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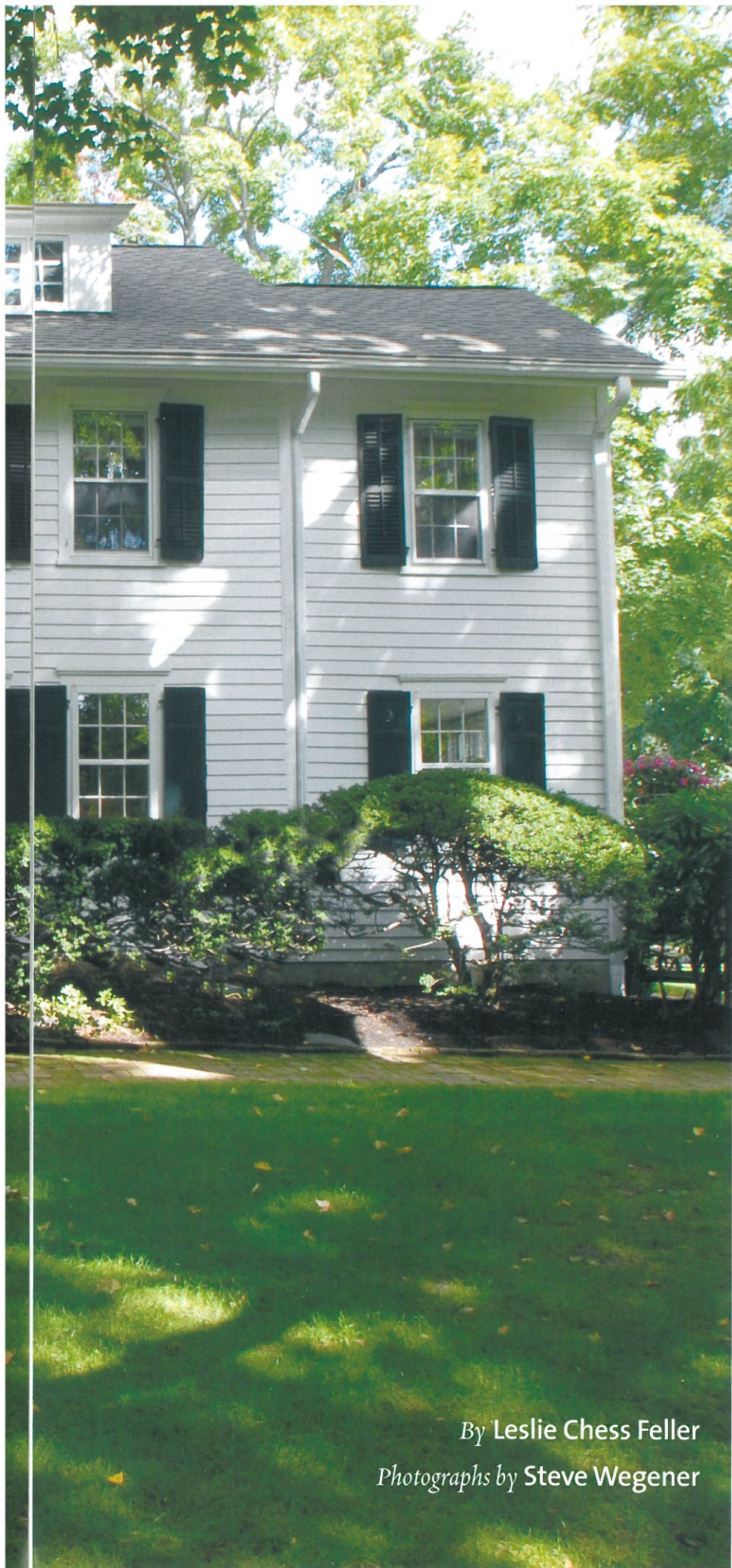
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Melanie Barnard's HISTORIC HOME MAKEOVER



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“The mandate for the whole renovation was to bring new life to the old house, to enable it to move forward into the future.”

— MELANIE BARNARD

This Old **HOUSE** moves into the 21st century

THE SIGN STILL says it's the Ephraim Smith house. Built circa 1761, the white Colonial with dark green shutters sits at the corner of Oenoke Ridge and Parade Hill Roads in New Canaan, as it has for almost 250 years. Guarding its northern exposure, an equally venerable sugar maple branches skyward, its massive trunk mapped with swirling layers of bark and rounded burls containing dormant buds. Perched on a limb, a small statue of Saint Francis blesses both tree and house.

“My father brought him to America from Sicily a very long time ago, and when we moved here in 1980, it seemed right to put him up in that tree,” says Melanie Barnard, who, with her husband, Scott, became the sixth family to bring new life to what she fondly refers to as “this old house.”



Once work was completed, Melanie had a new outdoor kitchen — perfect for trying out recipes from her grilling cookbooks.

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NOT THAT THE HOUSE hasn't been updated along the way. But now a major renovation, completed in July 2007, has successfully merged the historical half of the house with a wing that was added in the 1950s. The end result magically connects past and present. “We gutted the newer side,” Melanie says, “to build in twenty-first-century options like a professional kitchen and a home office that overlooks the family room, as well as a laundry/mudroom and two-car garage.” In the aftermath of what the Barnards describe as a complete upheaval, yesterday's simple white farmhouse manages to appear essentially unchanged. Yet the stage is set for whatever the next millennium of tomorrows might bring.

The Barnards' new kitchen looks out on the huge maple tree's trunk, which fills the frame of the large bay window. A cookbook author and prolific food writer, Melanie jokes that her need for an updated kitchen after twenty years of rigorous professional and family cooking precipitated what became a seven-month renovation with a double mission.

“We live in an era when old houses are being torn down to make way for enormous McMansions, and that really bothers me,” she says. “Suddenly people want to live close to town, which is where so many older houses are located. And many, like ours, are just beyond the Historical Preservation District.” Offers to buy the



Exposed timbers in the family room help blend the old with the new.



Originally an open porch, this space was enclosed in 1940 and became part of the living room.

property at “whatever the asking price” were being left in the Barnards’ mailbox. The thought of developers bulldozing the house in the name of progress rankled.

The couple decided to save their home by making it a compelling example of a different approach. The message? “Slow down. Look at what is possible. A very old house can be updated technologically and in every other way.”

As soon as architect Rob Sanders, a specialist in historical renovation, pulled into the Barnards’ driveway, he knew this would be a particularly satisfying project. “What Melanie and Scott did with the old West School told me who they are,” he says.

Sanders is referring to the one-room schoolhouse, possibly one of the oldest in Connecticut (circa 1784), that sits across from the sugar maple, having been lovingly restored by the Barnards. Since 2002 the eighteenth-century structure has been repurposed as a playhouse for the couple’s grandchildren and guesthouse for visiting friends. “For my husband, it was a refuge during the seven months of renovation,” Melanie says. “Scott took the big TV set and moved in there for the duration.” Meanwhile, across the driveway, the walls came tumbling down.

The job ahead would be a journey of rediscovery. “This kind of house is an architectural puzzle to be solved,” says Sanders, “sort

of like peeling the onion, layer by layer, until you find the essence of what it used to be.” The family room in the twentieth-century wing had been renovated in 1980 by the Barnards when they first moved in, but it wasn’t consistent with the spirit of the house. An even bigger problem? The original eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rooms were separated from the newer part. The goal was to unite the two halves, visually and functionally, creating a flow that seamlessly connects old with new.

Considering the project triggered a not-so-small epiphany. “Scott said that, along with air-conditioning, a real garage and a generator, he wanted a working fireplace,” Melanie recalls. “I realized that in the historic wing we already had several. But we’d both completely forgotten about them because their locations were so separate from where we really lived. Even the large ‘keeping room’ hearth had become like wallpaper — we’d walk by it now and then, but we’d stopped noticing it.”

As with all true Colonials, five fireplaces — three on the ground floor and two upstairs — branch off one center chimney to spread heat throughout the house. To either side of the eighteenth-century front door, the “parson’s parlor” and the “family parlor” had shallow fireplaces that earlier residents, in an effort to conserve fuel, rarely lit. But in the keeping room (yesterday’s version of the



Knocking down the wall that once hid this keeping room fireplace from the rest of the house was a key action in connecting the historic part of the house with the newer portion.

family room) logs were always kept burning in a large central fireplace. Now, 250 years later, almost forgotten across from the perimeter wall of Melanie's old kitchen, this centuries-old hearth waited in plain view to be rediscovered.

Knocking down that wall would be pivotal to the new definition of the house. "It was a huge thing to contemplate, but to me, this house is a living thing," Melanie says. "Behind that wall, the historic half was dying." The Barnards opted for major surgery, in essence, to save the patient. "The mandate for the whole renovation was to bring new life to the old house, to enable it to move forward into the future." The more Melanie thought about that hearth, patiently waiting, the more certain she felt. But taking down the wall would be the final step.

First, the main floor of the twentieth-century side of the house had to be addressed. "It needed to look as if it had always been here," Melanie says, "which means we had to gut everything and start from scratch." Staying within the exact same footprint was a priority since the root systems of the property's many old trees now go under the house, almost cradling it.

Rough structural timbers — some the actual "bones" of the eighteenth-century house — make a powerful functional as well as decorative statement. "We discovered them when we opened up walls to frame the new kitchen," says builder Guido Balderrama, an immigrant from Bolivia, who worked with his brothers to turn the Barnards' vision into reality. "I feel the spirit of this house deep in my heart — it made me search to find exactly the right materials, including more rough beams like the ones we found in the walls."

The very floorboards in the renovated contemporary half of the house are another link to the past. One hundred and fifty years ago

they were the sides of a boxcar in Kentucky. "I wanted the floors to be genuinely old," Melanie says. "Yes, they were a splurge, but they connect everything and I love them."

A strategic relocation of the main staircase to the second floor in the contemporary wing was integral to the new design. This created a series of rectangles in an open floor plan that includes the new kitchen and family room, from which there are views of Melanie's beautifully landscaped backyard. "Next to cooking," she says, "I love to garden."

A right-hand turn off the new family entrance, formerly a side door, starts the journey from now to way back when. Anchored by a dining/transition island that is nine feet long by three-and-a-half feet wide, the long rectangular space travels the length of the house. Visible at its far end is the circa 1761 hearth, once again the heart of this home. Exposed original timbers create additional rectangles on partial walls in this area, linking the two parts of the house.

The challenge for designer Christine Donner was to create a kitchen that respected the age of the house while meeting the technological and practical requirements of a modern-day professional chef. The new kitchen had to look timeless, with all state-of-the-art culinary machinery installed as unobtrusively as possible.

And no matter what, when that final wall came down to reveal the keeping room hearth, the brand-new space and its surroundings had to flow easily into the historic half of the house. "I knew that less would be more," Christine says. "Thoughtfulness was required and, above all, restraint."

With a surface of dull butternut wood and sides stained a soft colonial blue-green, the dining/transition island separates the kitchen from the family room beyond. It also offers a place for



The contemporary look of granite counters and a marble-topped preparation island blends well with the new kitchen's antique floorboards. State-of-the-art appliances were a must for this professional cook.

family or friends to spend time without getting into Melanie's workspace. "I'm strictly a solo cook," she says, "unless I've chosen to teach a class or do a project with my grandchildren. I don't want people running in and out, getting underfoot while I'm working."

Melanie's main workstation is the four-by-five-foot preparation island, its surface a two-inch-thick slab of white marble. Sided in the same butternut wood that tops the transition island, it reiterates the mellow tonality of the kitchen's antique floorboards. "The marble weighs 1,500 pounds and is meant to look rough and solid," Christine says. "This is for serious cooking."

As are the counters of honed green granite from Finland on the kitchen's perimeter, the perfect solution for a professional chef who hates the look of granite. "This looks like soapstone," Chris says, "but it's not. It's the right high-performance surface for Melanie."

"I love it," Melanie chimes in. "And, look, not a sparkle in sight."

In this kitchen ovens are a priority. When developing recipes, it is not unusual for Melanie to bake five versions of a dish at one time. A microwave, invisible but easily accessible, is located on the lower level of the transition island. Her Viking range provides

a traditional oven; another is at eye level on a wall nearby. The culinary pièce de résistance? A Miele convection/microwave oven offers new hybrid technology, and it rates superlatives from this no-nonsense expert. "There's no preheating; it's instant on, very fast," she says. "Setting it on a low temperature turns it into a warming drawer."

In terms of décor, less was the right way to go. On eighteenth- and nineteenth-century farms, home-furnishing decisions were based on availability and utility. "We didn't want everything to



The parlor in the original house now has a gas fireplace.



New Life for an Old School

Established in 1784, West School originally stood on the corner of West Road and Weed Street. In 1811 it was purchased from the town of New Canaan for \$11 by Farmer Jones, who lived in the former Ephraim Smith house now owned by Melanie and Scott Barnard. That was the year that a recession in town made it necessary for local farmers to find additional work. So Farmer Jones bought the schoolhouse and moved it to his property to use on-site for a cottage industry: He and his eleven children made shoe lasts there, selling them to the Silliman Shoe Factory in New Canaan to bring in extra income. The fountain in the center of the garden behind the schoolhouse is actually a well cover. It is believed that Farmer Jones dug the well to service the building.

By the time the Barnards moved in, the schoolhouse, which sits directly on the ground, was pretty much falling down. Over two years,

Brookfield carpenter John Morris spent his weekends carefully taking the old building apart and then putting it back together. Jacking it up one corner at a time, he hand-dug a foundation, then removed, numbered and eventually reinstalled the original floorboards. “The beams were so encrusted that I spent an entire summer scrubbing them with a toothbrush,” says Melanie.

After consulting with experts, the Barnards chose not to turn the schoolhouse into a museum, but to let it continue to redefine itself as it moves forward in time. They added plumbing and electricity; a coffee table and cabinets were built from wood left over from the original flooring. Along with a couch that opens to a bed for overnight guests and a large dollhouse for their grandchildren who love to play here, they’ve furnished it with two vintage school desks and family memorabilia. “There’s a TV set,” Melanie says, “but it’s permanently set to Channel 13.”

match because they wouldn’t have done that back then,” Melanie says, which explains the combination of wood, granite and marble surfaces. “This was a working farmhouse, not an elegant residence.” There were no moldings, no carved mantles, no fancy millwork. Simple pewter knobs and door handles were right for the period look.

Seven-foot ceilings were both a plus and a minus. While they conveyed historical authenticity, opening up the living space was a real challenge. “The low ceiling height made the original collection of small rooms on the twentieth-century side feel very compressed,” Rob Sanders says. A slightly diluted mixture of warm ivory/gold paint with accents of white throughout the kitchen, family room and dining room created an illusion of height, as did the new lighting fixtures and cabinetry.

In this house everything new still looks charmingly old. Take Scott’s garage — rebuilt from the ground up, farmhouse style, it appears to have been there forever. In the family parlor, a sage green wooden chest from Pottery Barn seems creaky with age. A new but rustic-looking dining room table suggests generations of families gathering around it for hearty meals. On an adjacent wall, a painted distressed-pine breakfront from the Lillian August Warehouse, narrow enough and just under seven feet tall, looks like a true collectible. Mixed with pieces that are undeniably genuine, the antique look-alikes effectively fool the eye.

Bringing the house into the twenty-first century meant upgrading the technology: A generator, central air-conditioning and a new heating system were installed. Out on the backyard brick patio, a completely winter-proof outdoor kitchen includes a refrigerator plus hot and cold running water, along with what Melanie calls “a major grill” and rotisserie.

When she’s not on the patio smoking brisket, cooking fish or preparing any of the recipes included in the three books she’s written on grilling, Melanie can now choose to work outside on her laptop. Computer wiring runs through all the walls, but the patio is effectively wi-fi.

“During construction,” Sanders says,