

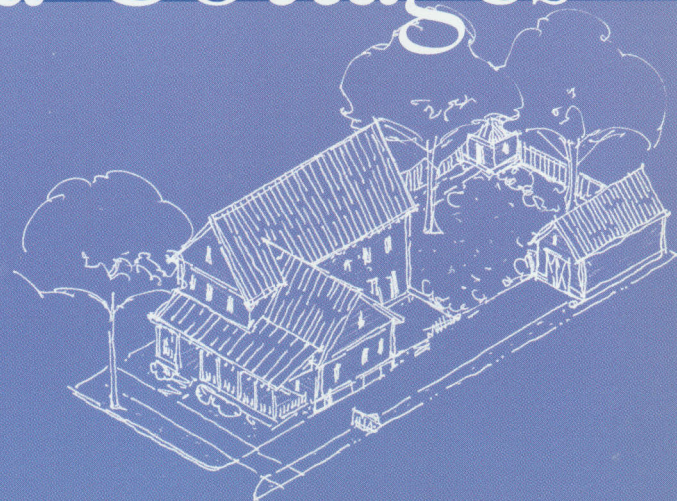
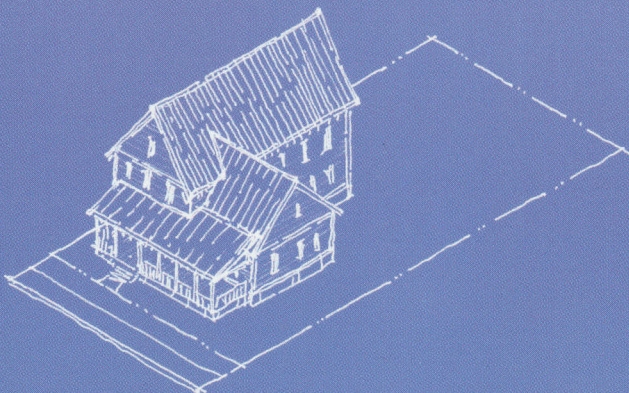
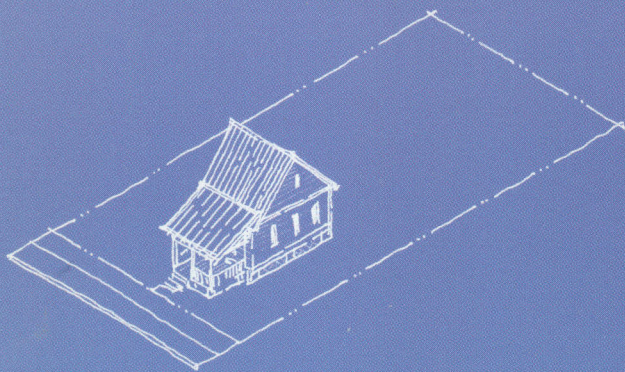
Clem Labine's Period Homes

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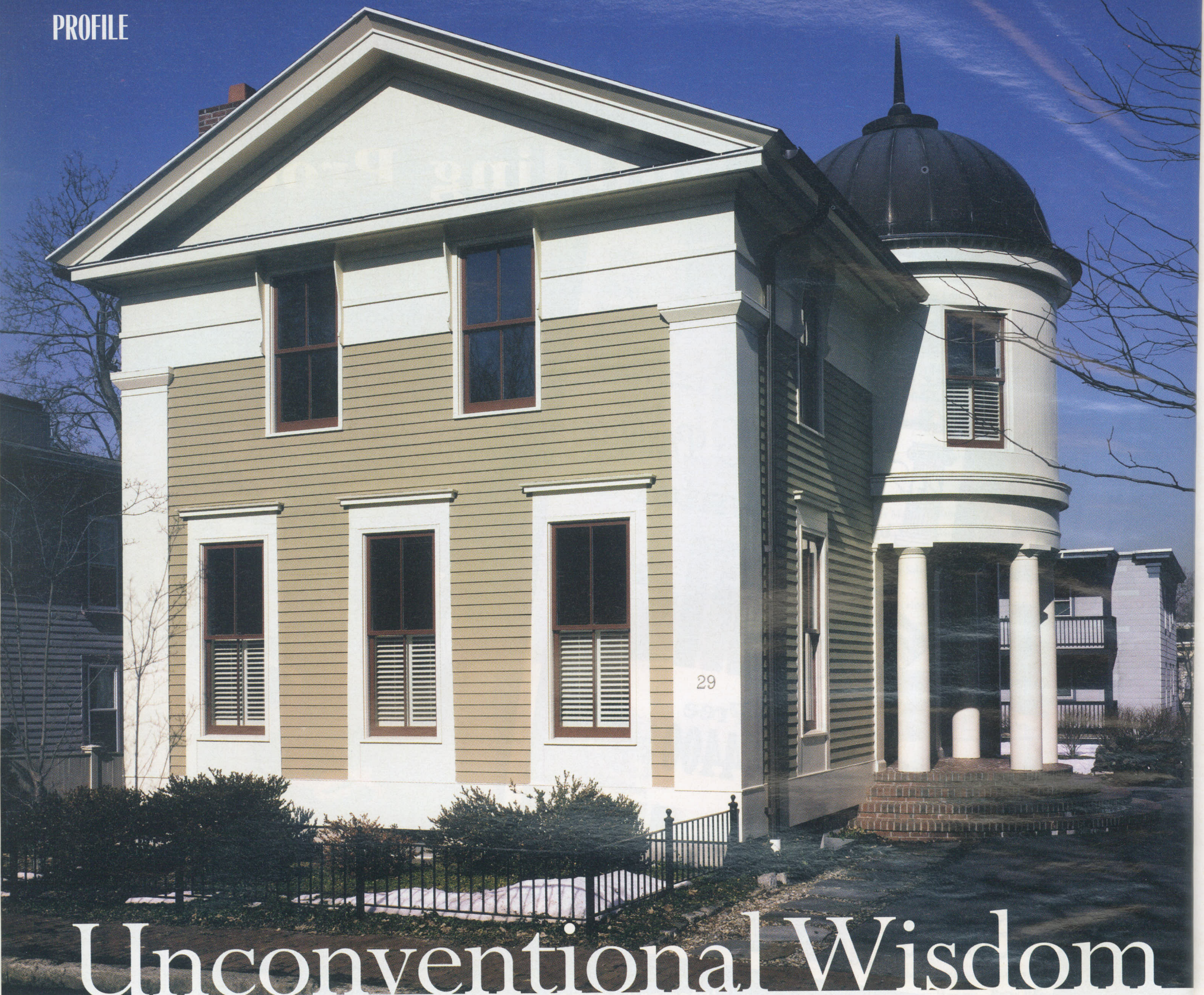
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Unconventional Wisdom

A Boston firm specializes in creating fresh interpretations of traditional styles. *By Will Holloway*

“Tell the truth, but tell it slant” — *Emily Dickinson*

To spend an afternoon with Jacob Albert, AIA, James Righter, FAIA, and John Tittmann, AIA, is to take an architectural tour of some of the more intriguing recent designs in the Northeast. Over the past 35 years — as Albert, Righter & Tittmann Architects, Inc. (AR&T), since 1996 — the Boston, MA, firm has designed more than 100 new houses and orchestrated some 250 residential renovations and additions. From their new office — a recently renovated space overlooking the bricked streets of Downtown Crossing — they continue to produce unique designs rooted in historic precedent but clearly distinct for their innovative and often unexpected touches.

Mother Yale

When Albert was an undergraduate at Yale University in the mid 1970s, one of his first architecture teachers was Righter. When Tittmann went to Yale a few years later, one of his first teachers was Albert. “That’s certainly what ties us together — our time at Yale,” says Righter. “Although we were there under different deans, we were all strongly influenced by the flavor of the school. Charles Moore was my dean, and I came there as probably one of the few students who’d lived in a piece of Modernist architecture. Moore turned me around, as did the political scene at Yale in the late ’60s and early ’70s. These pendulums come and go, but we had Robert Venturi and Moore there at the same time, who double-handedly overturned the profession. We’re honored to have been around during those times — there are very few moments like that.”

Indeed, the emergence of Postmodernism in an era disenchanted with the dehumanizing effects of Modernism transformed the curriculum at many an architecture school. If the generation of architects that this movement spawned can, in general terms, be classified as espousing either New Classicism or the more informal American vernacular tradition, Albert,

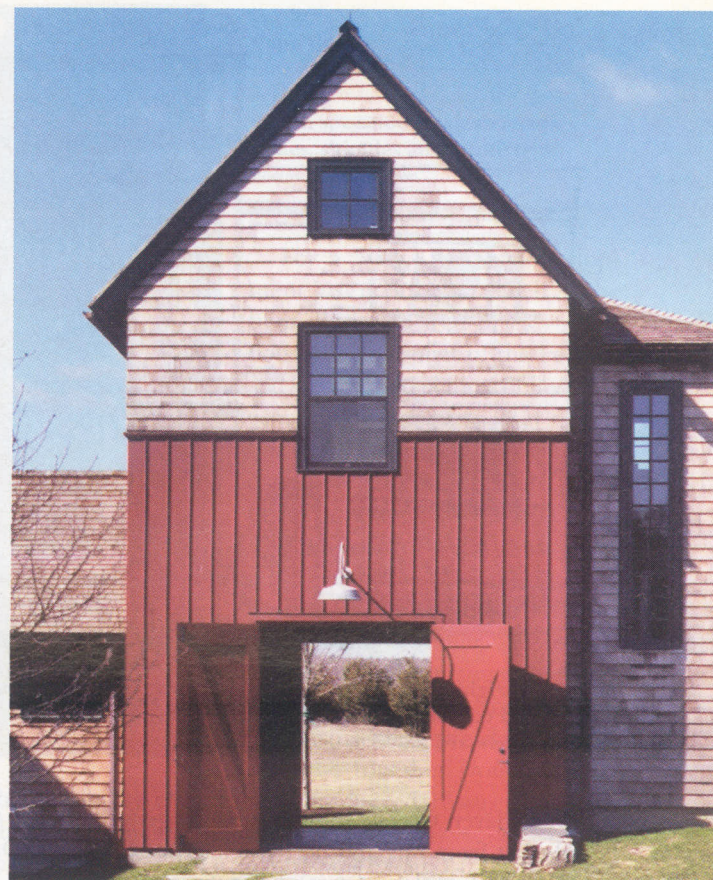


From left to right, Jacob Albert, James Righter and John Tittmann, of Boston, MA-based Albert, Righter & Tittmann Architects, Inc. *Photo: courtesy of AR&T*
 Top: In a Cambridge, MA, neighborhood of mostly 19th-century residences, Albert, Righter & Tittmann (AR&T) designed a house that honors the scale, materials and Greek Revival character of the surrounding homes. But, like many AR&T designs, it includes an unexpected touch; in this case, unlike any of its neighbors, the house features a domed entrance rotunda capped in copper.
Photo: Greg Premru

Righter and Tittmann fall into the latter category. Their reverence for the vernacular can be attributed, to some degree, to the influence of Moore and — especially upon Albert and Tittmann — of Yale architecture historian Vincent Scully. “Scully was a hero of mine,” says Albert. “I eventually got to be his head teaching assistant in school, so I sat through the Scully lectures at least three times.”



Left: For a chateau-inspired house to the north of Boston, AR&T added an artful touch for the musically inclined family – violins carved out of a balcony railing. Photo: courtesy of AR&T



Right: The entrance tower of a farmhouse in upstate New York is boldly announced by the red barn boards on its lower half. Photo: courtesy of AR&T

“Just like Jacob,” says Tittmann, “I was addicted to Scully, and was his teaching assistant for all six semesters of architecture school. I can still remember sequences of slides and sentences that he used in crafting each lecture like a book.”

After graduating from architecture school, Albert spent a summer in the New Haven, CT, office of Allan Greenberg. In 1980, he joined his old teacher Righter at James Volney Righter Architects, which had relocated to Boston after nine years in New Haven.

Tittmann took a slightly more circuitous route, working with Allan Greenberg, teaching with Stanley Tigerman at the University of Illinois and working at two Chicago, IL, firms – Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and Booth/Hansen & Associates – before relocating to Boston and opening his own practice in 1991; he joined forces with Albert and Righter in 1996. Since they were working on similar projects, and having kept in touch throughout the years – not to mention sharing the same accountant – the three Yale grads could see no reason why they would not be better off in practice together.

The variety of Albert, Righter and Tittmann’s designs exhibits an openness to new ideas and design concepts, an openness that they attribute to their alma mater. “Jim [Righter]’s undergraduate course was a real eye-opener because field trips and slides were a big part of his teaching style,” says Albert. “He showed slides of places like Disneyland – of what most

people didn’t really take seriously as architecture, but when you really looked at them, there were things about them that were wonderful. I think the whole process of learning about architecture at Yale was a process of opening your eyes – to look at everything and learn from it.”

Today, Albert, Righter and Tittman bring that same spirit of openness and continual learning to their office. The walls are lined with shelves of well-thumbed books and are adorned with drawings, renderings and three-dimensional models. The entire office, including a staff of seven architects – representing a variety of programs, including the University of Michigan, Syracuse University, Washington University in St. Louis and Yale – often takes field trips, most recently to Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House in Plano, IL. Albert recently gave a slideshow of his 2005 trip to Bhutan.

The continuum that the three principals embody – from the early days of the Postmodernist movement to the present – is reflected in their work. They don’t view architecture as static, but as a continually evolving art form. Thus their designs fall into many different points on the spectrum between traditional and modern, often invoking Classical and vernacular forms while infusing them with fresh, artful elements. Like Emily Dickinson, they know the language – and know it well – but often choose to “tell it slant.”

“It’s not good grammar,” says Tittmann, “but it’s totally understandable, and it’s that bending of the language that makes it memorable, that makes it present and fresh, and that’s what we strive to do – just because you’re speaking in a language doesn’t mean you can’t be creative or poetic or fresh.”

“A lot of clients in New England want houses that look like they belong – houses that look like they’ve always been there. We enjoy that. But there are also clients who want something different.”

“We love that kind of client – the client who wants something artistic or expressive,” says Righter. “In fact, some of our heroes, such as the architects of the early 20th century – McKim, Mead & White, James Gamble Rogers – those guys were charging around having a ball. If you stand on



The design of a house on an island off the coast of Connecticut took its cues from surrounding 1920s Colonial Revival summer houses. The house’s tower is tied into the body of the structure by a band of windows that extends into the roof. Watercolor: courtesy of AR&T; photo: Chip Riegel



Above and right: AR&T's design of an urban residence in Cambridge, MA, combines fluted columns and swags with vinyl siding and asphalt shingles arranged in a checkerboard pattern. Drawing & photo: courtesy of AR&T



the New Haven Green, you see three Rogers' buildings that are all entirely different from one another; you also see three A.J. Davis buildings that are all entirely different – it's just astounding."

"We think that such range is fun and admirable," adds Albert, "not something to be embarrassed about or disapproving of."

Fresh Interpretations

Tittmann estimates that 80% of the firm's time is spent working on new houses. All told, they've completed more than 500 built projects since 1971. Accolades include five awards from AIA/New England, three from the Boston Society of Architects and, most recently, a 2005 Palladio Award for a house in Concord, MA.

Situated on a ridge overlooking the Sudbury River, the 6,200-sq.-ft., six bedroom, four-and-a-half bath residence exemplifies the innovative spirit that defines AR&T. It is a collection of seemingly incongruous parts – two high-style pavilions in the spirit of regional Greek Revival homes juxtaposed with a connected barn and free-standing garage in the New England barn vernacular. Having chosen to forgo strict Classicism in favor of a fresh interpretation, AR&T created a home rooted in the past but – owing to its lack of convention – very much in the present.

In a July 2005 article in this magazine, Tittmann spoke about the project. "The client was keen on picking up on New England's visible Greek Revival traditions," he said. "At the same time, we were trying to do something very nontraditional, creating a composition that you can't find in any book – we wanted to form a collage, exploring how far the language could be stretched in one composition and expanding the edges of that composition."

While the Concord house evolved from traditional New England architecture, another recent project grew out of a series of images – mostly chateaus and lodges – that the client had shown the architects. Designed for a young family to the north of Boston and completed in 2005, it is a fusion of those building types with a hint of French Norman country houses. It features a steeply pitched roof, six gables and wide overhanging eaves supported by elaborate bracketing. The rustic tone of the house is typified by the living room, which was designed large enough to accommodate square dances; it has an exposed vaulted timber-frame ceiling and, in an

artful touch, the overlooking musicians' balcony includes violin silhouettes carved out of the railing.

One of the more distinctive AR&T designs was completed in 1993. Located in a 19th-century neighborhood in Cambridge, MA, the 1,250-sq.-ft. residence occupies a site where an earlier structure had burned and been demolished. Working under zoning regulations that specified the dimensions not exceed those of the former house, the design takes its cues from, but freely interprets, the style of the surrounding neighborhood. Like a few nearby houses, the street-side façade features an eye-catching checkerboard pattern of asphalt shingles; like many nearby houses, it features a flat-line cornice fronting a pitched roof. The common materials – asphalt shingles and vinyl siding – are contrasted with swags and fluted square columns that infuse a touch of elegance.

Of the common threads that run through all of their designs, one theme that arises frequently when the principals discuss their work is "sense of arrival." In the Hudson Valley of upstate New York, for instance, AR&T invoked vernacular barns and stables in creating a 3,900-sq.-ft. farmhouse that incorporates the ruins of an old barn foundation in its design. The entry courtyard is delineated by the foundation, the farmhouse, a freestanding garage and a stone wall. Through a break in the wall, the house is approached by a pathway of fieldstones; in lieu of a traditional front door, the house is entered within a breezeway under a tower that is clad, on its lower half – in contrast to the predominately natural shingle structure – with red barn boards, as if to announce its importance.

The shaping of the outdoor space with parts of the buildings, which orchestrates the way one moves through that space, was central to the design. It's a consideration that plays a part in all of AR&T's designs. "We sometimes tell clients that it's not so much a house with landscape around it, but rather it's a garden with a pavilion, and we're going to design the pavilion, but we'll do it within the context of the garden design," says Tittmann. "Every great house – Monticello, Mount Vernon – is a pavilion in a grand landscape, and this house is a much humbler version of that."

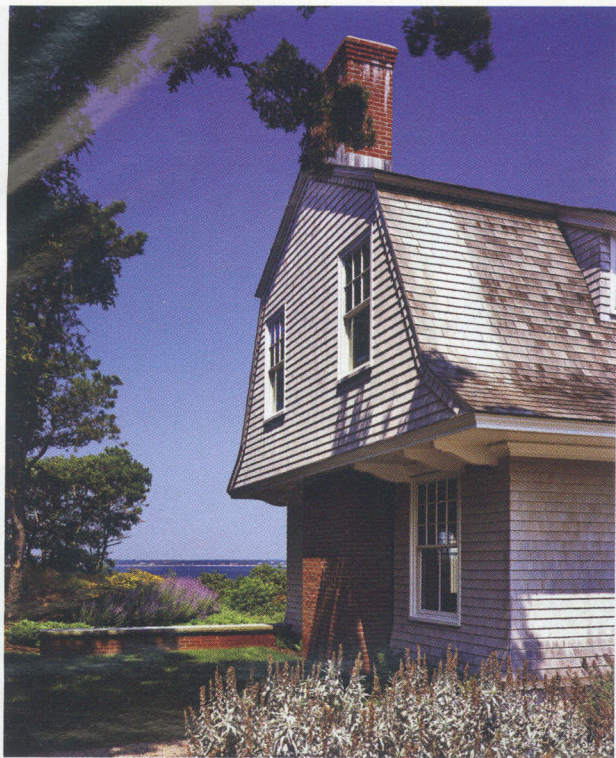
Staying in Character

While many AR&T houses stand out for their artful elements, others are designed to fit the character of an environment. It generally comes down to client taste, or, in the case of a summer house on Massachusetts' Cape Cod, the guidelines set forth by a community association. "In this case," says Albert, "the house is part of a community association that has a very specific design guidebook – you have to have windows with small panes, shingles and white trim."

Much like the upstate New York farmhouse, the outdoor experience was shaped by the layout of the house. The bulk of the main house, the guest bedroom wing and an adjacent garage create an arrival courtyard that opens to the south. The approach is centered on a stair tower mirrored by



The eating room of a Concord, MA, house has a canopy-like ceiling that reflects the patterned linoleum flooring. Photo: Robert Benson



Far left and left: On Massachusetts' Cape Cod, AR&T designed a summer house under the guidelines prescribed by a community association, which specified small window panes, shingles and white trim. Photos: Robert Benson

matching cupolas atop the guest wing and garage. A gambrel roof, clad in red cedar shingles, brings the eaves down low and accommodates four bedrooms on the second floor. Because it's located on the Cape's north shore, the main part of the house is one room deep to take advantage of the southern sun and the view to the north. "It's always a challenge when you have a view to the north," says Albert. "You still want to get southern sunlight, so it sometimes leads to designs that are thin, so that the important rooms will have exposures on both the north and the south."

On an island off the coast of Connecticut, the firm designed a house in the spirit of the island's traditional architecture. "The whole east end of the island was developed in the 1920s as a summer resort, and is a collection of very distinguished, loosely described Colonial Revival summer houses," says Albert. "To us, they are really creative and inventive essays in that style. They're not just four-square Colonial houses, but are rambling, picturesque, very skillfully designed houses – we were partly giving a nod to those."

The entry façade is punctuated by the house's main vertical element, a stair tower, which is wrapped in a band of windows that extends into the roof of the house, tying the elements together. The ocean-side façade includes a series of four identical dormers in a gambrel roof that extends over a wide porch. "Most of the houses that are like this," says Righter, "are very muscular and are trying to show off every little last thing. When you're practiced you realize that you don't have to do a lot – the real art is to pull it together and simplify it. That's why the dormers are all the same, and why the tower is not just expressive, but is pulled into the roof."

For the Ferguson Museum, a natural history museum on the same island to which AR&T had made incremental additions throughout the years, the firm designed a new building that fulfilled the museum's desire to have a more public presence on the island. This was accomplished by changing the angle of the façade (the new structure essentially envelops the extant museum) – making it parallel with the street – and designing a tower that boldly announces the building.

"This building has a lot of the elements of traditional summer New England coastal architecture," says Tittmann, "but they're combined in a fresh way that is nothing like what you would have seen in the late-19th century. The base of the building, for instance, slopes away and the shingle courses increase as they go down – which is not the 'correct' way to do it. Also, the band of windows goes right to the edge of the building. This is something that you find in Shingle-style architecture, but not in such a bold, super-scale way. All of this, to me, seems fresh and new, but at the same time mixes elements that we all recognize."

While the majority of the firm's designs have been for houses in rural settings, AR&T is enthusiastic about projects that involve urban architecture. The firm's largest project to date is an eight-story, 119-apartment, multi-use development on the East Boston waterfront that includes a seven-room bed-and-breakfast, café, marina services pavilion and two levels of underground parking. Situated on the grounds of the old Hodge Boiler Works, the design – with wide-window bays – pays homage to the site's industrial roots. If all goes according to plan, ground will be broken this coming August.

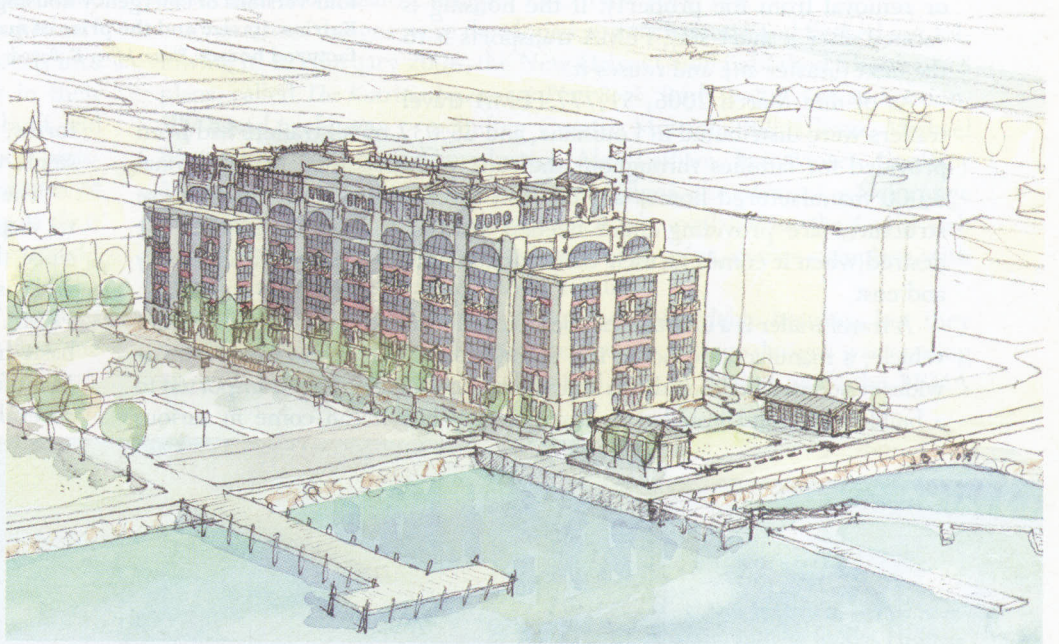
place. You have the possibility of really making New Urbanism happen, not by the rules, but by people of like mind."

"Our particular developer," adds Tittmann, "was excited at the prospect of our bringing a little Boston down to Texas."

Continuing Forward

Many of AR&T's early projects were for friends and family. As they've become more widely known throughout the years, they've attracted clients drawn by their innovative style. From the restoration of the tower of the H.H. Richardson-designed Ames Free Library in North Easton, MA, to a fanciful guest house/off-season storage garage on an island off the coast of Maine, the diversity of their portfolio speaks to the flexibility of their design approach.

Current projects include 12 new houses across New England – from North Haven, ME, to Cape Cod and the suburbs of Boston to northwest Connecticut – as well as a fire station in New York, a horse stable in Florida and a fishing cabin in the Catskills. By invoking historical precedent while seeking fresh, innovative ways to meet their clients' needs, Albert, Righter & Tittmann continue to design houses that belong to both the past and the present – and they're having fun doing it. ■



Top right: The creation of a multi-use development on the site of an old boiler works has enabled AR&T to partake in the ongoing recent redevelopment of East Boston. Drawing: courtesy of AR&T

Right: The new home of a natural history museum on an island off the coast of Connecticut gives the museum a public presence while honoring the island's architectural heritage. Photo: Chip Riegel