The 1720s stone farm house had been vacant for years before its purchase by clients of architects Ileana Martin-Novoa and Jonathan Katz. The pair's restoration of the home combined a meticulous preservation with construction of up-to-date amenities for a 21st century family. These include a bump-out at the front of the house for a new vestibule that includes a powder room and guest closet.

A poorly constructed 1920s addition had to come down even though the homeowners originally wanted to keep it. The pair's restoration of the home combined a meticulous preservation with construction of up-to-date amenities for a 21st century family. These include a bump-out at the front of the house for a new vestibule that includes a powder room and guest closet.

The homeowners had grown up in rural surroundings and longed to return to an area offering quiet, privacy and a lifestyle reminiscent of their childhoods. All they needed was the right architect to undertake the preservation and renovation of the unsung—to preservationists—farmhouse sitting on 24 wooded acres in the Somerset County hills.

The homeowners wanted to retain as much as possible of the original structure and its unique characteristics. For the rest, they sought features that would preserve the architectural integrity of the original. "This was not a cost-efficient project," Martin-Novoa says. "The homeowners could have torn down the structure and put up a McMansion, but they wanted to preserve the house and do so faithfully."

Martin-Novoa says that as an architect she loves houses of all vintages and shapes and forms. But she and her husband had never worked on a house as old as this one. "When we found out how old the house was, I was just a little intimidated," she says. "However, we were super-excited to work on such an old structure."

Little is known about the original stone farmhouse. A book on Somerset County's historic homes contains a line drawing of it but nothing about its history. The residence is L-shaped, formed by the 1920s addition that was constructed perpendicular to the original stone structure. A courtyard was created in the L.

The homeowners wanted the cozy look and scale of the house to remain the same," Martin-Novoa says. So the L-shaped footprint was retained, and the homeowners and architects planned a renovation of the interiors. "We were waiting for surprises on the stone house but it was sturdy; it had been there forever," Martin-Novoa says.

The addition was a different story. It contained an old kitchen and breakfast room on the first floor and, on the second floor, three bedrooms that were a maze of oddly shaped rooms with awkward connections.

The owners wanted to salvage the old addition but clearly it wasn't worth it—historically or practically—so it was torn down and replaced, Martin-Novoa says.

The architects refurbished each room in the original stone house: the dining room, living room and map room (now called a reading room) on the first floor and three bedrooms on the second floor. A fourth bedroom became part of a new hall bathroom.

They furred out and insulated exterior walls; replaced old windows with new energy efficient ones; installed up-to-date electrical, plumbing and HVAC systems; and cleaned and restored fireplaces in the dining room, living room and map room on the first floor and the original master bedroom on the second.

The stone house lacked a powder room and coat closet, so the architects bumped out a small stone addition at the
front and constructed a new vestibule with a powder room on one side and a guest closet on the other.

They preserved the appearance of the exterior by saving the stone removed for the bump out and adding matching stone from Pennsylvania to reconstruct the façade. They also replicated the original front patio, doorway and windows. A new half bathroom was added on the second floor above the new vestibule.

New Spaces

The new addition that replaced the 1920s structure includes a kitchen, walk-in pantry, butler’s pantry, mudroom, family room and library on the first floor. On the second floor there’s a new master bedroom and bathroom, a bedroom and bathroom for the couple’s son, a cedar closet and a laundry room.

A finished basement in the addition contains a billiards room, wine room, playroom and shower room along with storage and mechanical rooms.

Before the renovation the original house and addition had seven bedrooms and four bathrooms on the second floor. The new home has five bedrooms and four bathrooms on the second floor, two half-bathrooms on the first floor and the full shower room in the basement.

“The house is now bigger than when we started the renovation but it doesn’t look that much bigger; that was the homeowner’s intention,” Martin-Novoa says. The original home is now 7,900 square feet.

They also expanded the living space with construction of a new barn that houses garages, a hunt room and storage space, a gym and stalls for two horses.

Original Details, Quirky Features

Throughout the project the architects painstakingly preserved original architectural details. They retained dormer windows. They also replaced single-pane uninsulated windows of different sizes at the rear of the stone house with energy-efficient insulated windows but kept the different sizes to maintain the original random look.

They kept the wide-plank pine flooring in the original stone house; however, the planks were removed for the installation of radiant heat and then re-installed. Wide-plank pine floors from a torn-down barn were installed in the addition. Old beams and fireplace mantels throughout the old stone house were stripped of years of paint and restored.

Then there were the quirky features the homeowners were intent on keeping. The exterior of a beehive oven on the old addition was dismantled, each stone numbered, and then rebuilt on the new addition as a memento to the original. The oven, which used to open to the kitchen and now is a mudroom wall, was named for its shape and was used at many colonial-era homes to make bread and other baked goods.

A niche, an arched recess on one of the old addition’s stone walls facing the courtyard, received the same treatment. The mason dismantled it and rebuilt it with the original stones. No one is sure of its original use, Martin-Novoa notes.

The homeowners also insisted on keeping the multicolored ceramic shards that littered an inner courtyard between the former garage and the former kitchen in the 1920s addition. The previous owner’s mother was a potter who had her studio above the former garage. “Our clients saw this as a personal thing that was a part of the house and should remain,” Martin-Novoa says.

That sentiment illustrates much of what the homeowners believe and cherish. “The clients appreciated the fact that the stone house had sat there all this time,” Martin-Novoa says. “That’s in contrast to so many people today who want everything new. It’s refreshing to see people who appreciate history and the idea that smaller can be beautiful.”

Robin Amster is a Madison-based writer and editor.

Details Make a Difference

From left: A traditional rooster weather vane graces the roof of the new barn. • This gargoyle is one of two that sit on each side of a stone wall above steps leading down to gardens. • This new casement window is meant to look like a double-hung window. It’s in the restored dormer of one of the original stone house’s bedrooms facing the courtyard.
The architects preserved the appearance of the original dormer. The architects' retained the original dormer. These are views of the side of the house. The architects designed a barn to house two doors at the rear. Shown are replicas of two doors at the rear.

SOURCES
Architectural design, Katz/Novoa Architects in Millburn; building contractors, John Ansede and Ed Dwyer of AVR Ltd. in Bernardsville.

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