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Great Estate

by Cameron Henry, AIA

Before the designer labels, luxury cars, and hedge fund offices, the posh suburb of Greenwich, Connecticut had a noticeably different character.

For its first two centuries, Greenwich was a primarily agrarian community composed of a network of modest New England farms and maritime ports interspersed with small village centers, vestiges of which remain today. After the Civil War, resort hotels and mansions slowly began to fill in along the coastline as the town developed a reputation as a rural retreat for wealthy New Yorkers. However, in the late 19th century, the arrival of regular commuter rail service to New York City guaranteed Greenwich's shift from retreat destination to modish suburb. Simultaneously, changes in technology and economy were causing small family farms throughout New England to cease operation in droves. This perfect storm spelled an end to Greenwich's agricultural economy and the dawn of the back-country estates, horse farms, and country clubs for which Greenwich and has become known.

Lake Avenue is a historic North-South artery in Greenwich that has embraced the development trend. Yet one growing estate abutting the popular thoroughfare serves as a reminder of Greenwich's simpler past.

The owner, a self-made businessman, sold his company at an early age to pursue his passions: gardening, cooking, travel and the fine arts. Many of these he shares with his wife, a professional chef who trained at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California. Envisioning a small working farm with a focus on organic produce, farm-to-table foods, and ample space for guests, the couple acquired a multi-acre property abutting their 1940s Georgian estate when it hit the market.

Having previously worked with the award winning team of Charles Hilton Architects, interior designer Isabelle Vanneck, landscape architect Charles J. Stick and master builder Bob Levine decided to engage the firms once again in the development of the new property. The project includes a few small, early 20th century structures left in poor repair after years of neglect.

Frustrated with the "tear-down" culture in Greenwich, the owners chose to save and remodel two of the existing structures, relying upon the expertise of the team to salvage and significantly enhance their character. This includes a one-room studio and small service cottage that sat close to the street. The back wall of the cottage integrated with the stone wall that runs along the road. Both structures suffered from rot and insect damage. The cottage was carved into



The Limonaia sits on a stone terrace surrounded by a grassy meadow.

a warren of small, loosely organized rooms, and the mechanical systems were antiquated. Yet, despite all this, the charming structures' French country forms and accents would inspire not only their renovation but the further development of the site.

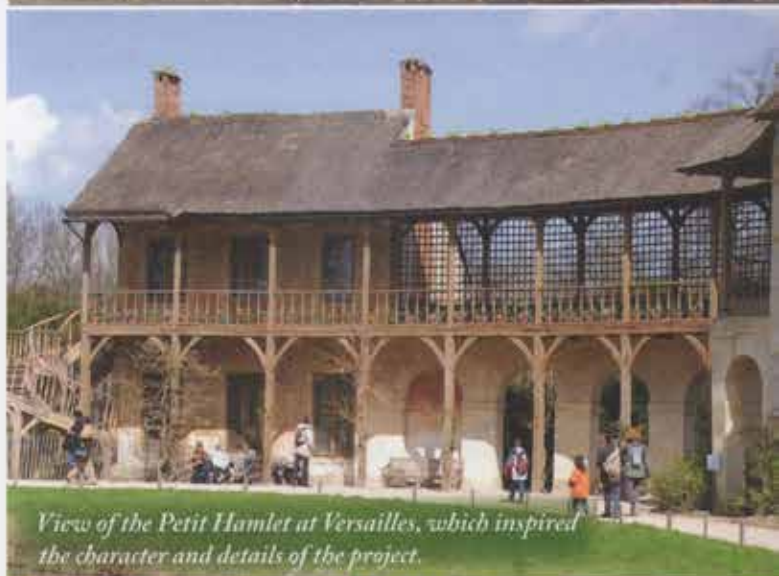
Research of the French farmhouse aesthetic led Hilton to examples of both classical and rural-styled French country homes. Though visually different, the two were often united by a shared palette of locally sourced, durable masonry materials and regional construction techniques that most commonly including stone, brick, and stucco. A trip to Versailles lent inspiration. Tucked in a far corner of the famous estate is "le Hameau de la Reine" (The Queen's Hamlet), a small village and farm constructed for Marie Antoinette. Built as a fanciful interpretation of the vernacular Norman style, the hamlet's working farm buildings provided a perfect study in the same French country architecture referenced in the old buildings on Lake Avenue in Greenwich. It was clear: to work within the Norman vernacular, the new garden property would require a natural palette of stone and brick.

The transformation of the new property into a working farm began by renovating the 80-year-old cottage and studio. The cottage's convoluted plan was transformed for agricultural use and its French country aesthetic was enhanced. On the ground floor new stone walls were added, carefully matched to the existing wall segments by mason Mauro Fidaleo. Rather than use French limestone, a variety of native Connecticut granite was selected to provide extra durability and to more closely match the existing walls. Atop the stone walls, the upper story was finished with hand-applied stucco and half-timbering, capped by a Vermont slate roof. A new greenhouse addition, imported from Europe, separates the formal vegetable garden from the adjacent cobblestone courtyard and allows for nearly year-round cultivation.

The interior renovations followed the same continental aesthetic, with rough-textured French plaster walls, antiqued-oak board and beam ceiling and New York flagstone throughout the first floor.



View of the shingle cottage before renovations.



View of the Petit Hamlet at Versailles, which inspired the character and details of the project.



View from the cobblestone drive court towards the renovated cottage



Chuck Hilton with Bob Capoferri of Marble Crafters on their visit to...



View from the formal vegetable garden towards the renovated cottage. On the far right is the stone site wall that becomes part of the street façade.



... a comfortable retreat
for the owners and their
guests alike—the rooms
and passageways on the
ground floor lend a distinct
old-world feel to the new
construction.



The great room features a carved French Camargue fireplace surround.



Details of the carved French Camargue fireplace surround in the great room can be seen at right.



French Camargue limestone continues as a border in the wine cellar around a herringbone pattern of the same tile used on the exterior facade.