

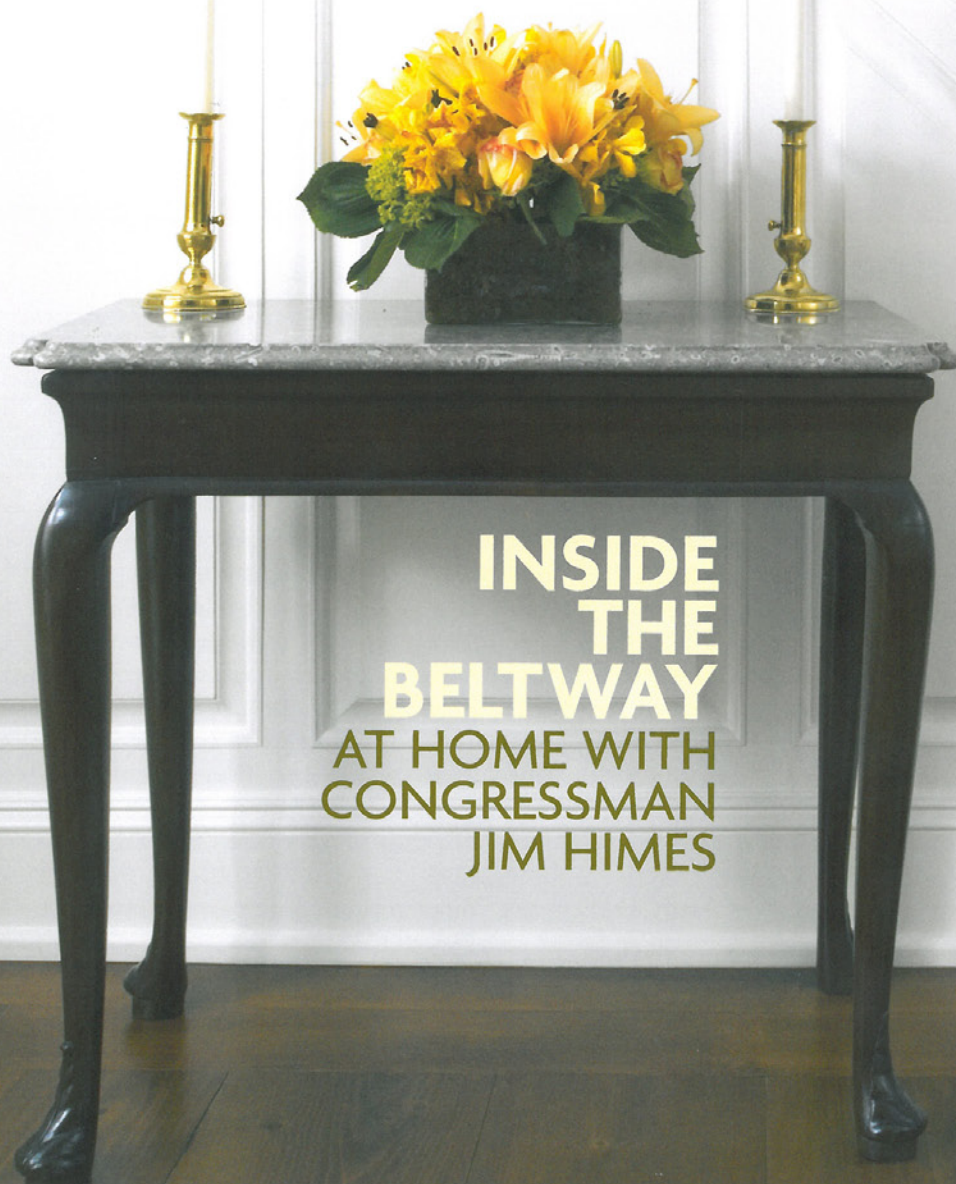
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# GREENWICH

MARCH 2010  
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## DESIGN & DECOR

THE EVOLUTION OF A HISTORIC HOME



**INSIDE  
THE  
BELTWAY**  
AT HOME WITH  
CONGRESSMAN  
JIM HIMES

**HEALING  
HANDS**  
GREENWICH  
DOCTORS  
ON A  
MISSION



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# GRACIOUS



# DESIGN

Allowing their house to evolve over time,  
this Greenwich family maintained the integrity  
of their historic home while  
making it livable and gorgeous

by **SUZANNE GANNON** photographs by **JEFF McNAMARA**



# AROUND A BEND

on a winding stretch of Clapboard Ridge Road sits a house that harkens back to an earlier time, yet fits squarely and comfortably within this one. Originally built in the 1820s just a stone's throw from the stone wall that hugs the road, on what was likely farm land, the house was expanded to include a small Greek Revival sunroom sometime in the late 1800s and then renovated again in the 1950s to include a sizable family room. In 2006, Nora and Rob Leary, who had purchased the house in 1999 and subsequently hired architect Mac Patterson of Southport-based Austin Patterson Disston, broke ground on a renovation-addition combination that hews to the building's modest scale.

*By adding a rear hallway, space was made for a butler's pantry with glass-fronted cabinets perfect for glassware and china.*

*From the kitchen island the Learys have views in all directions.*

In so doing, they resisted the temptation to expand beyond the building's original footprint more or less, and, with Patterson's guidance, arrived at a final product that accommodates the ambitious requirements for this active family of three. "They made gradual modifications over time to fit their needs," says Patterson. "I like to treat a house as though it's evolved over time, not as though it landed whole hog on the face of the earth."



## MERGING TWO WORLDS

"New England additive architecture" is the term Patterson has assigned to the design aesthetic that his twenty-eight-person firm practices. And it is very much at work in the Leary house, which consists of interlocking sections attaching to a central column, anchored on both ends with sizable rooms intended for gathering and relaxing. "Who wants to sit in the breakfast room on a Sunday morning reading the paper in a space that measures eighteen-by-eighteen?" asks Patterson. "These days, they design rooms big enough to park an S.U.V. And then they're made worse by not being trimmed out properly. And then they fill them with big furniture."

Patterson's guiding principle is restraint. And that's what made him a good fit for the Learys and their daughter Emma. "This would have been a teardown for many people, and a teardown would have been cheaper," says Rob Leary adding that in 2006, when they broke ground, McMansions were all the rage. "But we wanted to preserve the character of this house. We definitely resisted pressure to do other things."

The scope of work included two primary changes: reorienting the front door to create a more inviting approach and entry (and expanded driveway), and adding on a two-plus-story tower, like a barn, that houses a breakfast room, as well as an upstairs office for Rob who works in financial services, and a





“We wanted to preserve the character  
of this house.” —Rob Leary



Petite in scale and by far the most formal  
space in the house, this living room serves  
as an historical footnote to the front parlor  
of the original house.



*Like an old-fashioned greenhouse, this sunroom gets drenched in sunlight.*

*The dining room, with its gold leaf ceiling, occupies the space that served as the kitchen in the original house and bridges the older portions of the house to the new.*

media/entertainment loft. "The front door had faced the road and you couldn't really see it from the drive," says Patterson who uses hand-colored renderings throughout the design process to keep clients abreast of the look and feel of the project. "You shouldn't be coy about a front door. People should be able to see it, and it should be wonderful and warm and welcoming to visitors."

Other modifications included refinishing the exterior in clapboard, fitting it with lead-coated copper leaders and gutters, and applying an Alaskan cedar shingle roof. They improved circulation by adding a lateral corridor that runs across the rear of the house and provides substantial storage for their green glassware, Spode china and ceramic miniatures of Amsterdam's canal-front houses, and they expanded the patio.



## THE PARTICULARS

"The client did not want to walk from room to room to get through the house," explains Patterson. "So that's how we arrived at the solution of the back hallway. We got some good mileage out of it by making it into a gallery that houses a butler's pantry as well as the coat closets." Programmatically, Patterson was able to tuck into the layout several items from the clients' wish list, including a 1,500-bottle wine cellar, a room for dry storage, a laundry room, a television concealed in cubbies in the entertainment/media loft, and his-and-hers offices.

"There were so many things we thought Mac would never be able to squeeze into this space [4,600 square feet], but he utilized every inch," says Nora, gesturing toward her office, which includes a pair of binoculars and a window through which she can spend time bird-watching or occasionally getting a glimpse of a wild turkey, deer or red fox.

Extensive millwork, such as the arched hallway into the kitchen that features a box-beam-like ceiling, is a signature of the firm's aesthetic, which is on display throughout the house. All of it was fashioned on-site. In the formal parlor, a petite room that serves as a historical footnote to the original layout, Patterson dispensed with the dropped ceiling to achieve some height, and detailed a pair of concave built-in bookcases, crowned with a shell detail and finished with Venetian plaster, where his clients display their collections. (During the holidays they exhibited an extensive array of nativity scenes gathered from around the world.)

"We really relied on Mac and his expertise in managing the scale, and in particular the details of the







scale—how to match the old with the new to get the right feel,” says Nora. “As a result, we’re happier than we thought we would be. It has a lot more charm than we could have imagined.” When the project went out to bid, Nora recalls several contractors maneuvering about on the property “like bumper cars,” spreading their drawings out on the lawn and trying to get a fix on their bids. Those who promised bells and whistles wound up pricing themselves off the job.

The job was not without its challenges. In addition to complying with strict zoning regulations so as not to lose their variance, Patterson was faced with the need to marry the kitchen into the original mass of the house, while maintaining the scale of the front entry hall and adjacent sitting room. He wound up converting the old kitchen into what is now a dining room that comfortably seats eight. Accented with a trayed ceiling painted in gold leaf, the dining room works as the bridge between this zone and the original column of the house where the entry foyer and sitting room are. He then designed a new light-filled kitchen with a wall of windows replete with views in three directions

through which the family can observe a family of raccoons nesting in the crook of an old cherry birch tree. The kitchen features a six-burner range (a caterer’s delight) mounted on an island under a burnished-steel hood, and transitions into the barn-like breakfast room, which includes three tiers of windows and ceilings more than 20 feet high. Upstairs is Rob’s office, and the entertainment/media loft from which you can see down to the breakfast room through a line of transom windows. “By far, the best part of the house is this post-and-beam media room,” said Rob. “Even though you’re upstairs, you still feel connected to the rest of the house.”

Flanking the other side of the house is the circa 1950s family room with which Patterson took particular care. He raised the ceiling and found reclaimed timbers to complement the room’s original exposed beams; installed old lanterns—none of them use a bulb more powerful than 40 watts—and mounted some 1950s paneling on the wall. He fitted the television into a cupboard that had been a gun rack, and reinvented the adjacent powder room as a bar with a window seat.

*A dark four-poster dominates a color palette of soft blues and grays. The cabinet at the foot of the bed contains a remotely controlled television.*

**“It has a lot more charm than we could have imagined.”**  
—Nora Leary





Rob and Nora Leary at home with daughter Emma.

*In the family room, added in the 1950s, Patterson raised the ceiling, found reclaimed timbers to complement its original beams and sourced paneling that matched the original.*

## ALL COMING TOGETHER

From the family room, where the family enjoys a large fireplace, the Learys can exit the house onto the back patio. To achieve a seamlessness with the outdoors and to address the natural contours of the property, which abuts a nursery and includes a swath of wetland, the couple hired landscape architect Diane Devore of Devore Associates in Fairfield. "She really helped us integrate and connect the yard to our house," said Nora. This is no small accomplishment for a family that enjoys cross-country skiing straight out their backdoor, sledding in the side yard, lacrosse, running, archery and sipping cocktails in the shade of the covered porch.

Diane tinkered with elevations and grading to separate what had been a single patio into three separate patio levels, all finished in bluestone. Then she constructed a series of terraces, hemmed in by stone retainers and planted with roses and herbs, that lead from the patio complex down into the yard. She designed a fire pit for the most distant part of the property and ringed it in winterberry for all-season viewing, and created a meadow of wildflowers. Trees were used for screening on the property's perimeter, and stepping stones point the way from the wetland back toward the bluestone front court, neatly delineated by diminutive boxwoods. Nearby she planted a cutting garden.

To complete the softer side of the interiors—draperies, upholstery, carpets, paints, lamps, decorative objects and an occasional piece of furniture—the Learys sought the advice of interior designer (and trained architect) Nance Vigneau of Vigneau

Associates in Westport. Nance had worked with Austin Patterson Disston before and was respectful of Patterson's tendency to make the selections of all hard finishes for floors, countertops and backsplashes.

"We have no problem defining the boundaries when we work together," says Nance, who joined the team about nine months before the project was completed, during framing. "Mac had recommended that I come onboard a lot sooner, but the client needed to get a handle on what the house was going to look like," she said, adding that the decision making required in such a project can be overwhelming for the client. The Learys had moved to a rental nearby while the heavy-lifting was underway, bringing most of their furniture with them.

"Nora is a very down-to-earth person, and she didn't








The new kitchen provides a straight line of sight into the dining room, where the old kitchen once was. Details include a trayed ceiling and arched doorway with a coffered ceiling and a burnished steel hood over the island cooktop.



want a typical over-the-top Greenwich house," says Nance. "She wanted sort of an understated elegance." Vigneau walked through the house and asked them to identify the pieces they absolutely could not live without. "I've never been in that situation where nothing from the client's former life can be used in the new house," she said. "Throwing everything out would be like erasing the person."

Nance explains that she attempts to get to know her clients and to understand how they live within a space, often developing as many as three different schemes for a room before a client finds one they like. "It's a collaboration, not a dictatorship," she says. "The Learys like art and antiques, and they had a lot of nice pieces."

The designer took her cues from the family's casual lifestyle, choosing chenilles and corduroys for the family room in soothing hues like chocolate and cream for the sunroom and family room, and muted blues and greens for the guest room and master bedroom.

"These are great fabrics that make you want to curl up and read a book," she said. Whether they're reading books, slinging arrows out back, or spotting finches in their own wildflower meadow, this house will always be the Leary's perfect retreat. 



*The barn-like entertainment loft provides a quiet escape.*