

CATHERINE MALANDRINO: *inFashion* FOR SPRING >>

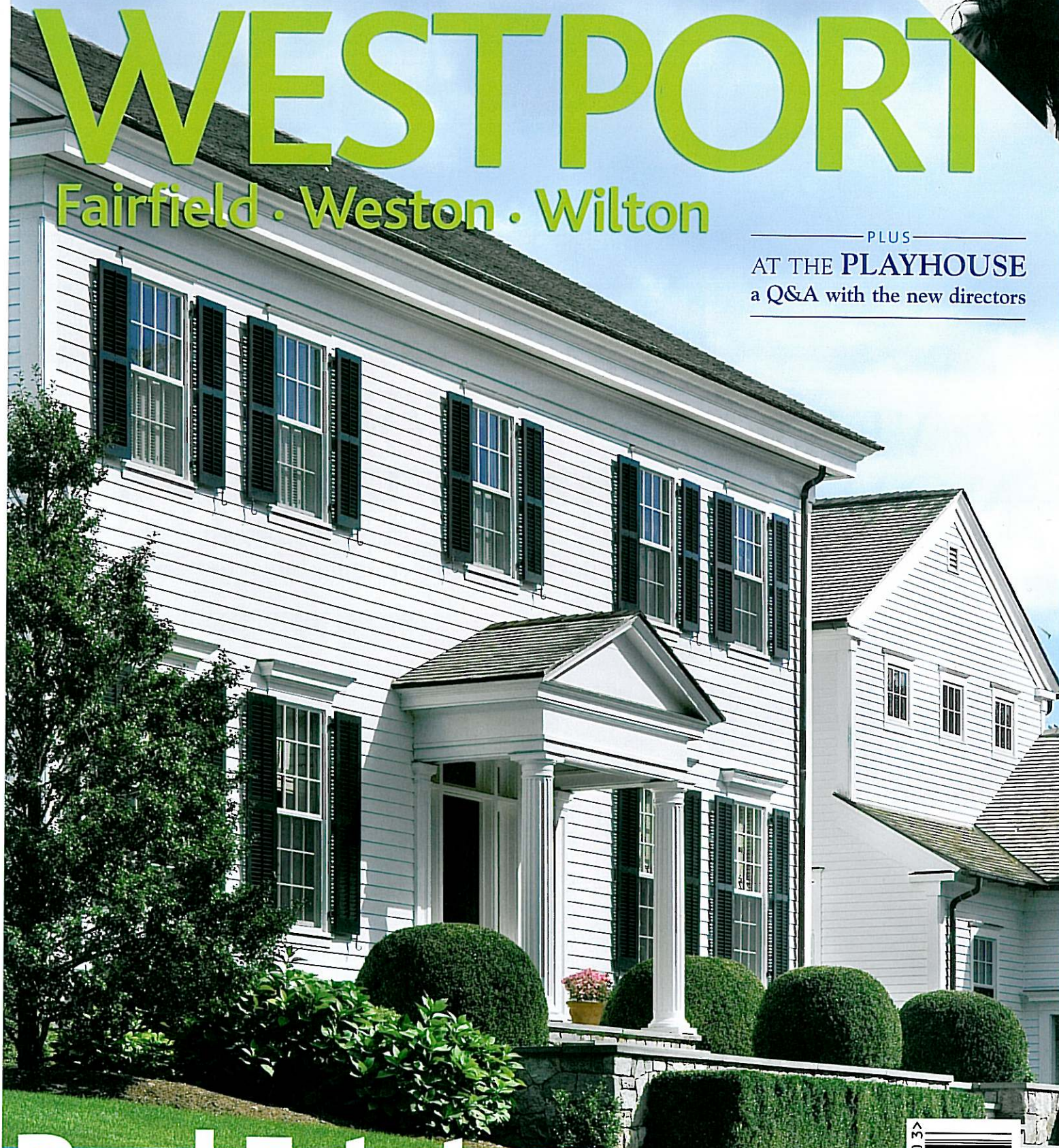


WESTPORT

Fairfield • Weston • Wilton

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AT THE **PLAYHOUSE**
a Q&A with the new directors




Real Estate

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WHEN WILL THE MARKET REBOUND? Local experts predict...





a true COLONIAL “REVIVAL”

BY TOM CONNOR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONATHAN WALLEN

A distinguishing feature of a Colonial Revival-style home is the entry portico, with its classically influenced set of columns, as seen in this newly built Wilton home. The look is enhanced by its handsome white clapboard siding. *Opposite:* Window placement is less restricted in the back of the house than in the front.



When this Wilton resident couldn't find the quaint New England home of his dreams, he built one — and included the modern conveniences his lifestyle demanded.

A COMMON DREAM OF FOLKS WHO settle in New England is to find a charming old home reminiscent of the region's Yankee past. However, antique homes are well-known for being recurring nightmares of leaky pipes and cracked foundations — actually, for having an endless list of needed repairs and inconveniences that most modern families are not willing to tolerate. And in a time when developers and home owners are clear-cutting suburban lots to make way for massive new structures that will dominate the landscape and irrevocably mutate the character of old neighborhoods, it's refreshing — if not astonishing — to find one owner who has built a house around a majestic old oak tree in deference to the land, his neighbors, and the past.

That Josh Weeks's Colonial Revival in Wilton is sophisticated and contemporarily comfortable is almost beside the point. This is a showcase not of success or possessions or creature comforts but of restraint, family history, and blending into a still largely rural neighborhood.

In 1984 Weeks left Greenwich for the wilds of Wilton and the kind of houses he had always admired. Raised in the Normandy-style house his parents had built off Round Hill Road, he somehow felt more at home in mid-to late-nineteenth-century Colonials. "My mother loved

French design, but I've always been drawn to the Connecticut Colonial farmhouse," he says. "I grew up partly on the Vineyard, where there are many Captains' houses and more of a New England look, and I think I've always preferred that."

THE PERFECT SPOT

When it came time for Weeks to find a house for himself, he started by finding the perfect property: three acres of meadow and mature trees with a view of a reservoir. That done, he found his architect, Stuart Disston of Austin Patterson Disston, in Southport.

"He's a traditionalist," Disston says of Weeks. "We studied a lot of New England Federal and Georgian period houses. By study, I mean we drove around and looked at hundreds of Colonial houses in the area — and there are many — and poured over old reference books from the Colonial Period, like *Village Architecture of Early New England*. Basically, we chose the details that he liked and that worked with the house."

What ended up on the architect's sketch pad was an invented narrative of how such a house might have evolved, beginning in the latter half of the 1800s. Since traditional Colonials were usually built in stages, beginning



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with a central box and adding rooms and sections as the family grew, Disston started with a main farmhouse-like building, then spun off a series of smaller wings of varying dimensions, roof height, scale and spatial relationships. That's not only the way such a house would have developed traditionally over time; it's also a good way to break up the mass of the 5,800-square-foot house and ensure a low profile on the site, which was important to Weeks.

As nineteenth-century home owners prospered, they added to the basic farmhouse, freely borrowing details and flourishes from other architectural styles — Georgian, Federal, Adam, Greek Revival — to embellish the originally plain facades and to boost their image in town. "There were a lot of things going on during that period," Disston says. "A lot of old houses were mixed and matched."

Set back from the road and balanced on the hillside,

the main section of the house looks original. In the narrative exercise, the portico would have been added on some years later as the family prospered and announced its newly gained status to the world, or at least the neighborhood and town. While officially independent from England, Colonialists closely followed Old World fashion and were particularly enamored of the Georgian period, as expressed in the fluted Doric columns on bases, recessed gable, and formal doorway with leaded-glass sidelights and transom. There's also a suggestion of the Greek Revival style here: The stately portico could pass for a temple entrance or a piece of neoclassical sculpture on a pedestal.

More important to Josh Weeks, though, was how the house related to the site. The property slopes off on the western side, toward the reservoir, and rises steadily from the road to a magnificent oak tree in back, planted by a next-door neighbor, now age ninety, with her father when she was a girl. Weeks and Disston designed the new Colonial around the tree, and left standing the other mature species on the property. "The trees put the house in scale," Weeks says.

STEP INSIDE

That majestic oak plays an equally important role inside the home. Inside the front door, double French doors at the far end of the long, central hall frame the base of the tree and its lower branches. To extend the view, big windows on the second floor staircase landing display the tree's upper branches and crown.

The outside comes inside again through the richness of detail of the portico that is repeated in the foyer. The vaulted ceiling here reflects the influence of Adam style, or Adamesque, a neoclassical architectural style popular in England in the eighteenth century. This particular look, says Disston, "gives expression to the space," with its Roman-style flat panels and pilasters. The fluted pilasters (half-columns set against a wall surface) frame the doorways and a thick assembly of crown moldings gives scale to the space.

"The entrance hall with moldings," Weeks says, "most captures the feeling I was trying to express when building the house: A classic New England style that's formal here and less and less formal as you move through to the more private parts of the house." This is in keeping with how it would have been in the late nineteenth century.

To the right of the foyer is the dining room, painted a mottled claret red, and across the hall, a small library/den. Like other rooms in the house, it showcases comfort, not ego, and references authentic family history, not designer-purchased heirlooms. Josh is a descendant of a



Above: Authentic antiques grace each room, including the library with its nautical influences; the homeowner is a descendant of a sea captain. Left: Cabinets above the white Corian countertops are softened and "aged" with numerous coats of white paint.



Left: Antique oak floors and elaborate trim define the formal dining room.
Below: The barn is a garage for the home owner's cars. The structure was built without a single nail.



sea captain, Joshua Slocum, who sailed and whaled out of New Bedford, Massachusetts. The room is both a nod to him and to Weeks's own heritage — a sailor all his life, Josh Weeks sails out of Edgartown, Massachusetts, where he has a second house. Here, in Wilton, the bowed walls in his den replicate a ship's cabin — a warm, embracing construct, regardless of the maritime connection. A glass-encased model boat on the paneled bookcase niche is a scaled replica of "Spray," Joshua Slocum's boat. The den looks out to the reservoir.

Further down the hallway on the left is a large, light-filled living room with an adjacent sunroom. An enormous bowed window, visually echoing the Adam and seagoing themes, takes advantage of the reservoir views and opens up the whole room. This is also a warm and welcoming space with a ten-and-a-half-foot high ceiling. Just as the owner is more interested in relationship than size, the high ceiling allows a modest-sized room to feel spacious. "If we were sitting here with an eight-and-a-half-foot ceiling [standard or slightly above-average height in Colonial and Colonial Revival period homes],

this room would feel a lot smaller," Weeks says. Most of the rooms in the house vary in height and proportion, in fact. The dining room ceiling, for example, is nine-and-a-half-feet high. "Stuart and I played around with each room to get the right feel," he says.

For the billiard room at the end of the center hall, tucked behind the dining room and a narrow passage hall to the kitchen, he chose chestnut reclaimed from a barn in upstate Connecticut rather than mahogany for its informal, rural character. Here are more ship models — bas relief half-models of varied colored strips of wood, purchased at the prestigious American Marine Model Gallery in Salem, Massachusetts — plus a small wet bar and a recessed, padded bench.

DECORATING DETAILS

In an apt approximation of Colonial home construction and expansion, decorating the house took time and involved its own authentic history. Once the house was built, Josh began filling the rooms piecemeal without a clear, overall plan. Then he turned to professional help. »

He interviewed a number of interior designers without success. His mother, Dorothy Henry, a Greenwich resident and part-time decorator, remembers the day he asked for her advice. "He called and said, 'Find me a good decorator in New York City who can finish this job in two months,'" she recalls.

When several of her friends suggested to Josh that his mother decorate the house, he agreed but with some reservation. "I think he was afraid he was going to get chintz with flowers," Mrs. Henry says. "But it was interesting, and it was fun, because I saw his taste grow. It was more sophisticated than I think he realized. He developed a style of his own as we went along.

"And, he's very fussy," she adds. "I found that out."

Working with her son, she suggested handsome but casual sofas and fabrics, as well as sedate Williamsburg tones and a number of antique tables, chairs and other pieces of furniture that now grace the house.

HOMEY TOUCHES

In recent years Fairfield County home owners have dropped very serious money on producing killer kitchens: huge spaces, restaurant-quality appliances, enormous work islands and enough granite and marble to build monuments. Aside from the fiercely competitive nature of contemporary suburban home design, it's as if some people will do anything to distance themselves from the kind of 1940s and '50s kitchens their parents and grandparents had.

Josh Weeks's kitchen looks as if it were built in the 1940s and never updated — if, of course, you are able to overlook the modern oven, range, refrigerator and dishwasher. There's also an island, but it's small and topped with plain wood. Cabinets above the white Corian countertops are faced with panes of glass and appear to have been softened with numerous coats of white paint, as if they had been painted a few times during the past sixty years. The result is a kitchen that possesses the kind of homey, apple-pie-on-the-windowsill soul that contemporaries twice the size and costing five times as much simply cannot replicate.

From the kitchen, more "additions" continue the journey from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first. Down two steps, responding to the lay of the land as well as to architect Stuart Disston's narrative, the family room, circa mid-1960s, features a raised brick fireplace and large, flat-screen TV. Beyond this room, more steps lead out to the garage and up to a pine-paneled media room filled, unapologetically, with twenty-first-century gadgets. Weeks may be essentially a traditionalist but he's not a purist. There's a room under his roof for adults and teenagers, represented by a nineteenth-century walnut card table from England as well as the latest version of the video game "Guitar Hero."

On the second floor, the master bedroom is in a quiet, private part of the house. It's a huge space, with a fireplace and broad deck, over the sunroom, and faces fields, water and sky. Off the bedroom is an equally large home office.

The last installment of the Colonial narrative came five years after the main house was completed: a barn for the owner's collection of vintage cars across from a rear corner of the house.

Weeks waited that length of time so that he could get a feel of how the main house sat on the property before adding another building. He also wanted it to blend harmoniously with the other houses on the street. Rather than build a four-car garage like so many other new houses, he kept the scale of the barn modest and installed hydraulic lifts to jack up two of the four cars, reducing the square-footage. Yet in every other respect, this is a traditional, vertical pine-sided, mortise-and-tenon barn; there's not a single nail in the chestnut framing.

Today finds Josh Weeks deeply settled into the house with his grown sons — Peter and Trevor — when they're home from college, and his fiancé, Christine. They are firmly part of the history of the house, and it them. The house embodies sophisticated, comfortable, contemporary living but with integrity and respect for everything that came before, including the land and the neighbors.