



# Visions of America

Heidi Hendricks and Rafe Churchill  
know that true craft is generational

Words [Nick Spain](#) Photography [Chris Mottalini](#)

If you're the kind of person who believes that not only our physical attributes, but our very emotional and spiritual makeup are inherited, then Rafe Churchill didn't become a builder; he was born one. It's not due to the fact that he was slinging a hammer on construction sites as early as twelve, but because he is a third-generation carpenter, the latest genetic iteration in a long line of New England craftsmen. It also might be what gives him the slightly gruff, stoic demeanor inherent in so many tradesmen. As someone who possesses generations' worth of knowledge about the built environment, he knows what is and isn't possible when designing the architecture for a project. He also isn't afraid of expressing it, which, by his own admission, can sometimes come across as a kind of obstinate rigidity with clients.

Enter Heidi Hendricks, Rafe's wife of 30 years and business partner at their firm, Hendricks Churchill, where she runs its interiors arm. The daughter of two New England artists who moonlighted as signmakers, Heidi is an expert in bringing a fluid approach to collaborating with clients. In Rafe's words, "When Heidi shows up, the edges get knocked down, and then it becomes this thing we can all pass around." You can see this quality in the way that they conduct an interview — Rafe all structure, rigor, and form, with Heidi interjecting to speak about the human emotions that come up from seeing a well-patinated plaster, or in describing how the placement of a dining table could impact a client's entire life.

It's this dynamic, which is not quite good cop / bad cop so much as matter-of-fact uncle and doting mother, that

has drawn so many clients to the duo since merging their practices seven years ago. That union happened after decades of crisscrossing the country and several past lives, spending time in Seattle during the height of grunge; in Brooklyn during the peak of hipsterdom; a career in P.R. for Heidi and a construction company with his brother for Rafe; finally returning to their ancestral roots in the Connecticut countryside. For years, they maintained their respective practices until they realized they were missing out on a good opportunity. "When I was building Heidi Hendricks Interiors before we merged, I also ended up working with other architects. It made me realize just how much Rafe and I take for granted what each other is thinking." The synergy from this mind-melding is evident in everything they touch, and it's also part of why their first book with Rizzoli, which chronicled the creation of their home, Ellsworth, in rural Connecticut, sold so well.

For their second book with the publisher, titled *Distinctly American* — more on that later — the two wanted to cast their nets further afield, showcasing ten homes that they collaborated on, going as far back as 2012, several years before they were even design partners. The spaces are evocative of the Hendricks Churchill ethos, key to which is a reverence for older properties and the regional architecture that springs up from true craftsmanship. "We are drawn to historic structures, and we get so much inspiration out of the New England vernacular," explains Heidi, "but also the vernacular anywhere we go in this country where it's rooted in a history of skilled

**Opposite:** In the corner, a Noguchi Akari floor lamp. The two 1960s French tile coffee tables are by Roger Capron. The vintage Togo sofa and ottoman were designed by Michael Ducaroy.

craftsmen applying their trade as it had been shown to them through generations.”

A complete lack of this inherent charm is what initially led a couple in the Hudson Valley to reach out about renovating their own small farmhouse, though they weren't convinced Rafe was even interested after the initial site visit, misreading his straightforward pragmatism for disinterest. “Those guys called up a mutual friend,” Rafe explains, “and they were like, ‘So I don't think he's interested,’ because I was just like, all right, yeah, let's do it.” Heidi believes this to be one of her husband's strongest qualities: “He's able to see through it all and find a path forward.” It's not his first time at the rodeo.

While that home doesn't make a cameo in the book, the project was such a breeze that they followed up the main house with the renovation of a small(ish) barn on the property. That space did make the cut, one of the final selections from an initial pool of 20 or so projects. The barn had once been home to a kind of farm livestock that you wouldn't expect: minks. The space had been divvied up into three floors to accommodate as many of the creatures as possible, so as a first phase, Rafe recommended demoing these to expose the full structure and get a sense of the space. When the time eventually came to move forward with construction, Hendricks and Churchill knew that they would need the help of another historical enthusiast, Jamie Hammel of The Hudson Company. Hammel and the couple are frequent collaborators because, as Hammel puts it, “Rafe and Heidi, they have this appreciation for unique materials. They're always looking for [something] one of a kind.” As someone who has built a sizable company by facilitating conversations about the beauty of 100-year-old grain, he knew he had found kindred spirits when he first met Rafe around 2011.

Key to the renovation of the structure were its joists, which would remain exposed thanks to a new exterior shell that provided the necessary R-value, but many of which were missing or badly in need of repair. The “original face,” as it's called, was going to be exposed on three sides, with hand-troweled plaster slightly recessed in between, so the criteria were demanding. The trio worked together to meticulously source new ones that would not only match in scale but had an almost identical surface. The resulting interior is squarely monastic and cathedral-like, with the new wood members woven so expertly into the fiber of the structure that it's nearly imperceptible. In reviewing photos of the project for this piece, Hammel points out a post with the faintest horizontal banding running across its face, a detail you have to zoom in so much to see that the image becomes slightly pixelated. “That's ours,” says Hammel. “When we salvaged them, we removed the lath, and it left these ghost marks, these shadows.” The attention to detail by all parties is granular, to say the least.

True to the couple's output, there is still a thoroughly modern current running through the space, with ex-

posed I-beams and glass railings on a new upper level and steel posts that run all the way down to the new finished basement and garage. This sense of time-bending is further enhanced by Heidi's interiors, where Togo sofas, vintage Japanese textiles and saturated tiles rub elbows with the centuries-old elements. “I was looking at a lot at fashions from the '70s and anything that had Robert Redford.” While this was initially informed by the clients' love of vintage furniture, it's thwarted from becoming a pastiche by Heidi's quintessential blurring of periods, with shaker joinery in a dusty pink hue to offset a color scheme that would otherwise read largely masculine, and skateboards hung as a winking nod to mechanical reproduction methods that were in their nascency during the barn's heyday. The overall effect is of a *mélange* that is at once everywhere in America and nowhere in particular.

The new publication's title — I told you we'd get back to it — is a particularly bold one given our current political climate, when a jingoistic resurgence has shifted our national identity toward something more aligned with crisp white walls and gold foil than finger joints and limewash paint. It's the pair's commitment to the various patchwork typologies that make up the great American quilt that lends the book its name. “It's a funny thing that people like to say, ‘Oh, you're a designer, what kind of work do you do?’” says Rafe. “It's the worst question, right? [As] somebody who doesn't want to put a label on it, we find that the only people that are really good at describing our work are other people. [Our editor] was just like, look, your work is so American, and it's so clearly moving in that direction with your ideas. Let's include the word *American*. And, you know, for some, they would run away from that and be like, ooh, is that political? I find it to be a tremendous topic. Having grown up in a small town, surrounded by historic architecture, it only makes sense.”

Their next move is bringing this particular brand of Americana to a larger audience through a new hospitality venture, Place in Mind, that will see them reinventing historic structures as hotels. They're leading with two properties in Vermont and, just like the homes they've designed, no two will be alike. That's because theirs is a vision of the United States free from the rosy lens of revisionist history: heterogeneous, layered, resourceful, sometimes rough around the edges and, lest we forget, welcoming. **LD**

*Distinctly American* is published by Rizzoli.

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