

Three generations of getting it right

by Jeannette Ross

For 50 years, the Hobbs family has been leaving its imprint on the high-end residential landscape in Fairfield and Westchester counties, but that doesn't mean it's been doing the same thing over and over. It's been doing the same thing better and better. It has also been branching out and doing more.

Theodore Hobbs, known as Ted, started the New Canaan business in 1954, and his son Michael joined in 1968. Michael's son Scott joined in 1992, taking over the reins as president in 1998. In 1997, Scott welcomed his brother Ian into the fold.

Photos courtesy of Hobbs



The new direction was brought about by consumer demand. "As you build a lot of homes," Scott said, "you have legacy clients. We promised we would always be there for the older clients."

"Most people don't build more than one custom home in their lives," Scott said, going on to paraphrase a Chinese saying that is essentially "house done, life over." So, while these former clients may not be building another home here, they very well may be making changes, and sometimes big changes, to the house Hobbs, Inc. built for them years ago.

"Most houses are designed for a specific time and size of a family," Scott said. That means, as families change a house has to change with it. Back in 1954, the typical house was 1,200 square feet and had three bedrooms and one bathroom. Now, some of the "must haves" include:

This unusual shingle home with its many outstanding details was another winner for Hobbs, Inc. this year.

central air conditioning, mud rooms, three-car garages, bigger kitchens and baths, and that playroom for the kids that transforms over time into a game room and then an adult escape space. "A lot has to do with how families age and their needs change," he said.

The three projects for which the company won its recent HOBI awards offer good examples of the two directions Hobbs, Inc. is moving in today. The Remodeled Home of 2003 was a very big job in which the company integrated major additions onto an existing home. The second was for an indoor pool also added to an existing home. The third was for new construction.

The focus of the remodel job was a classic brick colonial in Greenwich built in the late 1930s. Hobbs, Inc. managed the construc-



The company is in the business of managing construction and the focus has always been on high-end residential work. Hobbs Inc. has numerous awards to show for its efforts, most recently a 2003 HOBI, given by the Connecticut Home Builder's Association, for Remodeled Home of the Year – a stupendous effort in Greenwich – and more recently, the company won two 2004 HOBI's: one for a new home in New Canaan and the Specialty Room Award for an indoor pool room, as in lap pool.

As the area has become more and more built up, three to four years ago the company began working on smaller projects and developed a maintenance component.

"The typical profile is 8,000 to 12,000 square feet and \$2.5 to \$5 million," Scott said. That could encompass new construction or a full-house renovation. "On the smaller side, we do anything from a kitchen to a garage, family room, high-end pool room, or bathroom renovation."

tion, working with Rink DuPont, AIA, Architects. The project took 14 to 16 months. Although the house went from 8,000 square feet to approximately 10,000 square feet, that hardly tells the tale. The main part of the house was deemed sound enough to keep, but the interiors were pretty much gutted. The living room with its fireplace, which was on the small side, was converted to a front foyer and a period stairway was added. Ceilings were raised, the room layout was changed, and the entire house was rewired and re-plumbed and a "smart house" system was installed. In addition, two wings were



Two wings were added to this Greenwich home, and were blended in so beautifully that it was singled out as the Remodeled Home of the Year in 2003 by the homebuilders industry.

added, a solarium at one end and a three-bay garage at the other end. In giving the award, the judges noted "the seamless integration of old and new."

"With any renovation," Scott said, "ensuring what you're keeping will work with what you're making is the biggest challenge. You have to make sure everything lines up and levels out. How you match what is square with what isn't square is very challenging."

It's also a matter of selecting the right materials, knowing when to go with antique material and when to go with new. "Some old growth woods have a special veining, which you can't faux or recreate," Scott said. But antique materials may not be readily available, are more expensive, and not always easy to work with. On the other hand, "new materials have better stability characteristics and come in a wider variety of sizes," he said. "They are almost always less expensive."

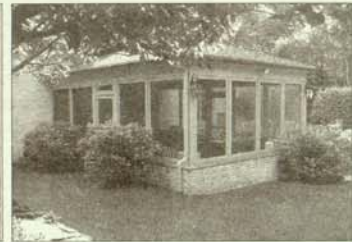
The proof of the pudding comes when people unfamiliar with the project voice their opinions. At a party at one house Scott said, people tried to guess what was new and what had existed before. "The truth is, everything was new but the stone veneer on the exterior," he said.

The new construction went up on West Road in New Canaan. It was a shingle style designed by Kaehler-Moore Architects in Greenwich. "The house was well-designed for a tricky site on property that backed up against a river," Scott explained. One of the highlights was a family room curved like a horseshoe, with a stone fireplace at the flat

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end and antique beams. "Outside were these wonderful big overhangs that help ground the building," he said. Generous bedrooms and living areas, a kitchen overlooking a terrace, and a fabulous adult game room with an antique bar added to the house's appeal.

A home in Rye, N.Y., joined the growing number of houses with indoor pools. For this home, Hobbs, Inc. installed a 10- to 12-foot wide lap pool in a room that featured


a limestone deck, skylights, mahogany beam work and mahogany windows opening out onto Long Island Sound.

Indoor pools, Scott said, are becoming more and more popular. Of the three types available, a full-size pool requires a lot of space and is very expensive. Lap pools are more versatile. They can be as thin as four feet and as long as you want. Moving water pools – small pools with a current that enable you to swim more or less in one place – end up being a popular option. "Fifteen to twenty percent of the houses we do have indoor pools of one sort or another," Scott said. The biggest considerations are moisture control and drainage. "If you go into the water table, it's a big problem," he said.

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Safety Issues

Whatever type of construction the company works on, safety is a major concern on a Hobbs, Inc. work site. It is a dedication borne of an unfortunate mishap. "In 1987 we had a legal scaffolding system collapse and three workers were badly hurt," Scott said. "My father made a decision then and there to do things super-right." It hasn't been an easy decision to enforce.

"In the residential construction world, there's no understanding of safety. We win lots of awards for safety," he continued. When a person works for years without getting hurt, they begin to think they won't ever get hurt, and that's dangerous, Scott said. Using hard hats is a prime example. Scott knows of specific instances where hard hats have saved lives, yet many people don't wear them.

"There are a whole lot of tools that make the job easier, and many have more safety parts, but there are more and more power tools, and what used to be a cut finger now is a lost hand," he went on. "It takes dedication to make sure everyone understands what's expected."

Making Life Easier

The final component of the Hobbs, Inc. plan is personal estate management. Because many clients have left their doormen and supers behind in moving up from apartments in New York City and may not be comfortable with running a big home, and many more are strapped for time, Hobbs, Inc. developed a management division "to make living in a house as stress-free as possible," Scott said. "We can do everything from fixing a stuck door to managing an entire property inside and out. We like to take a pro-active approach and find problems when they are minor rather than when they become a crisis."

Scott likened owning a custom home with its many advanced systems to owning a computer. "It makes life easier when it's working. When it doesn't work it's frustrating."

The program works on a number of levels, but at the upper end Hobbs, Inc. will arrange for seasonal walk-throughs to make sure everything is in working order. If, for example, a client needed plumbing work, Hobbs, Inc. would arrange for the plumber to come, be there when the plumber arrived, make sure everything was cleaned up afterward and pay the plumber. Then Hobbs, Inc. would bill the client. The company will also arrange to meet with the homeowners to discuss what major activities will take place and when, so everything will be in good shape. For example, one homeowner asked the company to install a big trellis for a wedding and they did.

"If we have some time," Scott said, "we can do anything."

Hobbs Inc. can be reached at 203-966-0726. ♦

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