



STRIKING AND SERENE A casual sitting room reflects the contemporary sensibility the homeowners brought to their antique house.

An Artistic Awakening

A sculptor and a collector of antiques use simplicity and honesty to reinvent their 18th-century farmhouse

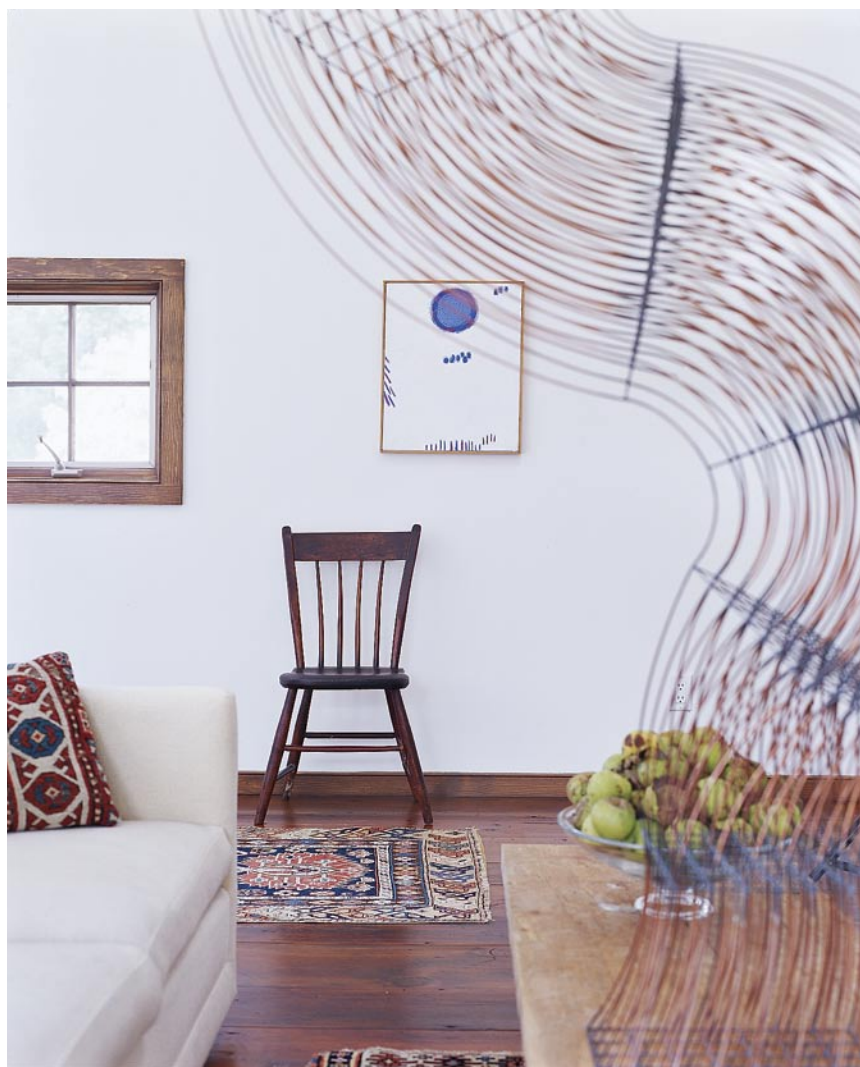
BY DEBRA JUDGE SILBER

Within John and Eunsook Pai's light-filled Connecticut home lies a rugged colonial heart. Built in 1740, the older part of the house consists of a two-story square of small rooms arranged around a center chimney. With uneven pine floors and low ceilings, the interior has the aura of an 18th-century museum.

The house that grew out of that boxy start recalls an exhibition space as well but of a different kind. Stationed throughout its bright, open rooms are the modern metal sculptures for which John Pai has become internationally known. They share the space harmoniously with Eunsook's collection of 18th- and 19th-century furniture. The interior spaces, integrating antique beams, high ceilings, and big windows, are themselves balanced between two centuries.

If you ask John Pai how a contemporary addition could so closely capture the spirit, if not the substance, of their home's colonial origin, he'd say it's because they allowed the house to evolve as it might have 200 years ago—inspired by materials on hand, building only what was needed, and adding one room to another until the house was complete.

"This house grew out of something that existed before, and I think the house has more character because of that evolution," says John. "It's very much like the way I do sculpture. When I begin, I don't have a complete picture of where I'm going



for a Colonial Home



to finish. While I'm working, I discover a lot." He adds, "It's a very realistic way of working."

It's not, both John and Eunsook concede, a terribly efficient way to remodel a house, however. The project, which involved two architects, spanned three years. But, John says, "We didn't want to rush to the wrong conclusion. It became a matter of principle, and we were willing to pay with time, money, and some frustration."

In search of simplicity

The Pais purchased the house in Fairfield County as a quiet alternative to New York, where they lived and where Eunsook still commutes to manage her own clothing boutique. Traditional New England architecture appealed especially to Eunsook. Having spent most of her life in Korea, she found the simplicity of the early American style fresh and new.

Transforming the house into one in which they could live and entertain comfortably would mean adding a light-filled sitting room, updating the kitchen, rebuilding the dining room, and adding a garage with an office behind and master suite above. Their first step, though, was to refresh the oldest part of the house, which itself took 10 months and included improving insulation, replastering the walls, and stripping the original pine floorboards. "The floors were thick with paint," Eunsook says, adding that the face nails holding down each board ruled out the use of a sander.

The floors in the rest of the house were no less work. Determined to match the aged quality of the originals, Eunsook and builder Alan Dreher, of Newtown, Conn., made repeated trips to a wood dealer in New Hampshire, finally selecting antique pine floorboards that they then painstakingly stained to blend in each of the new rooms.

Just as builders in 1740 re-used timbers from an earlier house on the site, the Pais used reclaimed materials from the area and elsewhere to extend the home's authenticity into its new spaces. These materials included fieldstones for the dining room fireplace and kitchen stove surround as well as the reclaimed floorboards and chestnut beams



A KITCHEN FOR SERIOUS COOKING
A marble-topped island is Eunsook's primary work station; above it, pots hang from hooks John designed. Countertops are stainless. "I wanted something you don't see," Eunsook explains.

A RUSTIC TABLE AWAITS GUESTS
Centered in the dining room is a 12-foot antique patternmaker's table the Pais found at an antiques shop in Massachusetts.



PEAKS AND CURVES

A circular staircase (below) curls up from the entry hall to the master bedroom. Originally designed in a straight run, it evolved into a spiral that not only saves space but quietly enhances the home's rural style. "Eunsook always liked the idea of a farmhouse with a silo," John explains, so the space enclosing the staircase became a silolike tower (right).



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used throughout the new sections. “What we wanted was a natural flow,” says John. “We really wanted to keep the character of the old part but make it flow naturally into the new.”

A space for gathering and music

The bright, open sitting room that extends from the old part of the house was specifically designed as a place for the house concerts the Pais often host. Originally conceived by the architect to resemble a Japanese temple, the room's peaked ceiling is outlined with beams and features a cupola in the center. But other stylistic moves were altered by the Pais in favor of a simpler, traditional New



truly New England, mold a bit.” —James Denno, architect

England design. They removed the room’s wide, overhanging eaves and reconfigured the original window placements to enhance the views outside. Now, a large French door in the back opens the room to the outdoors, and side windows offer vignettes of the surrounding stonewalls and fields.

Inside, a grand piano and a cello take up one corner; the remaining furnishings are simple and functional. Antique wooden chairs stand ready along the walls, and in the center, two white sofas pull up to a coffee table that consists of a weathered board placed on a set of concrete blocks.

The table is one of what John calls his “temporary-permanent” design solutions whose short-term ingenuity survived over the years. Another is

the overhead lighting here and in the dining room (photo, p. 31). John designed the simple cylindrical pendants as a temporary fix while deciding on the right lighting. “Anything you put in a room reacts with the artwork,” he says, “so we needed something simple.” When he found they worked well, he replaced the temporary paper shades with more durable and safer fiberglass ones.

Room at the table

Entertaining at the Pais’ home means not only music but also food, and Eunsook’s cooking is legendary. Among events is an annual Fourth of July picnic that draws 130 guests. Eunsook does

THE BEAUTY OF THE EVERYDAY Drawn to the simplicity of Early American items, Eunsook started a collection that includes numerous iron tools, a sign describing the origin of their house, and a primitive green stool.



UPDATING THE TRADITIONAL *Geometric shapes throughout the house—from triangles in the ceiling beams (p. 31), to the circular silo (top, p. 32), to the square window panes (above)—enhance the home’s fresh, contemporary feel, says James Denno, the architect who worked with the Pais to complete the project. “We used elements that were truly New England style, but then we broke the mold a little bit,” he says. The Pais’ artistic input in the process, Denno says, “helped make it a better house.”*



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—John Pai, homeowner

all the cooking herself, on an eight-burner Dynasty stove tucked into an alcove lined with hand-painted Dutch tiles. The kitchen functions well, but Eunsook says if she were to do it again, she'd make it twice as large.

The adjacent dining room, added in the 1980s, was designed to resemble an old barn. But the Pais felt the chiseled-and-pegged rafters tried too hard. “It just didn't look truthful,” John says. “When you do it for decorative rather than functional reasons, it shows.” So they rebuilt the room, choosing plain walls and antique chestnut beams recovered from an old tobacco barn.

The 12-foot-long dining table is surrounded by two of the six sets of early American chairs Eunsook has collected. “We don't buy for future value,” she says. “We buy things we like that are useful.” Eunsook's interest in Americana eventually rubbed off on her husband, who found that, like his wife, he responds to antiques primarily because of how they look.

“I noticed Eunsook loved antiques, and I discovered I have a feel for antiques also, based mainly on my visual response to them,” John says. What fascinates him is the creativity with which Early American craftsmen approached their tasks. He points to an iron tool on the wall. “It could be any shape, but why did he choose these curves?” he wonders aloud. It's a question that might just as easily be posed about the staircase in the next room or about the Pais' house overall. And the answer would be reflected as well in John's next observation: “In the end,” he says, “the object says something about the person who made it.”

Debra Judge Silber is an associate editor.

For more information, see Resources, page 86.



THE POWER OF SIMPLICITY *White tile and simple, old-fashioned fixtures in the master bath complement the plain brown molding that frames the view outdoors.*