

TRADITIONAL HOME

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Art & Craft

VINTAGE VICTORIAN
HARDWARE AND
ART NOUVEAU FURNITURE

NEW ART GLASS
AND SILVER

LASTING BEAUTY

ROOMS WITH STAYING POWER

Eric Cohler came at the problem of redoing a contemporary house from a number of angles, including his choice of furnishings. By mixing centuries and continents, he was able to bring a delightful, if eclectic, order to the whole, as with this grouping under the stairs.



Designer Eric Cohler



COHLER COUNTRY

balances new and old in the transformation of a boxy modern house.
By Eliot Nusbaum Photography by Carlos Santini

Three towers give the house a vernacular quality and



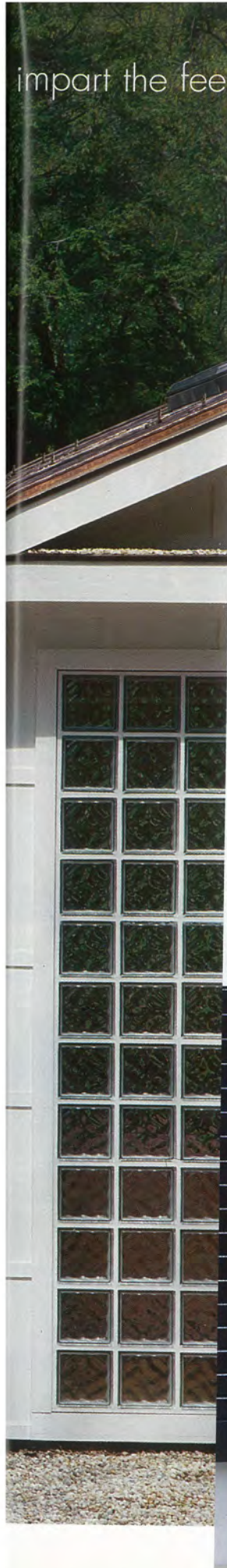
impart the feel of a home in the European countryside.

WITH HIS EXTENSIVE STUDIES of both architecture and interior design and a master's degree in historic preservation, Eric Cohler was ready for a personal challenge. That challenge sat at the end of a driveway in Connecticut, inspiring him to do something totally new: work on a contemporary house. "I had been looking for a house for a long time," he recalls, "and this one just spoke to me. It was such a 'dissolve' between the exterior and the interior, because all of the walls are glass. It was as if you were living in the trees."

The house, a scant 1,200-square-foot, flat-roofed box, had been in an estate and was in terrible condition. So the first need was to stabilize the structure, which meant putting on a new roof. At the same time, he also did work in the small galley kitchen, a bathroom, and a couple of small rooms.

But it wasn't long before he discovered he hadn't stabilized things enough. "One night I was sitting at dinner and noticed piles of dust accumulating on the table," he remembers. "I looked up and saw an enormous cluster of carpenter ants. It turns out the house had been infested for years, but the ants had been dormant. As the roof was collapsing, I went to the bank and got a loan and replaced the whole roof."

At the same time, the bank asked him if there was anything else he wanted to do. "And then it started," says Eric. It was a transformation. While keeping the best of the original contemporary features, he started thinking outside the box—adding wings and towers and peaks and even more glass to create



Opposite and above: Not only did Eric build wings out from the original 1,200-square-foot structure, he also built up, adding three second-story, copper-clad towers over the house—one for his office, one for his reading room, and one for guest quarters. While he kept the flat roof on the original house, he added peaks to the additions, all of which are covered with raised-seam copper sheets. A row of hornbeam trees someday will screen the house. **Left:** Eric with Tyler, his standard poodle.



a wonderful if idiosyncratic version of a modern house. Smooth, water-resistant white compressed-wood exterior siding, a raised-seam copper roof, Colonial-style shutters, and lots of grids mix the metaphors of modernism, post-modernism, and vernacular architecture to create a unique dynamism.

By the time he was done, the house had grown to about 4,000 square feet, with three peaked “tower” rooms—an office, a reading room, and guest quarters—plus separate wings for the kitchen and dining room and a freestanding studio (connected to the house with a pergola). The original house is now one large living room and a small library, with all the other rooms in extensions.

“I was playing off the rectangular shape of the original house, which was a Breuer-style of architecture,” he explains. “There are no curves in the structure, just a series of grids.” And while you can still “see” the 1950s house, it is also immediately obvious that it has undergone a wonderful metamorphosis.

Eric’s fascination with infusing traditional forms with the unexpected carries over to his interiors. They are finished in what you might call a general modernist manner—unpainted wood panels, more grids, and, of course, all of that glass—and furnished with a collection of antiques, contemporary



Opposite and above: These views of the living room capture the essence of Eric’s ability to mix unexpected elements like the modernist birch grid paneling on the walls and ceiling and the glass-block walls—added for privacy—with a 1940s mirror-topped coffee table, a Georgian library chair, a Chinese Chippendale chair, and a 1920s English mirror. **Left:** The foyer leading to the living room. The painting, by one of Eric’s clients, was a housewarming gift.





Left: The new dining room addition extends out from the house over a stream and into the woods. To take advantage of the setting, Eric designed the room with three glass walls and a skylight over the table. By using some small-paned windows that open—in contrast to the large, clear fixed windows—he has created the illusion of transparency. **Below:** In the library, Eric added the two large windows as well as niches for a couple of African masks, books, and the television.

furnishings, and craft pieces. All are mixed together with discrimination, creating a vibrant but casual atmosphere that speaks volumes about his personal and somewhat iconoclastic vision of design.

The new 10x14-foot dining room is a perfect example of this ability to blend architecture and an eclectic mix of furnishings. The room itself extends out from the back of the house toward the woods and is cantilevered over a small stream. To take advantage of the setting, Eric designed it with glass walls on three sides, and he added a 5x8-foot skylight above the centered dining table.

While the house is unusual for its location in four-season Connecticut, what really pushes the design is Eric's placement at the end of the room of full-length, triple-hung, small-paned windows on each side of a large fixed glass pane, continuing the grid motif and providing ventilation. The contrast between the busy, small-paned windows and the featureless fixed windows makes it appear as if the space between the paned windows is open. "The reason I used grids and mixed them with the plain glass was that I wanted to have a dissolve, not only between the interior and the exterior but also between traditional and contemporary architecture," he says.

The furnishings are minimal in number but not spare in design. In the center of the room is a new glass table from a chain store; it is surrounded by a set of Regency chairs, slipcovered in white linen, from London. On the window end of the room is a pair of metal urns on Plexiglas stands. "I love to mix things, like the wonderful old chairs and the new, inexpensive table," explains Eric.







Left: The kitchen is the heart and soul of this house, says Eric, who designed the “exploded” mahogany Chippendale-style island. It’s where he and his friends gather, either in front of the windows with their wonderful views or at the fireplace, below. The simple galley-style kitchen, with its mahogany cabinets and dark green Vermont marble counters, functions with efficiency and style. The sculpture in the window is a real propeller from the 1920s.



He brings the same sensibility to the living room, which is finished with a grid of wood panels on the walls and ceiling, glass-block windows, a skylight, and wood floors. The furniture includes a sofa covered with a primitive print, a pair of white club chairs, a 1940s coffee table with a mirrored top, a Georgian library chair, and a Chinese Chippendale chair. “The two antique chairs offset each other as do the two contemporary club chairs,” Eric says. A contemporary painting of a man on a train brings a bit of soulfulness to the bright room.

The kitchen addition is a cheerful open room that showcases Eric’s design prowess. Strategically placed windows take advantage of the views while providing a natural gathering place for friends and guests; and they do tend to gather in the kitchen, he says. A nearby fireplace, likewise, proves to be a favorite spot to draw up chairs and chat.

At the center of attention in the kitchen is the custom-built, 60x30-inch mahogany island, a witty take on a traditional design: “It’s based on a Chippendale table, but I kind of exploded the table form with bulbous

In the master bedroom, I wanted the bed to float—I wanted

Right: Eric purposely kept the master bedroom simple, so that the bed would float in the room. He already had the antique footboard, and he designed the headboard to coordinate with it. **Below:** The master bathroom is all local slate, with a concrete counter and two sandblasted glass basins. The cabinets and the light fixtures are Eric designs.



overscaled legs that I just love.” Dark green Vermont marble is used for the countertops and backsplash in the working area of the galley-style kitchen. The walls are a creamy white—similar in color to the birch floors—with molding painted a dark brown to match the mahogany. A series of five prints punches up the room with spots of bright color. An authentic 1920s propeller with curves to match the island legs stands on end in front of a floor-to-ceiling window, adding sculptural drama to the room.

Perhaps Eric’s cleverest idea is in the master bedroom. It is purposely furnished sparsely, to allow the bed to float in the 24x13-foot room. The bed is an 18th-century American antique—sort of. Actually only the two footposts are from the 18th century. Eric designed the rest of the bed frame, but made no effort to replicate the style of the antique originals. The parts he designed are elegantly simple forms that match the scale of the footposts but not the early American carving. The only other furnishings in the room are an antique English table, a Sheraton tray table that had belonged to Eric’s parents, and an antique late-Georgian or early-Regency hall chair. The curtains are a creamy cotton-duck fabric with a navy border that matches the color of the tailored bedskirt. A dreamy abstract painting completes the space.

As with every other room, what makes the master bedroom work is Eric’s ability to gracefully mix and match. As he says, “It all comes down to balance.” ■

Regional editor: Bonnie Maharam

For more information, see the Reader’s Resource on page 180.



it to feel like it was just floating in space. —Designer Eric Cohler

