

DESIGN FOR THE WELL-LIVED LIFE

MAY 2006

HOUSE & GARDEN

**Rooms
that
Seduce
Kitchens
that
Dazzle**



SPELLBOUND



**IN RURAL CONNECTICUT, DESIGNER ERIC COHLER TRANSFORMS
A 1960S RANCH-STYLE HOUSE INTO AN IMAGINATIVE WEEKEND RETREAT
THAT BEWITCHES EVERYONE WHO VISITS IT**

A view of the luncheon terrace, opposite page, reveals graceful columns topped by a Chinese Chippendale railing by Eric Cöhler, windows by Hurd, and custom shutters by MacLeay Construction. ■ Cöhler created the Dutch door in the foyer, this page, where two early-19th-century Regency hall chairs sit beneath an Italian lantern with antique glass by Dennis & Lean through Holly Hunt. A concrete caryatid from Carter & Co., Boston, is tucked into an alcove.





Vigorous patterns define the living room. An 18th-century chair with original fabric was acquired through Christie's; a Gainsborough chair is in C. J. Dellatore's Grid in Snow Espresso, from Decorators Walk. Stark Carpet's Natura in Black sisal is bound in black leather. David Hicks's Chevron velvet in dark brown, through Lee Jofa, is on the sofa. ■ In the library, right, an antique armchair in a custom slipcover by Cohler and a Chippendale chair in Edelman suede.



Among Litchfield County's rolling hills, designer Eric Cohler has turned back time. Old Orchard Farm, or OOF, as it's known to houseguests who want to be invited back to Connecticut, seems like a classic English country pile, despite the Federal/Georgian conceit or the tease of a Greek Revival portico. It commands 25-mile views over the Housatonic River Valley and looks like a home that has evolved comfortably over generations. A relaxing weekend haunt for Cohler's family and friends, it has no trace today of its origins as a mid-'60s split-level ranch-style house.

Cohler had a vision when he bought the property in 2000. "A three-story Georgian carriage house, that was my inspiration," he says. "I had a fantasy of who was going to live there: a gentleman traveler returned home. It was to be filled with all my books and my art and my favorite objects." The challenge of executing a total transformation "was the main reason I didn't tear it down."

Cohler began what he thought would be a simple renovation by raising the house 12 feet and adding a floor where the garages used to be. He decided to tinker with the back wall. What was going to be a window seat became a library. Ceilings rose to grand heights, with standard windows stacked to look like expensive double-height custom jobs. A staircase with deliciously swirly newels connected the kitchen to the library, ascending to the bedrooms. Under the treads, a book-lined secret room, inspired by *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, would accommodate his nephews, Colin, 10, and Andrew Mason, 13. A carriage house with guest quarters, a gym,



and garages appeared nearby. He restored stone walls in the woods, reminders of the property's farming past, tapping Father & Son Masonry for new walls and terraces. Gardens were planted, walkways laid out, and peastone laid down for the proper Parisian crunch under each footfall.

"I should have stopped, but I kept going," Cohler says. "Life's too short not to do what you want to do; otherwise you're going to want to redo it." Which is exactly what happened in the living room. After months of dissatisfaction, he and project manager Jeffery McCollough took it from not quite special enough to "Wow!" with a brighter palette and bolder textiles.

The house appears as if by magic after the final twist of a meandering drive through orchards that harbor some of Cohler's extensive sculpture collection. "It's stately, but not intimidating," says Stephen Elrod, the creative director of Lee Jofa textile company and a frequent weekend visitor, who

prepares breakfast when he's there. One quirk: only teas from the nearby outfit Harney & Sons are served, so coffee drinkers must go into town to get their fix. Nobody objects.

The house elicits that kind of devotion. Entered through an octagonal room with two English hall chairs seductively entwined in the center, the house entrances visitors. "They're spellbound," says Steven MacLeay, the general contractor. "They look and they stare and they touch. Nothing's boring. Even the closets are interesting."

For his own house, Cohler turbocharged his design philosophy of mixing high and low, sophisticated and naive. His sensibility abounds in the art, the colors, and the details, down to the trim on duvet covers or the Bulgarian floor tiles in the mudroom. In the library, for instance, an Ivory Coast carving of a youth stands on a clear base, a display Cohler favors because it makes sculpture and objects pop out from their surroundings. The names of his favorite authors, among them Capote, Fitzgerald, Thackeray, and Faulkner, are lettered on each bookshelf's frieze. In the master bedroom, a sisal rug is trimmed in leather. A Ray Parker abstract from the 1960s hangs by a four-poster that Cohler bought at Marshall Field's for \$899 and customized. In the living room, a \$450 low Parsons-style table sits under an eighteenth-century equestrian study. A fiery Italian glass lamp from the 1960s illuminates a camelback sofa covered in a pungent-mustard-colored tweed (*Cont. on page 187*)



A Primitive crystal chandelier, by Dennis & Lean, and Farrow & Ball's Silvergate 850 wallpaper bring romance to the dining room, opposite page. Ellsworth Kelly's Colored Paper Image I (White Curve with Black I) (1976) hangs behind Taylor Harbison's Untitled No. 19 (2003). ■ A stainless-steel frame in the master bedroom, above, has drapery and a duvet cover, in Lulu DK's Clark in Suntan, by Cohler and project manager Jeffery McCollough, and a bed skirt in Mulberry in Powder, from Lulu DK.



Centrally located, the kitchen is truly the heart of the house. ■ Cohler, left, prepares a meal at the kitchen's center island. ■ In the breakfast nook, below, klismos chairs from Vincent Mulford Antiques, Hudson, NY, surround an antique drop-leaf table from the Brimfield Antiques Show. Beneath the window, pillows in Lulu DK's Catwalk Stripe in Color 21 bring pop to the custom banquette by Cohler. He concealed a flat-screen TV and stereo system behind a bead-board encasement above the antique mantel. ■ The kitchen, opposite page, also features a stainless-steel Viking refrigerator, a bell-jar lantern, from Mrs. MacDougall through Hinson & Co., and walls covered in Benjamin Moore's HC-174 Lancaster Whitewash.

TRADE SECRETS

ISLAND A CENTRALLY LOCATED ISLAND IS THE KITCHEN'S WORKHORSE, HOUSING TWO VIKING DISHWASHERS, WATERWORKS' STAINLESS-STEEL FARMHOUSE SINK, AND A PREP AREA. A COOK CAN PREPARE, CLEAN, AND STILL ENTERTAIN A ROOM OF GUESTS.

CABINETS DESIGNED BY COHLER AND MADE BY MACLEAY CONSTRUCTION, CABINETS ON THE BACK WALL CONCENTRATE AND MAXIMIZE STORAGE SPACE. FOR FLAIR, COHLER LINED EACH CABINET WITH CAROLYN RAY'S HOOVER WALLPAPER IN VERMEER.

HARDWARE COHLER "WANTED THE HOUSE TO LOOK LIKE IT HAD BEEN HERE FOR A HUNDRED YEARS." COLONIAL BRONZE BIN PULLS AND SWINGING LATCHES IN AN OIL-RUBBED BRONZE FINISH GIVE THE KITCHEN AN OLD-WORLD FEEL.

FLOORING BRAZILIAN COUMAROU, A RESILIENT WOOD, HAS A NATURALLY RICH COLOR.

COUNTERS CARRARA MARBLE COUNTERS ARE CLASSIC AND DURABLE. BUTCHER-BLOCK TOPS, LOCATED BENEATH THE CABINETS, PROVIDE A STURDY, PRACTICAL PREP AREA.

THE BAR A TRADITIONAL KITCHEN CAN STILL ACCOMMODATE MODERN DESIGN. COHLER CREATED AN ELEGANT BAR WITH A VIKING WINE COOLER, CUSTOM CABINETS, A MARBLE TOP, A CALAIS SINGLE HOLE MIXER, AND A COPPER NORMANDY SQUARE SINK BY WATERWORKS. □



