome that was no less adroit. Our mutual clients brought to their new home a remarkably eclectic mix of modern and traditional (bordering on medieval) furniture, as well as artworks equally separated by time and genre—all of which arrived from the residents' previous, and much smaller, home. Somehow Beth was able to bring these radically different elements into balance with one another with sensitivity and grace, and to fill in the spaces between them with components that suited the scale of the old furniture and the new architecture. The house feels both comfortable and cohesive, and it required a talent as subtle as Beth's to achieve it.

When I consider the house, which has proven so well tailored to the desires of my clients (individually and as a family), I am reminded that it is not as unconventional as it seems, because the modern mind isn't always linear. We've become used to going online and following our noses from site to site, link to link, obeying no greater logic than our own curiosities and instincts; this organic transit feels far more natural than the straight-ahead one we might follow if the rules of cyber-engagement were more conventional. Perhaps the Internet has led us back to what the creature in the woods seems always to have known: that the lack of expectation of a linear path predisposes us to doing what makes sense. There is no firmer expression of that idea, in my work, than this house.

OPPOSITE: In the kitchen, the reclaimed oak used in the expansive handcrafted island, an object of my design, is a match for both the beams in the adjoining family room and the wide-plank floor.



Adjacent to the family room and the kitchen, the dining room also overlooks the indoor pool from an interior window at right, above the banquette. Beyond the tall French windows lies a terrace with a water view.



The library is identical in scale to the family room, which occupies a mirror-image position on the opposite side of the living room. With natural light on two sides, the room balances an enfolding interiority with a connection to the landscape. OVERLEAF: The pool captures reflections from the garden beyond the bronze reclining nude.



