NEW OLD HOUSE

Building Character in Today's Homes

Spring 2007

Country Style

STONE HOUSE | SOUTHERN PORCH
## CLASSIC COTTAGE | GREEK REVIVAL

$5.95US $6.95CAN

The three pavilions—clad in cedar flush boards painted in primary colors—express the range of Greek Revival styles, and each is suited to its use. The high-style blue pavilion has the most formal rooms: the living room downstairs and master bedroom suite upstairs. The yellow pavilion is the building's fulcrum, containing the kitchen, family room, and eating area. To accommodate two cars while keeping the scale approachable, Tittmann designed the garage as a New England–style barn with a lean-to shed.

Primary Residence

Albert, Righter, & Tittmann Architects creates a
colorful twist on the traditional Greek Revival style

TEXT BY J. ROBERT OSTERGAARD PHOTOS BY ERIC ROTH
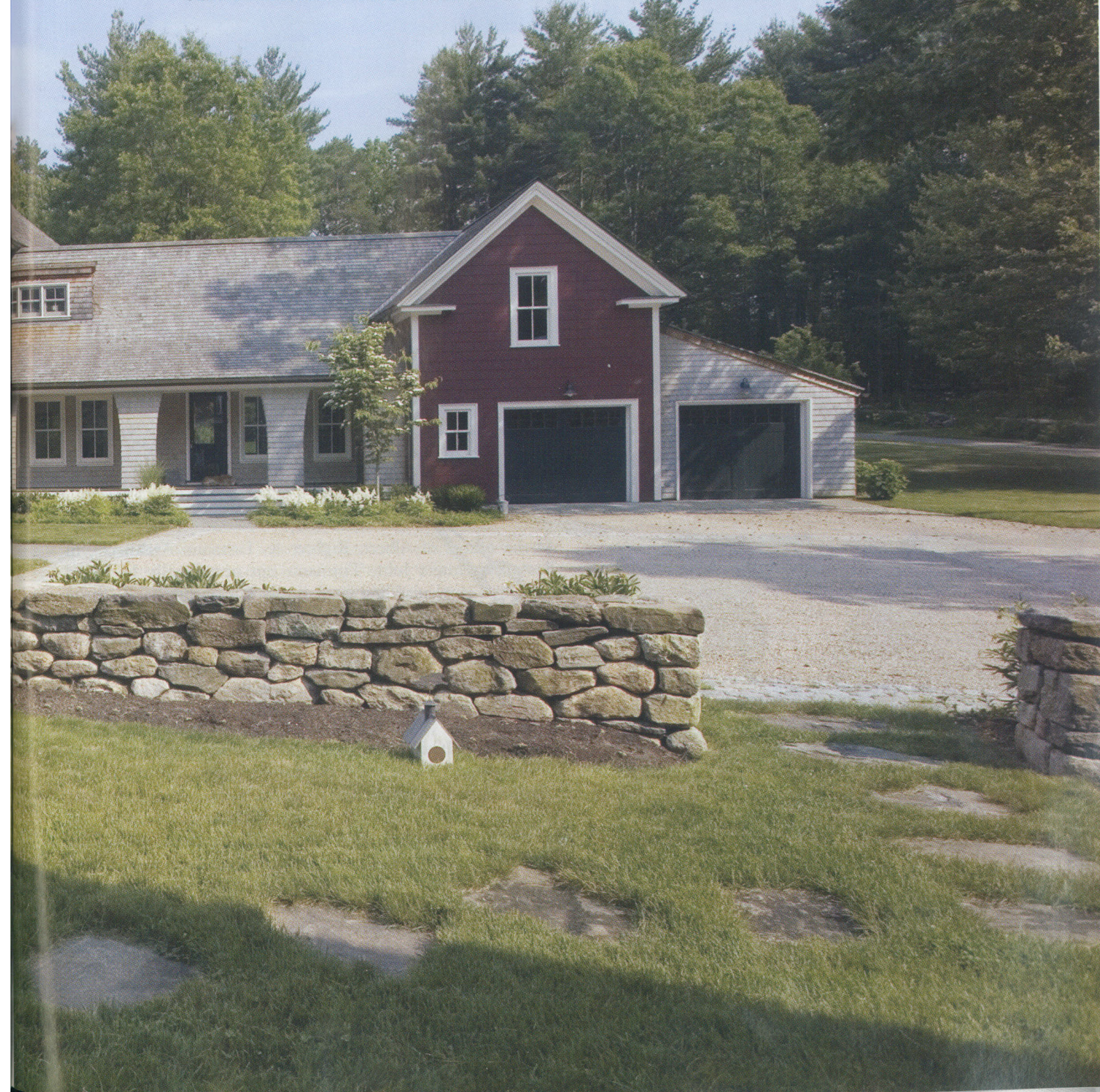
At the offices of Albert, Righter & Tittmann Architects, in Boston, architect John Tittmann can occasionally be heard quoting a particular line from Emily Dickinson: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant." Dickinson's poem, which advises revealing truth circuitously—lest it blind us with its "superb surprise"—served as a touchstone for a new Greek Revival he and his team designed just outside of Boston.

"We used the Greek Revival language in a truthful and recognizable way," Tittmann says. "But we were telling it 'slant'—bending the classical language in the same way poets bend written language." There are good reasons to compare the design of a house to the writing of a poem, as both architect and poet work with the same tools: language, logic, and metaphor. And how well they use these tools helps determine the success of the finished composition.

An Essay on Language

This new old house is manifestly a Greek Revival, which is fitting given the predominance of the style in its tiny New England town. But because the house was planned as a collection of three interconnected structures—or pavilions—it's able to speak simultaneously in more than one dialect. There is the

Far left The interior is open and more suggestive of the Shingle style than the Greek Revival. In particular, the cascading stairs are reminiscent of Stonehurst, H.H. Richardson's Shingle-style masterpiece in Waltham, Massachusetts. The columned screens and idiosyncratic ceiling treatments give structure and definition to the rooms without closing them off from each other. *Left* The upstairs hall offers a series of built-in benches and bookcases. *Left bottom* A detached studio also sits across from the house, and along with the studio space is room to store bikes and gardening tools. *Above* The most formal room in the house, the living room is appropriately housed in the blue pavilion.

high style expressed in the blue pavilion, with its elaborate ornamentation and formal entablature; the more casual Greek Revival farmhouse of the yellow pavilion; and the lowest style, the New England barn vernacular of the garage. A fourth pavilion, a freestanding studio, is also in this low style, thus establishing a dialogue with the garage across the central courtyard. "Each of these pavilions works within the Greek Revival language," Tittmann says. "So it's really an essay about classical language: You can take different hierarchical iterations—you can be very formal, less formal, or even informal—and still be speaking the same language."

The house has an L-shaped arrangement, with the three primary pavilions acting as anchors and two intercessional wings connecting them physically as well as stylistically. This organization breaks up the overall mass of the house and creates a gentle gradation between the high and low styles. For example, the wing joining the blue and yellow pavilions has Doric columns, but the wing between the yellow pavilion and the red garage/barn has more casual shingled supports.

There is also a "slant" in how the house relates to its riverfront location. "Typically Greek Revival buildings have an urban reading. They refer to the built environment," Tittmann says. "And even Greek Revival farmhouses that are far from the village center may address the street in an urban way. This house doesn't have a nearby street at all, so we created our own courtyard—its own sort of urban environment. And the east side of the house faces the river, which in a sense serves as the thoroughfare it addresses."

Metaphor and Logic

Tittmann and his team—project architect Lisa Waldbridge and staff architect David Cutler—drew inspiration from the river; indeed, the river serves as metaphor for the way the house is

experienced, and it plays a role in the internal logic of the house. Visitors to the house arrive through the woods, over a bridge, and down the meandering drive into a courtyard that offers no river view. "One of the central ideas was to control the view of the river," Tittmann explains. On entering the house, you are greeted by the entry staircase. "Not until you are invited beyond the stair into the dining room or living room does the view open up and you see the river. This is the choreography of how you move through the site. It's like going to the theater—the curtain rises, and you are suddenly transported into a new place."

The interior choreography of the house is influenced by and analogous to the river. The first floor's most public rooms—the living room, entry hall, and dining room—have the most public placement: facing the entry court. But more private spaces, such as the upstairs bedrooms, all look east to the river. On the western edge of the first floor, between the blue and the yellow pavilions, a hallway extends from the main entry down through the dining room into the kitchen and family room. "A river flow is, of course, fluid and picturesque," Tittmann says, "and with this long axis parallel to the river, so is the movement through the house." Upstairs, a hallway on

the western edge carries the memory of the one below and is punctuated by a series of window seats and built-in bookcases, thus creating a sense of rhythm and calling to mind the flowing river nearby.

To open up multiple channels for navigating the interiors, Tittmann could not adhere strictly to the vocabulary and structure of the Greek Revival language. Instead, he interpolated elements from another language: the Shingle style. "The organization of the space is more akin to a Shingle-style house than the compartmentalization of a nineteenth-century Greek Revival house," Tittmann explains. Throughout the first floor,

boundaries between rooms are discreetly delineated. For example, a columned screen is all that separates the entry hall from the dining room, yet this is sufficient. (And the entry stair itself was inspired by H.H. Richardson's Shingle-style masterpiece, Stonehurst.) The kitchen, butler's pantry, eating area, and family room all open onto each other, yet the rooms retain their own distinct character because Tittmann specified different flooring materials, ceiling heights, and architectural details for each. There is a staircase at the main entry and another off the kitchen, as well as numerous doors out to the landscape and the river, thus providing free circulation through the house and many pleasing currents and eddies.

"There is a democracy at work here," Tittmann says of the interior. "You don't have to follow one path." This also seems an apt description of the entire project, as Tittmann and his team pursued several paths to give a traditional architectural language a modern inflection and a new slant. NOH

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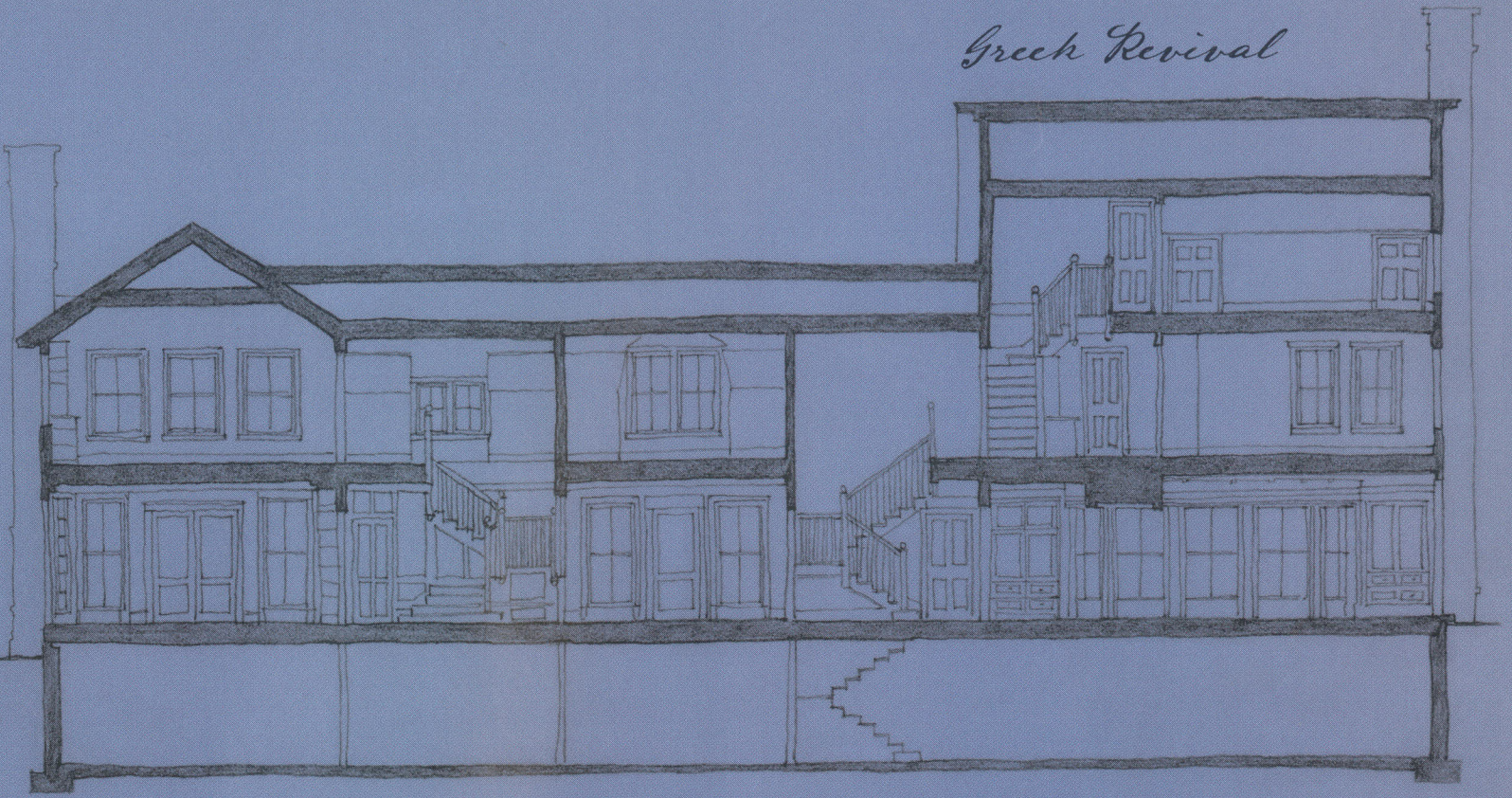
For Resources, see page 79.

A view of the back of the house from the yard also reveals three distinct sections of the house—the formal pavilion, the connector and the pared-down Greek Revival farmhouse. *Below* a view of the fields and river that lie behind the house.
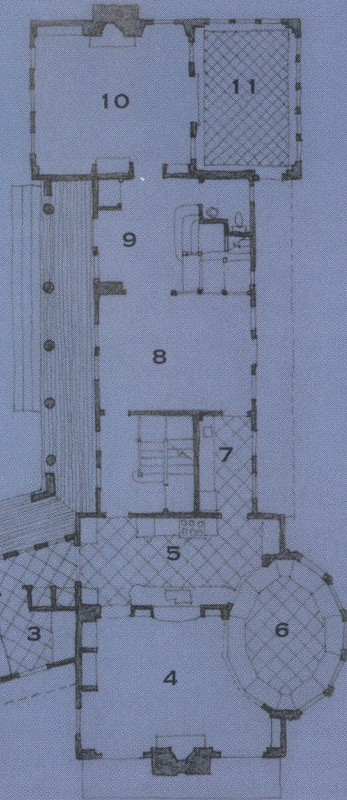
Greek Revival

First Floor

1 GARAGE
2 STORAGE
3 STORAGE
4 FAMILY ROOM
5 KITCHEN
6 EATING AREA
7 PANTRY
8 DINING ROOM
9 STAIR HALL
10 LIVING ROOM
11 SCREEN PORCH

Second Floor

12 PLAYROOM
13 HALL
14 LAUNDRY ROOM
15 BEDROOM
16 BEDROOM
17 STUDY AREA
18 BATHROOM
19 BEDROOM
20 BATHROOM
21 HALL
22 MASTER BEDROOM
23 CLOSET
24 MASTER BATHROOM