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Designer John Bjørnen Takes a Greenwich Colonial to the Next Level

By Mindy Pantiel | Photography By Costas Picadas



Situated about a mile from Old Greenwich and a bike ride away from the beach, the two-year-old Colonial nailed the location, location, location real estate mantra. Additionally, the standard issue Connecticut façade was copacetic with the neighborhood, and inside it had the right number of formal and informal spaces plus adequate bedrooms and bathrooms for a couple with two young daughters. What it lacked was character. “Structurally it had great bones, but it was soulless and had no energy,” says designer [John Bjørnen](#), who was hired by the owners to imbue the structure with personality and vitality.

The couple, who worked with Bjørnen on two previous projects, was also firm about an indoor-outdoor connection. “When we walked in the house, we wanted to be able to see out to the swimming pool,” says the wife. But with just three small windows in the back family room wall, that was a tall order, and Bjørnen’s solution of installing 16 feet of French doors proved to be transformative. “Suddenly the house could breathe,” he says.

And while the expansive fenestration solved one problem, it couldn’t address the complications of carving out a pool and outdoor living spaces on a tight triangular lot. That job fell to landscape architect [Janice Parker](#). “When you have a large house on a very small lot, every detail has to work just right,” says Parker, who backed the new pool with a four-foot granite retaining wall and plantings selected to mask the nearby neighbor and hide a pool fence. “I blurred the wall edge with a hedge of holly, limelight hydrangea, and pleached linden trees for a touch of formality.”

Back inside, Bjørnen eliminated the building’s generic sensibility by introducing custom elements including a butler’s pantry off the mudroom, a vaulted ceiling clad in v-groove in the master bedroom, and a redo of all the bathrooms. “All the light fixtures are new, and the ceiling in the living and dining rooms are covered with faux wood wallpaper that looks so real, the builder insisted on touching it to be sure,” Bjørnen says.



The quiet blend of grays, flax, mushrooms, browns, slate and whites that pervade the rooms is a direct response to the measured taste of the homeowner. “I don’t like a lot of color, and my style is a mixture of things,” says the wife, who wanted a casual beachy vibe. In the entry, a huge basket that often brims with beach towels and water toys tucked under an antique Indonesian table hits the mark, and that same piece of furniture does double duty as a kids’ table in the nearby dining room. There, a stained mahogany table with a brass base is the centerpiece and is paired with durable leather armchairs backed with contrasting striped fabric. “This can be a space where the kids do art projects, and with very little effort, it sets up beautifully for adult dinner parties,” Bjørnen explains.

Immediately adjacent, the formal living room features a shapely neoclassical sofa topped with a playful Flokati pillow, midcentury armchairs and a two-tier brass coffee table. And in the commodious family room, where a chandelier reminiscent of a Calder mobile tempers the 29-foot-high ceiling, the mood is more relaxed. A durable leather sofa with a classic tufted bench seat paired with 1940s bobbin

chairs establishes the casual ambience, and the soft blue accents are appropriately beachy.

About the media room located one flight down, the designer jokes, “If Ralph Lauren and Tom Ford had a baby, it would be this room.” To his point, the gray-flannel pinstripe walls would look right at home on a shirt in a Polo ad, and the striped banquette and campaign chairs gathered around a wood trestle table emulate Ford’s classic edited style. Not surprisingly, it’s the husband’s favorite hangout, while his wife prefers the quiet more feminine tones and water views of the master bedroom.

Regarding the final result, Bjørnen says, “Our intent was to reimagine the house, and we succeeded at opening it up and instilling it with the sophisticated casual elegance and coastal flair that the owners love.

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