

# RENOVATION STYLE

June/July 2001

## pretty summer rooms

breezy ideas bring in the sun

plus,  
kitchens, gardens  
and backyard retreats





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# poolside suite

An addition breathes new life into a grand old Connecticut home.

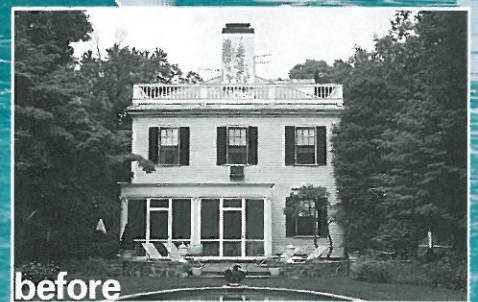
BY HELEN THOMPSON PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF McNAMARA PRODUCED BY BONNIE MAHARAM







Capped with a peaked roof, the new pool room blends with the home's elegant Federal style.









"I used to drive by this house a lot,"

says Greenwich, Connecticut, interior designer Cindy Rinfret, "and I'd have to catch my breath every time I saw it." The High Federal-style residence made such an impression that when a client who was considering buying the house asked Rinfret to walk through it, the designer didn't need to ask for directions. "I thought, *I know that street, and I know that house,*" she recalls. With its lavish Neo-classical ornamentation, the 1801 mansion was a local landmark—a tribute to a lifestyle long gone.

It was for that reason that the owners turned to Rinfret and to Wilton, Connecticut, architect Rob Sanders, who specializes in historic residential preservation. But his job was to go beyond preservation. "I needed to bring this house into the twenty-first century," he says. "This is a family with an active lifestyle—and there was this pool in the backyard that they wanted to take advantage of." Besides being an enticing destination for friends and family, the pool was a focal point of the home and its grounds. "It was a beautiful asset in a beautiful space," says Sanders.

Unfortunately, the pool was far from the kitchen—and all of its handy amenities. That arrangement was fine during a period of history when servants waited hand and foot on family and guests, but it didn't work anymore.

"The family needed a room that would welcome kids who had just hopped out of the pool," says Rinfret. For the children in dripping-wet bathing suits, and their dogs, the frequent trek from pool to food source (not to mention the bathrooms) was circuitous—and the all-too-obvious shortcut was right through the formal living room. The house already had a small screened porch, but it failed

on many counts. There was no place to change clothes, no bathroom, and no place to cook or store food. "The screened porch had a big job to do," says Sanders, "and it wasn't up to it."

Probably added in the '30s, the porch clung, off-center, to the back of the house. "It always looked like an afterthought," the architect says. "The pool is a strong element and is directly on axis with the house, so the fact that the porch was small and off the main axis of pool and house made it look even worse."

The challenge for both architect and designer was to ease the transition from the formality of the house to the informality of the backyard, making any changes look like part of the original 1801 plan. It was a challenge that was both easy and hard.

"This house is conceptually very straightforward and has an incredibly rich vocabulary of architectural elements," says Sanders. There were plenty of cues for him to work with, starting with the handsome lines of the house. Designed and built by New England architect Asher Benjamin, it was once considered the most expensive and elegant house in Vermont (it was moved to

Niches on either side of the addition create extra room for seating (OPPOSITE) and dining (RIGHT). "The room is a nice way of saying, 'By the time you get inside, don't be wet,'" says architect Rob Sanders. The space has laundry facilities, a mini kitchen, a changing room, a bath, storage, and a television. "We repeated the kitchen's denticulated cabinet detail on the pool-room cabinetry," says Sanders, "to keep the addition consistent."





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Connecticut in 1936). The balustrade across the roof-line, the slate roof, the painted-cedar clapboards, the ornate leaded-glass windows, and the exaggerated classical columns were repeated in the addition that replaced the old porch.

Inside the main house, 10-foot ceilings, six fireplaces, heart-pine floors, and lavishly ornamented cornices and moldings had a powerful visual impact that could not be ignored. "Basically, the pool room had to be a balance to the size of the house in front of it," Sanders says, "sort of like a finial on a banister."

The new pool room stretches across the back of the house and includes a kitchen, laundry facilities, a changing room, and a bath. A center bay window is flanked by French doors and capped with a roof whose pitch matches that of the other entries. "The room is mostly glass," says Sanders, "so you are always having the experience that you're on a porch."

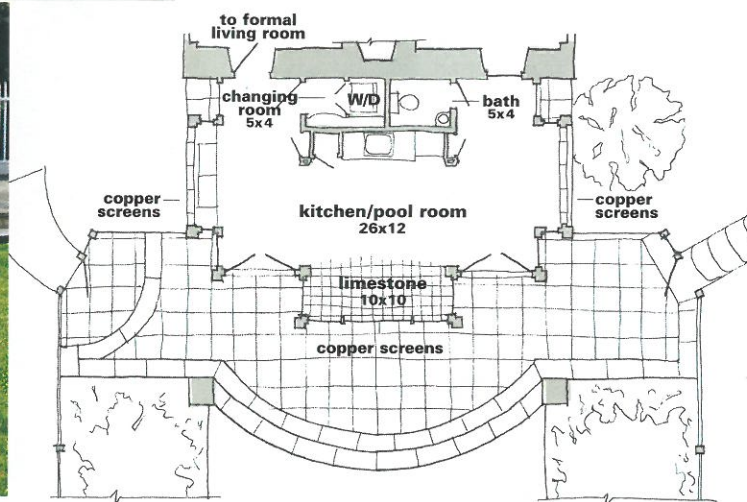
But responding to the architectural detail of the house in an authentic way also made the renovation difficult. Sanders designed bifold copper screen doors that look ➤

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Designer Cindy Rinfret added a faux window on the room's one windowless wall: "We needed something architectural there," she says. A set designer for operas, John Pascoe painted a leafy scene that replicates what's outside. Sanders repeated the mansion's signature Ionic columns and crown molding with dentil detailing in the pool room. "The changing room was tiny and claustrophobic," says Rinfret, "so John Pascoe gave it a view. He was playing with the indoor/outdoor theme."





The addition's bump-out bay window makes ample space for seating inside. A demilune-shaped flagstone terrace that extends to the flowerbeds helps anchor the addition to both house and pool.



## flooring to withstand wet and woolly feet

With children and pets making the new pool room their private outpost, flooring that could endure nonstop wear and tear was a must. The choices, however, were limited. The floor couldn't look too "porchy," because the addition opens off the formal living room. Painted-wood floors would be too casual and need seasonal upkeep. The toughest option—concrete—was stylistically inappropriate. The best solution was pillow-cut limestone squares, whose rounded edges lend a sense of softness to the hard surface. Square green marble inserts were added as a subtle reference to formal materials elsewhere in the house.

Limestone is quarried from ancient riverbeds, and fossil imprints in the off-white rock are one of its charms. The porous rock must be sealed to prevent staining and deterioration, but once that's done, it is impervious to most physical insults. Prices begin at about \$2.50 a square foot and go up, based on cut, finish, and origin. Since sheet-vinyl prices are similar, this easy-to-maintain stone can be a bargain, and it doesn't have to be replaced every few years.

original to the house. "We spent hours and hours matching the new custom-glazed leaded glass to the old leaded glass," he says. "Not only did they have to match, but the mullions all had to line up perfectly." Fortunately, the process for making leaded glass hasn't changed much in 200 years. "It was a wonderful experience looking at the nineteenth-century level of detail. It showed that people were thinking hard and well back then."

And the homeowners were obviously thinking hard and well, too. "They didn't want this room to be just for the summer," says Rinfret. Even with so much glass, year-round comfort wasn't totally improbable. A pale green ceiling and stone-colored walls suit climatic extremes.

"In the summer, the colors fade into the shades of the willows, maples, and mountain laurels in the gardens," she says. In winter, they are a cheering counterpoint to a snow-covered vista. With just a change of furniture slipcovers—from a frothy floral for summer to a cozy dark green velvet for winter—the nature of the room deftly adjusts to the seasons.

"The homeowners wanted a happy house," says Rinfret. And they recognized that happy houses get used. "They figured out how they wanted to live in their house," says Sanders. "We had many conversations about their ideas. When we finally built the addition, we all understood exactly what everybody was saying, and the result was this jewel box of a room." ■

Architect: Rob Sanders Interior designer: Cindy Rinfret

For more information, turn to the Buying Guide on page 122.