

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

Fresh Volumes

IN CONNECTICUT, A HOUSE CHALLENGES CONVENTIONAL NOTIONS OF SPACE



Interior designer Stephen Sills and architect Jason Chai, of C/S Architecture, collaborated on a family's 12,000-square-foot residence in Connecticut. THESE PAGES: The front elevation (inset) and the rear. "When they purchased the property, it was a blank slate," says Chai. "We had continuing conversations about what kind of building was appropriate to the land."



Architecture by Jason Chai, AIA,
of C/S Architecture
Interior Design by Stephen Sills
Text by Michael Frank
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Every now and then you come across a new house that has an old soul. It is not always easy to figure out how this happens to be. Sometimes old or salvaged materials, repurposed in new construction, bring with them a sense of history. Sometimes a house is built on an earlier foundation and retains the spirit of its ghost ancestor. Sometimes, though, the design of a house is rooted in longtime relationships exposed to new ideas through hours of conversation and debate about how the place should look and live, which rules it should follow and which it should break—how, in short, it might best express the combined thinking of its owners, architect and designer.

Such is the story of the house that the architect Jason Chai and the designer Stephen Sills recently completed for a Connecticut family. The project grew out of a web of old connections. Sills had designed an earlier home for the couple and had spent 15 years helping them assemble an array of furniture and antiques; Chai is the wife's cousin and had designed modest additions to the family's previous residence. Yet nothing in the planning process was taken for granted. The husband, who is in business, had strong ideas about how the house should sit on the site, a special piece of land that spills down to the Connecticut shore. The wife, an avid reader who describes the poet Elizabeth Bishop as her own personal sun, prepared for design meetings by reading Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, and she challenged and probed her cousin's ideas at every turn.

Over time a concept began to take shape. Although the house was to be large, the wife had a fear of "McMansion unruliness." So when Chai introduced her to the

"The interiors very much reflect the clients, but they also look back to my own early work," Sills says. LEFT: The library's walls are covered with burlap hand-painted in a faded Ottoman design, the work of Patricia Arnillas. Fabric on tufted chairs, Holland & Sherry.



vernacular of the Dutch dairy barn, she was intrigued: The volumes were pleasing, yet the gambrel roof could hide an impressive amount of space. “She was also concerned about the house seeming too fancy,” Chai recalls. “So we undercut the obvious size and the emphatic metal-shingle roof by using a lot of timber details that are Scandinavian in flavor. They helped make the house feel more down to earth.”

The clients very much wanted the interior organization and ambience to reflect who they were and how they actually lived. This is a family where the children (two daughters, 15 and 12) study ancient Greek and know enough Latin to translate Catullus. “We all live in books,” says the wife, who quite understandably asked that

the house have not just one large library but many smaller rooms to house the proliferating volumes.

She had other specific requests too. They never dine formally, so they didn’t need a dedicated dining room. She wanted to be able to reach her children’s rooms without having to exit onto a hallway, so the master bedroom opens to a sitting room, which opens to the daughters’ bath and bedrooms. Eccentric but intimate, to be sure. She wanted spaces that did not have a specific purpose, rooms to “think in, to read in, to be in.” “The interior flow is intentionally idiosyncratic,” says Chai. “Instead of hallways, you have smaller rooms that lead to larger ones. I quoted Artur Schnabel to my cousin. He said

LEFT: Two 18th-century wallpaper panels dominate the living room. The linen sheathing the table is from Holland & Sherry. ABOVE LEFT: The living room’s furniture—there are Empire and Louis XVI chairs, Napoleon III lamps and an Italian Bombay chest—was collected over an eight-year period. Strié on sofa and Louis XVI chairs, Stark. ABOVE: The family room. “This is a cozy room right off the living room, a place where they use computers. I added the modern cube table to relax the atmosphere,” the interior designer says.

“The house is so strong a presence that my client did not want to live with superficial decoration,” Sills says.



ABOVE: A wall of the small study displays a group of tempera paintings depicting Islamic pottery, each with its original 19th-century cardboard frame.

that he handled the notes no better than any other pianist, but the pauses between notes—that was where the art resides.”

The pauses between notes: something similar happens in Stephen Sills’s work here. “Jason created a magnificent house, with beautiful proportions and details that make reference to Swedish, Dutch, Islamic and Moorish architecture,” Sills says. “The house is so strong a presence that my client did not want to live with superficial decoration. This is why I left so many of the rooms white and paid so much attention to negative space.”

Take a look at the wall above the living room fireplace: Where a more conventional designer would hang a mirror or a painting at this focal point, he chose to allow the wall to breathe, then flanked it with a grid of Chinese drawings. He left the wall above the sofa empty too, focusing attention instead on the shape and proportion of the room and the silhouettes of pale French furniture and Asian antiques collected over the years. “The whole room,” he says, “is about a positive-negative interaction that paradoxically creates a sense of tension and a sense of serenity at the same time.”

The library shows Sills working in a different spirit. “Before Stephen touched this room, it was cold and cavernous,” says the client, who hoped for something very different for her library. Sills took one look at the space and intuited that a subtle use of pattern on pattern would create a subtle cocoon for the family’s vast quantity of books.

How fitting that the children’s favorite seating is the flotilla of French mushroom stools, since this is a house where books mushroom and so do ideas: Geometric shapes, which served as models for 19th-century artists, become decorative objects; a slightly menacing wooden pineapple hangs over the breakfast room table in place of a chandelier; a vast foyer is naked except for a few punctuation marks of furniture. “I deliberately try to make my interiors less pretty,” says Sills. “I like things that are off, that are not consciously decorated. It gives a house much more energy, much more humanity. That way, it’s less like design and more like actual life.” □



The master bedroom’s eclectic mix of furnishings includes a pair of Lucite bubble chairs, a Sills-designed steel bed, two 18th-century Irish mirrors and a 19th-century Italian griffin table.



A wooden pineapple, from Sentimento Antiques, hangs above a table in the breakfast room. "The tension of that heavy object over the white table keeps the room from being too pretty," says Sills.

