

An Architect's Design For Weekend Living



By TED BOTHA

WHEN Michael Davis, a Brooklyn architect, bought an 1880's timber-frame house on the site of a former fish hatchery in Columbia County in upstate New York, he went about his redesign in the same way he renovates his clients' old houses.

"I like to open up a space whenever I work in a period building and take it back to the original four walls," Mr. Davis, 46, said. "I also like to use elements that are specific to the site."

The compact 1,500-square-foot, three-bedroom house he purchased, in the hamlet of Linlithgo, not far from Hudson, had little character, he said - the rooms were tiny, the fluorescent lights were unflattering and linoleum hid the pine floors. So first, he exposed the wood floors, the joists in the ceiling and the perimeter walls.

He opened up the warren of minuscule first floor rooms by removing doors and a bathroom that had been added. He made kitchen cabinets from wood saved from an old barn. He built a fireplace from slate gathered at a nearby waterfall - a theme he will soon continue when he expands the house by adding a slate-floored dining room topped by a master bedroom.

Inspired by a single weeping spruce on the site, he planted a garden of weeping trees and shrubs around a swimming pool, which is also surrounded in slate from the waterfall. He let some areas of lawn revert to thicket while he also planted more pine trees for seclusion and a garden of lilac, forsythia and flowering shrubs.

"The garden is also a series of rooms, and by opening up the house and developing the garden you connect the building to its site,"

A New Yorker's second home in the Hudson Valley, with touches of Central Asia.

he said. "I wanted the house to rise out of the flowers and vines."

For the interior of the house, Mr. Davis opted for texture and color - and for a theme that combined his passion for Asia with his habitat in the Northeast. His love for Asian art began when he was in college, he said, on the day he picked up an oriental rug that a colleague of his father was throwing out.

He put the rug in his dormitory room, he said, and "I saw how it totally changed the light, the acoustics, the feel of the place." Years later, he was introduced to ikat, a form of silk fabric woven in central Asia, when he designed the installations for an exhibition, "Splendid Silks of Central Asia," that toured the country in the late 1990's.

The combination of rustic house and Silk Road - Rip van Winkle in Samarkand, you could say - might sound odd, but the tribal materials fit perfectly, whether it's embroidered cloth from Tajikistan on the guest-room bed or a Turkish saddlebag slung across a corner easy chair. Other objects include stone carvings of the Hindu gods Ganesh and Shiva and teak benches, which were put around the pool.

"I'm not trying to create an eastern aesthetic, but something I love," Mr. Davis said. "These textiles are carpets were functional. They kept people warm and people lived in them; they were their homes. I love their color and warmth."

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EXTERIORS the house is on the site of a former fish hatchery. Its front porch, right, affords a fine view of the property.



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Mr. Davis likes to tell his clients that when it comes to designing, they should take their time - and he has practiced what he preaches. He has been working on his house for more than a decade. He also moved slowly in choosing the house - he rented it for two years before he bought it.

"It helps being able to live in a house before buying or renovating it," he said. "You want to see how a wonderful July looks under 10 feet of snow in February - especially in the Northeast. And you might discover that you prefer the view in a secondary bedroom to the master bedroom."

Mr. Davis finally decided he liked the Linlithgo property, although more for its location than anything else. The house and a nearby barn had been built for the guardian of the fish hatchery. In front of the two timber-frame buildings, the land drops away to the Roeliff Jansen Kill and the waterfall. Across the stream are depressions that, until the 1940's, were flooded to raise fish fry that would later be released into the stream.

WHEN the owner of the house put it on the market, the asking price was nearly \$400,000 - a lot more than it was worth, Mr. Davis said. The area wasn't as trendy as it has become in recent years - in those days, you could fire a canon down Warren Street in Hudson without hitting anyone, he said.

Almost every weekend for the two years that Mr. Davis was a renter, real estate agents traipsed through the house with interested buyers. But no one saw the potential. Then in 1993, Mr. Davis bought the entire nine-acre lot - down to the spice rack, the silverware and a Honda Civic in the barn - for \$230,000.

"By then I knew exactly what I wanted to do with the place," said Mr. Davis, who eventually replaced the 1977 Civic with a classic 1969 MG convertible.

These days, he might struggle to find parking for his convertible in busy Hudson when he goes to rummage through the towns many antiques stores. He shops for himself and for clients, whose interiors he often also designs, mixing antique and contemporary furniture and using salvaged items wherever suitable. One of his latest projects, a reproduction of a 19th-century farmhouse in Millbrook, N.Y., makes use of salvaged doors, light fittings, hardware and timber.

Given Mr. Davis's background, it's perhaps surprising that he has ended up in a



INTERIORS the fireplace was built with slate from the property. An old barn provided the wood for kitchen cabinets, left.

place such as Linlithgo, where the one general store closed a while back (which means he goes to nearby Germantown for his coffee and morning paper). A born-and-bred New Yorker, he grew up for the most part in a brownstone in the east 60's, where he father was happy connecting to nature simply by sitting under the two large trees in their backyard.

"Every summer my parents would decide to buy a country house, and we went on these ridiculous drives," said Mr. Davis, who, with his shoulder-length brown hair, taste for Western wear and genial, soft-spoken nature, looks more like a singer in a country rock band.

His father, the lawyer Sidney M. Davis, who defended many Hollywood actors (among them John Garfield) in the Hollywood blacklisting days of the 1950's, wanted a home "five feet from a major intersection," Mr. Davis said. His British mother, Tilly Laycock-Davis, preferred the idea of something with a Gothic gate and a long driveway disappearing into the woods.

The result was that the family never had a home in the country. The summer drives

were always unsuccessful, and the family would spend the rest of the vacation traveling in Europe.

Mr. Davis, though, never had his parents' ambivalence, even after he bought an apartment in Brooklyn - right behind the clock in the Eagle Warehouse and Storage Company building on Fulton Ferry Landing.

The ceilings are double the height of those at Linlithgo, and the living room could easily swallow the entire first floor of the house. The apartment's view includes not only the timepiece but the Brooklyn Bridge, the East River and Manhattan, Quite a different sight from his nine country acres.

But as dissimilar as the city and country properties are, they reflect a patience and consistency in the way Mr. Davis acquires property and fixes it up - he eyed the Brooklyn building for almost a decade before buying into it. And he renovated the apartment, too, by first stripping it to its shell.

"The country and city are not separate lives," Mr. Davis said. "They are two parts of one life - just two very different parts. I couldn't imagine one without the other."