

“I want it to look like a Swedish summer in 1912,” came the magic words on the other end of the phone. I have dreamed my whole career of getting this call—ever since watching *Fanny & Alexander*. I did not expect it to come from a beautiful young lady in her late 20s, newlywed and about to start a family, with the rather original plan of moving to the suburbs from downtown New York. You never know these days who’s going to love—and know about—The Past. People in their 20s are into Madeleine Castaing, Robert Kime, and Mongiardino, and I think it’s because of Instagram, which has put all of this historicism and fantasy within reach in a sort of vomit draft (whereas before, you had to spend years pulling the thread to know what books to ask for). These young clients also loved an apartment I had done many years ago for Nathalie Farman-Farma, founder of *Décors Barbares*. Done in the 19th Century Russian style, it was a most sophisticated and surprising take on how a young person could live, far ahead of (and even further behind) its time. I have never had anyone ask me to do something like it again. So I listened, and after screwing up the first presentation because I didn’t think people this young could be as serious as Nureyev about conjuring the Old World, we got in sync.

Architect Eric Smith was already attached to the project. Eric is responsible for many of the very best classical houses and interiors of our generation, produced largely in collaboration with decorator David Easton. The self-assured refinement of his work has been one of the primary forces helping to usher traditional architecture out of the cartoonish era of postmodernism and into the moment of virtuosity it enjoys today. His first big idea for the exterior was to make the back door become the front door, adding a covered porch the full width of the house. As Eric explains: “The reality now is everybody arrives by car—so we needed to get the driveway out of the front yard, which gave rise to the porch aspect. It’s so pleasing to have that shelter as you arrive, which amounts to an outside room.” The rest of the rooms, otherwise known as the gardens, were beautifully designed by Abby Clough Lawless of Farm Designs. Once inside, we had work to do. As Eric has said, “the exterior is more of a restoration; the interior is more of a reinvention.” Typical of the period, there was a dense, busy aspect to much of the millwork, with ceilings

criss-crossed by beams and room-to-room connections not quite lining up. Things felt, architecturally, rather “granny” (I know, we wanted granny, but not uptight granny). Eric and I sought to edit the point of view of the interior architecture down to how it might have looked ten years later when Edwardian bric-à-brac gave way to more restraint. A decorator is never alone. My studio director, Kristin Palmer, is the same age as these clients and took a great emotional interest in this project; her instinct for layering patterns and keeping history “fresh” is pretty much everywhere. One of my favorite tricks is to always find a way to introduce a note of the exotic, and we have that in the form of a gothic cornice in the dining room, which would never have been in a colonial revival house in America. One item upon which Eric and I did not agree was the living room mantel, which I wanted to change to introduce another culture and material. He argued in favor of originality, invoking the happy ghosts of Christmas stockings over the past century-plus. I’m totally OK with saying I lost the battle, and maybe the room looks better for it. This house is not remotely about anything “less,” but one design rule of thumb is it’s generally better if you can deliver more using less. One of the biggest “gets” I am proud of is in an area that would have been overlooked in the old days, seen only by servants. These are the arches on the interior eaves of the third floor, which reflect and celebrate the shape of the dormer windows. Every guest room and bath up here is now claimed for family use and feels as distinguished as a room for Boswell in New Town Edinburgh.

Sometimes, a project is special enough that you know you want to do whatever it takes to give the client the very best. In this case, I felt that it should take the form of a trip to England together, to go shopping in person the old-fashioned way. This was a highly collaborative house, and my partner in design was passionate enough that I wanted her to have a certain kind of “in the kitchen” experience with me. We visited my Gods and Mentors at Jamb, James McWhirter, Soane, Max Rollitt, Howe, and James Graham-Stewart. We went to meet Robert Kime in person in the shop, and I’m awfully glad we did because it was the last time I saw him. I took Robert aside and told him how much he had taught me, whether he knew it or not, and how much of him there would be in this house. I hope you see it, too.

Falling in Love with You Again

Old Bronxville is New Again

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