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INSPIRED BY ITS PERIOD CHARMS, STEVEN GAMBREL AND CHRIS CONNOR TURN THEIR 200-YEAR-OLD HOUSE INTO A MODERN-DAY SHOWPLACE

TEXT BY MITCHELL OWENS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM WALDRON
PRODUCED BY ANITA SARSIDI
A HOUSE WITH A PAST demands an owner who can imagine its future. For designer Steven Gambrel that means more than simply bringing the wiring up to code and buying the latest plasma screen.

Located not far from the waterfront of the old Long Island whaling town of Sag Harbor, Gambrel’s country house has a potent history. It was erected in 1810 as a Methodist church, transformed in 1835 into a Catholic chapel, and converted in 1855 to a school. After a brief period as a boarding house, it was owned by an Orthodox Jewish couple with ten children, and somewhere along the line it had also been cut in half and transported across town to another site. By the time Gambrel and his partner, entrepreneur Chris Connor, found the house three years ago, its original split-cypress shingles masked by 1950s asbestos siding, the place had been abandoned for three decades. Time had not been kind, and real estate agents went out of their way to avoid it. “It was a little squalid,” Gambrel remembers, shaking his head.

But he and Connor had a vision. Besides the two-year conservation-quality renovation they would undertake—including putting on a new roof, rebuilding the stone foundation, and replacing the old double-sash windows with precise mahogany replicas—the couple decided to use the structure’s period charms as the starting point for an architectural narrative of what might have been. “That was the storyboard,” Gambrel says. All additions had to make chronological sense, as if one
family had lived in the house since its construction and made improvements over the ensuing two centuries.

“Sag Harbor has lots of homes that used to be fishermen’s houses, so we imagined that as the family’s fortunes increased, they embellished the house,” explains the designer, a graduate of the architectural school at the University of Virginia. Gambrel got out the drafting paper, adding an 1830s Greek Revival–style porch with square columns to the rear of the house, connecting it to the land for the first time in its history. A small shingled barn-cum-garage of a slightly later vintage was built at one corner of the lot, and at the west end of the house, he installed a two-story library, a breathtaking 12-foot-square sliver of space that seems more glass than wall. The pièce de résistance stands at the back of the property—a slightly theatrical neo-Regency pool-house ornamented with overscale trelliswork and a lead-coated copper roof that boasts a sweeping silhouette. If this last addition seems a trifle outré, that’s precisely the point: “It’s a happy summer pavilion,” says Gambrel, “not a serious building.”

Indoors, the decor is just as dégagé—light-filled rooms with a mélange of the humble and the elegant, the traditional and the modern, the raw and the crisp. “I like rooms to be clean and smart, without a lot of stuff,” he says. “Nothing here is from one period or one place, but there is something simpatico about all the pieces.”
Facing page, from top: Gambrel relaxes with Dash, a Labradoodle. The poolhouse, based on a 1930s structure at the Hollywood home of director George Cukor, was designed by Gambrel. This page: A bleached-mahogany sofa by Gambrel on the porch; the striped cushions are by Donghia, and the paisley pillows are by Designers Guild. See Resources.
Clockwise from top left: Mahogany countertops in the kitchen; the dishwasher is by Bosch, and the early-1900s milk-glass shades are from Antwerp. The landing's 1960s lacquered console is vintage Billy Baldwin; the mirror frame is 16th-century Dutch. A 1930s French gouache still life hangs beside a Roman shade of Indian batik in the library. Gambrel and Connor added the rear porch to the 200-year-old façade. Facing page: Curtains of Belgian linen by Coraggio and an antique Napoléonichandelier in the dining room; the cerused-ash side chairs are by Gambrel. See Resources.
Here, history and modernity meld rather than collide. Bare wood floors whitewashed and waxed à la Gustavian Sweden are framed by baseboards and moldings painted high-gloss white in the manner of 1960s decorator David Hicks. Lowly burlap covers the walls of the library, a gritty background that sets off the haute-faubourg glitter of a Jansen gilt-bronze table and a sofa upholstered in cream-colored wool with Hermès-style brown whipstitching. The Greek Revival-style porch is scattered with vintage metal chairs that Gambrel suspects are by William Haines, a star of Hollywood silent films who went on to become Tinseltown’s top decorator. A guest room is lined with antique deeds of London real estate, each encased in a sassy orange-lacquer frame whose color matches the wax seals on the documents. And in the downstairs powder room—the house’s original pantry—Gambrel papered the walls with reproductions of 18th-century drawings of flora and fauna torn out of an art book. “It’s much better than reading the book, don’t you think?” he says with a barely straight face. (Actually he bought two copies: one to gut, the other to peruse.)

Don’t let the tongue-in-cheek flippancy fool you. All it takes is one look past the good-natured tomfoolery to see that around here, often what looks sublimely precious really isn’t. The round surface of the pair’s dining table, for instance, owes its lacquerlike brilliance to a few coats of auto-body paint. Why? Gambrel liked the shipshape shine, for one, but the industrial finish also cuts down on housekeeping chores. “We can have lobster dinners and have big waxy candles drip all over it,” the designer says, grinning, “and there’s no harm done.”

Clockwise from top: Gambrel designed the guest bathroom’s chrome sconces; the checked floor tiles are by American Olean. Framed 18th- and 19th-century leases of London properties in the deed room. The guest room’s 1800s hurricane lamp was bought in Sag Harbor; Gambrel painted the 19th-century New Jersey mantel high-gloss white; the curtains are of Belgian linen. Facing page: Pages ripped from Cabinet of Natural Curiosities by Albertus Seba line the powder room’s walls. See Resources.