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Before & After



COLONIAL REVIVAL REVIVAL

CRISP STYLE RESHAPES A LONG ISLAND HOUSE

Text by Michael Frank/Photography by Michael Moran

HOUSES ARE A HOBBY of mine—that's the nice word," says a peripatetic media executive who practices his hobby—for the moment—in Los Angeles, New York, Jackson Hole and East Hampton. "*Passion* is another nice word, but *obsession* probably comes closer to the truth. You could say—I've said it of myself—that I ought to enter a twelve-step program for house addiction. I just love the experience of initiation, problem solving and comple-



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tion that comes with each new project. Each one gets better, and each one teaches me something new about architecture, construction and interior design."

Strolling to the beach three years ago from his former home in East Hampton, New York, summer retreat.

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"The façade was reorganized to give the house a Colonial Revival style," says Brian Sawyer, who recently redesigned a client's East Hampton, New York, summer retreat.



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ABOVE: To create a more coherent focal point, the living room fireplace and wood storage area were rebuilt. RIGHT: Interior designer Geoffrey Blatt used neutral tones throughout.

mer and (he imagined) would cut a striking sculptural form against the winter sky. The floor plan was traditional and straightforward, and while “a little tweaking was clearly in order,” he did not hesitate to buy the house, a 1950s Colonial Revival that had undergone several remodelings and additions over the years.

Soon afterward he put a call in to Brian Sawyer, the

architectural designer who had helped redesign his earlier East Hampton place. “I have to say, I was crestfallen,” remarks Sawyer, who recently started a firm with architect John Berson. “The house was anomalous for the neighborhood. The main block had been revised so many times that its façade was ruined. The windows and porch had no coherence or stylistic direction. The



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mer East Hampton residence, the executive saw a For Sale sign newly planted in front of a house that, “from a distance, and when you squinted,” looked instantly appealing. He was drawn to the house’s siting, next to a golf course; its views of the pond; and its majestic elm trees, whose leafy amplitude provided shade in sum-



FAR LEFT: Sawyer opened up the dining room to the view.

LEFT: “The wainscoting was capped with a shallow shelf to hold part of the owner’s photography collection,” he says.

proportions were off. The fenestration didn’t take advantage of the garden or the views. In the garage and garden, it had a kind of forced naïveté that made the property look suburban and clumsy instead of charming and rural. It was a mess.”

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ABOVE: "The ceiling in the master bedroom was dropped from a loftlike height to eleven and a half feet." RIGHT: The cabinet is by Charlotte Perriand.

BELOW: A shed dormer and French doors replaced the living room's fenestration. BOTTOM: "The outdoor living room is a transition to the pool and the landscape."



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Was nothing positive? "The footprint, the setting, the elm trees, the floors. We liked the way they had separated and worn; they had some character. Oh, and the roof—it had a nice battered, mossy quality."

Sawyer, who was formerly

a member of Robert A. M. Stern's office in New York, comes to architectural design by way of landscape architecture, and the relationship between this house and its garden was central to the project. He began by tearing off the front porch,

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changing its columns from round to square and repositioning them so that they would not block the views from the library and the dining room. New French doors in the dining room provide

signer Greg Koester. "There was an interesting collision. Lots of different things were happening. But by adjusting the shapes of the windows and the size of the panes, and by attaching shutters throughout, we consolidated dispa-

The windows and porch had no coherence or stylistic direction.



rate elements into what I think is a charming reorganization."

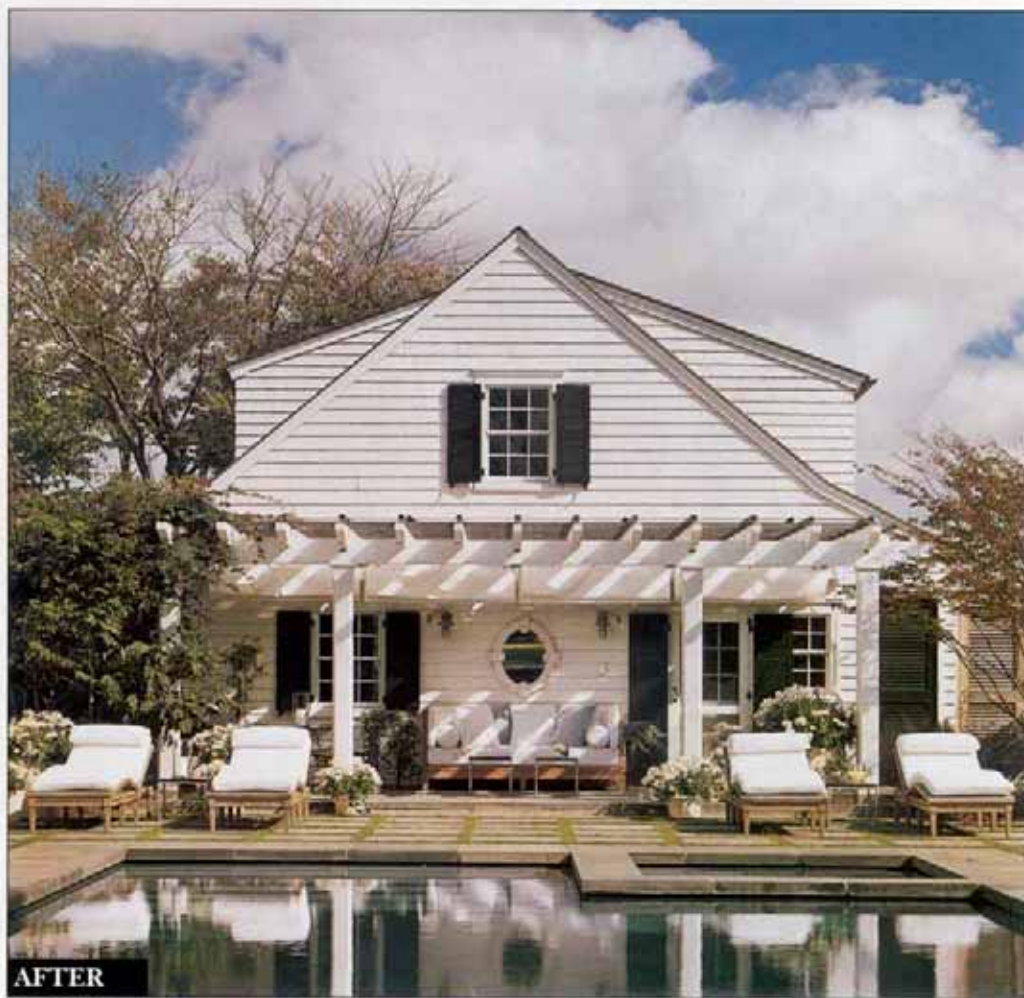
Sawyer did build a new gallery to connect the living room to the kitchen, and he changed the profile of the living room by adding a shed dormer to the roof, which further opened up the space to the garden, the elm tree and the pool beyond. The pool itself he completely reconstructed, changing it

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ABOVE: "We replaced the old pool, which looked like a turtle pond," says Sawyer (above right). RIGHT: "The guesthouse's pergola serves as a shady refuge around the pool and spa."

a link to what he calls the porch's transitional space, a kind of loggia that bridges the enclosure of the house and the openness of the garden. A bay window amplifies the light in the library, while upstairs French doors open the guest bedrooms to the balcony, which had been accessible only by crawling through double-hung windows. Pickets were replaced with farmhouse rails, a choice Sawyer was at first afraid might appear too decorative but in the end found "catchy—in a good way."

The rear of the house was left much as he found it. "I liked the clunky randomness of its massing," says Sawyer, who received help on the exteriors from architectural de-



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from a stone-bordered ovoid to a crisp cement-edged rectangle.

The guesthouse, too, was rethought: A second shed dormer was added to balance the existing one; an inappropriate arched window, a cupola and barnlike overhangs were replaced with cleaner lines, simpler fenestration and the generous pergola, which supplies yet another transitional space between the house and the garden. On both buildings the weathered gray shingles were painted white, a color more consistent with the Colonial Revival style.

When it came to the house's interiors, Sawyer and Geoffrey Blatt, the project's interior designer, paid close attention to the client's model, which was a renovated French atelier. "I liked the idea of keeping to the orthodoxy of traditional and appropriate architecture," explains the client, "while infusing it with a kind of austerity that would make the room suitable for my photographs and my growing collection of midcentury furniture and objects."

What did this mean, specifically? First, more demolition. Sawyer stripped away wallpaper, light fixtures, beams, cabinetry, mantelpieces and a hodgepodge of standard moldings before reconceiving each element. He retained

gre dining chairs. "The space is not about decoration," he says. "It's about the art and what's happening at dinner."

Both men brought a good deal of rigor to the living room. Sawyer created a tray ceiling and centered the fireplace, which, as throughout most of the house, he framed with black slate and simple paneled moldings. Blatt, in turn, felt that it was important to soften the crispness of the architecture with simple, textured fabrics, such as linen draperies and neutral slipcovers for the sofa and cushions.

The interplay of architectural crispness and decorative texturing continues in the library, where Blatt contributed a chaise of his own design, a Regency desk and Gio Ponti nesting tables from the client's collection. The rhythm continues in the master bedroom, where Sawyer dropped the ceiling from a loft-like double height to a more intimate, but still ample, eleven and a half feet. He also replaced the arched window with tall double-hung windows and introduced more wainscoting. The light-suffused shell easily accommodated the client's circa 1950s Charlotte Perriand cabinet and a Liaigre webbed bench and headboard.

"I'm a midcentury child," the client says, explaining his attraction to the

He began by tearing off the front porch, changing its columns and repositioning them so that they would not block the views.

the floors because he welcomed their patina, but he installed new millwork in the remainder of the house. In the entrance hall, for example, Sawyer designed a simpler banister, copying it from an 1842 Manhattan town house; he also added wainscoting with recessed panels, wide baseboards and strong crown moldings.

In the dining room, the wainscoting rises to chest height, where it is capped with a shelf that displays part of the client's collection of black-and-white photography. Blatt's contributions were subtle but sure: a sisal carpet, a Cuban-mahogany dining table, Christian Liai-

sleek objects and furniture that he has chosen for the house. "I grew up with these things, and I never stopped loving them. At least I haven't gone as far as installing the orange shag carpet of my formative years!" Asked whether it isn't more customary to rebel against, rather than embrace, the decorative sensibility one grows up with (think of Edith Wharton or Elsie de Wolfe), he says, "I found other venues for my rebellion. But there *is* something radical about combining a traditional home with modern objects. The link is quality: Aim for the best of any period, and you can bring together the most unlikely things." □



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