

An Ulster County couple builds a 21st-century version of an Arts and Crafts cottage

# Crafting a Traditional Home

By Valerie Havas

Photographs by Michael Polito

**M**any of us find the idea of old houses romantic. Researching their histories, unearthing their secrets, reveling in their old-time craftsmanship — what could be more appealing? There's a story behind every layer of wallpaper, a tale behind every architectural quirk. Less romantic, of course, is the reality of old houses — things like balky plumbing, eccentric electrical systems, and repair bills that threaten to send you straight to the poorhouse.

So it's not entirely surprising that when it came time for one Ulster County couple to build their dream house, they decided that they

The native white oak balustrade was inspired by a design by Scottish Arts and Crafts master, Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Sconces reflect the same aesthetic







A woodland mural adds charm to the teenager's bedroom; cushy club chairs covered in a '40s-style fabric do the same in the living room. Below right: a Mission desk and chair overlook the pond



Custom-made cabinets carry on the Craftsman theme in the kitchen, with its inviting window seat; works by local artists hang in the master bedroom; American matte-glazed pottery and white paneling brighten the master bath



wanted the look of an older home, but with all the conveniences of a modern one. To fulfill their dream, the couple — a designer of collectible dolls and the owner of a local real estate firm — turned to Peter Reynolds of Ashokan Architecture & Planning, located in Kingston. The happy result is a thoroughly modern take on an Arts and Crafts cottage.

"We wanted the better things about a traditional house, but with all new systems," explain the owners, who also sought a home that would be suitable for their pets and their now-teenaged son. "Our last house was very modern," they recall. "It was beautiful to have a party in, but it was not a great family house; it was not a good house for dogs."

Reynolds was an eager collaborator in the couple's effort to meld the old with the new. Explaining his design philosophy, he says, "New houses are best when they have a strong, respectful relationship to past designs that worked, but also are proudly living in the present tense — 'living' being the key word."

The home incorporates many of the elements that Reynolds

**New houses are best when they have a strong relationship to past designs**





The rear of the house shows the lower level, where a baby grand piano shares space with the usual utilitarian objects. The homeowners plan to one day add a television room. The garage, also in the Arts and Crafts style, is connected to the house by a breezeway



Built-in cabinets in the hallway showcase a collection of American pottery. Left: The imposing eight-foot-tall front door with its divided sidelights was executed by the Kerhonkson firm Barra and Trumbore; an inexpensive acorn doorknocker "just seemed right," the couple say. Below: Dolls designed by one of the owners are housed in a room of their own on the second floor



believes can help make a new structure feel comfortably old — elements like classical proportions, carefully executed millwork, a generous amount of texture, close attention to windows, and "authentic stone treatments with a deep thickness to them." At the same time, it successfully meets the needs of a 21st-century family.

In true Craftsman style, the house is in harmony with its setting, a 10-acre wooded site in Accord. Cedar shingles are stained a woody greenish-brown, while the burgundy trim is the color of autumn leaves. A long, spacious porch with tapered wooden columns overlooks the backyard pond, providing plenty of room for outdoor entertaining. During the building process, the couple agonized over how to save as many big trees as possible, even changing the location of their garage three times to avoid chopping down a giant black cherry tree, and building the driveway around a massive oak.

Indoors, the centerpiece is a beautifully crafted wooden staircase. Reynolds came up with the original design, which featured a balustrade with predominantly vertical elements. After his clients admired a photo of a staircase by the Scottish Arts and Crafts architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the design evolved to include horizontal and diagonal elements as well.

Because the couple's two spaniels — an English springer and a Brittany — had virtually destroyed the maple floors in their previous house, the new one incorporates more pet-proof materials. The entrance hall floor is slate, while the lower level, where the dogs stay when the owners are not home, has polished concrete.

Slate is also used for the floor and backsplash in the kitchen, where a window seat invites guests to watch meals being prepared. The decision to include a window seat was a perfectly logical one for Reynolds. "The big secret design professionals don't want to admit is that, no matter how many beautiful spaces you create, and no matter the splendor of the house, most clients spend 80 percent of their waking time in the kitchen, and of course, all guests congregate there," he



## Crafting A Traditional Home

declares. The couple added a wooden work island manufactured by Stickley, a company making furniture in the tradition of Gustav Stickley, a leading proponent of the American Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the last century. The island is topped with a slab of charcoal soapstone. The kitchen is open to the living area, and there is no dining room. "We don't have a lot of dinner parties, so a dining room wasn't a big thing for us," the homeowners explain.

The focal point of the living room is a fireplace created by stonemason Greg Childers of Stone Ridge. "Most of the stone came from the property's existing walls, which had not been maintained over the years," Childers recalls. "There was bluestone, marble, and a pinkish Shawangunk granite. Only the mantel and the hearthstone came from a quarry." The process of making the fireplace was time-consuming, to say the least. "We

### Details in the living room, including the coffered ceiling and quarter-sawn oak floors, evoke the past

set up a cook pot in the woods and made stew over a fire while we collected and chiseled the stones," Childers remembers. "It took about a month and a half to collect and trim the stones."

The shallow, tall fireplace is based on a design devised by an 18th-century physicist named Count Rumford. "No other masonry fireplace can project heat as far into a room," says Reynolds of Rumford's invention. "We modified his design, as many do, but the essential design — a shallow firebox with a reflective, parabolic shape — is hard to improve on."

Other details in the living room — including the coffered ceiling and quarter-sawn oak floors — evoke the past as well. The furniture is a mix of old and new: the *mélange* includes comfy club chairs covered with fabric from ABC Carpet & Home, an antique sewing machine cabinet, a Stickley display case, and a table fashioned from a cement garden pedestal and a piece of slate. Tall double-

hung windows topped by fixed clerestory windows allow light to stream in. Because they're made with high-quality insulated glass, the windows help keep out the cold.

A sunroom, which serves as the family room, is also on the ground floor. With its inspiring views and ample natural light, it is the preferred workspace for one of the homeowners, who craves sunlight during the dark winter months.

To a large extent, says Reynolds, the home was designed around the clients' collections of American pottery and meticulously crafted dolls. To that end, it has several display cabinets and cases: some old, some reproductions of original Craftsman designs, and some built by Nicholas Simile, a cabinetmaker from Rosendale. One cabinet may show off pieces from, say, Glidden or Van Briggles potteries, while another may display the prototype for a Pinocchio doll. Upstairs, an entire room is devoted to dolls, most of them beautifully dressed.

Walls throughout the house have a skim-coat of plaster for an older, irregular look and doors all have five horizontal panels (another Arts and Crafts touch — six paneled doors are more traditional). The master bedroom has painted wooden paneling and a walk-through closet to the master bath, which features lots of windows and separate areas for the shower and tub. The shower area, which has no exterior window, receives light through a "window" made of glass blocks. A live parakeet provides a splash of color.

Paintings adorn virtually every room in the house. Local artists — including Jane Bloodgood-Abrams, Greg Arnett, Priscilla Derven, Connie Fiedler, and Paul Abrams — are well-represented in the couple's extensive art collection. In their son's bedroom, a mural featuring clouds and woodland creatures covers the ceiling and three of the four walls. To create the mural, the couple commissioned local painter Diantha Baker. "In a house filled with so much art, to have the house itself as a painting is a wonderful thing," they agree.

In Reynolds' view, this house looks to the past, yet is obviously of its own time. "There's a big difference between something feeling similar to old structures, and imitating old things," he declares. "The latter is really more theater than architecture." This house, he believes, is not a slavish imitation of the past; it is a living entity, built for a family living in today's world. ●