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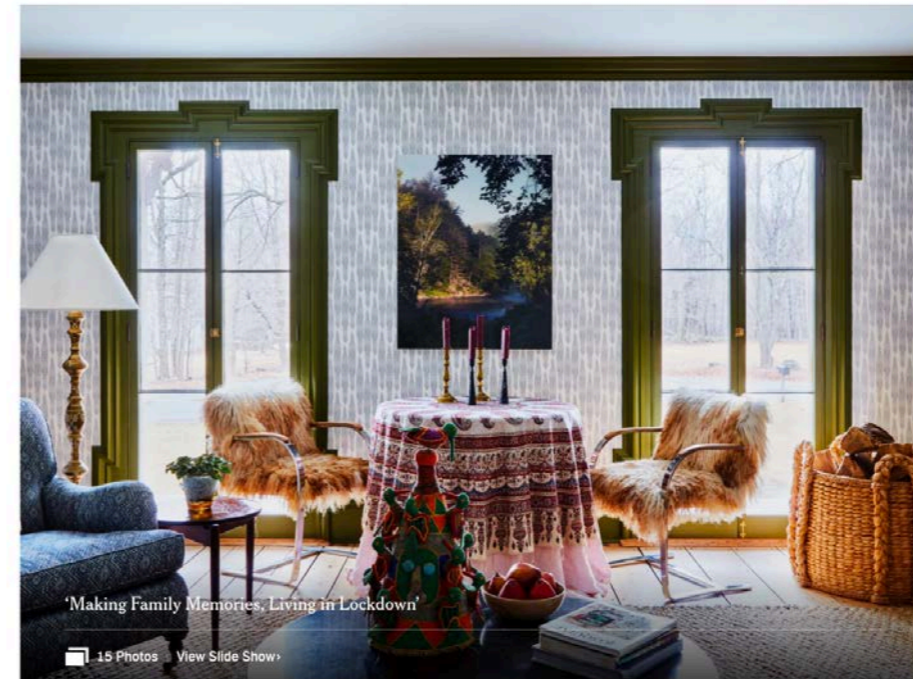
After Years of Watching It Fall Apart, the Home Was Finally Theirs

The farmhouse in Sharon, Conn., was ‘impossibly perfect.’ All they had to do was fix 150 years’ worth of damage and bad renovations.



By Tim McKeough

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Tim Lenz

Heide Hendricks and Rafe Churchill first saw their new home in the early aughts: an 1871 farmhouse with a big red barn and stone walls, sitting on 33 acres of field and forest so idyllic it looked like something out of a storybook.

“It was like a fairy-tale setting,” said Ms. Hendricks, 52. “It was just impossibly perfect.”

The married principals of the design firm [Hendricks Churchill](#), who have a reputation for thoughtful restorations of New England country houses, had just left Brooklyn for Sharon, Conn., and were getting to know the area with their newborn daughter, who is now 16.

“Part of our routine for getting our daughter to fall asleep was driving around the back roads of Sharon,” said Mr. Churchill, 50, so eventually they saw nearly every house in the area.



Heide Hendricks and Rafe Churchill, the married principals of the design firm Hendricks Churchill, admired an 1871 farmhouse in Sharon, Conn., for 15 years before buying it in 2018 and embarking on a renovation. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Although they had just designed and built a new house of their own, once they discovered the farmhouse, “we were both talking about it like it was our special place,” Mr. Churchill said. “But it seemed totally unrealistic that we could ever live there,” he added, because they assumed they couldn’t afford it.

“So we just kept an eye on it for 15 years,” Mr. Churchill said, as their family added a son, who is now 14. “We watched it and watched it as it slowly fell into disrepair.”

Beginning in 2015, they also watched as the house landed on the market and the price slowly fell from the initial ask of \$2.4 million. By the time it hit \$775,000 in early 2018, they felt they couldn’t avoid buying it. They offered the asking price and closed that May.

Like any 19th-century house that had been only partially updated over the years, the 3,000-square-foot structure needed work. The plumbing, heating and electrical systems all had to be replaced, along with roughly half of the windows.

The home had been expanded a few times over the decades, with a series of early additions to the back. The latest changes — including renovated bathrooms, an updated kitchen and wall-to-wall carpeting — appeared to date from the 1960s and '70s.

Fortunately, most of the newer things simply covered up the old details that Ms. Hendricks and Mr. Churchill cherished.

“With all of our projects, we like to approach them very carefully and protect the initial emotional response that made you fall in love,” Ms. Hendricks said. “Essentially, we went through and tried to scrape away some of the insertions that the previous homeowners had made, and eke out the original details from the late 1800s and early 1900s.”

That included exposing and refinishing the original pine floors, retaining as much early woodwork as they could (including the Victorian scrollwork on the front porch) and replicating missing pieces of trim where necessary.

In the front section of the house, they left the layout largely as it was and tried to keep as much original plaster on the walls as they could.

“When you walk into a house, you can see the difference between a new drywall wall and an old plaster wall,” Mr. Churchill said. “As far as doing a full gut, we limited that to the bathrooms and the kitchen.”

For a replacement kitchen, they designed a room with bead-board paneling, a deep statuarietto marble sink, an island topped by a thick white-oak counter and new cabinets painted Farrow & Ball’s blue-gray De Nimes. The kitchen now connects to a sunny pantry painted pale blue, a laundry room painted light yellow and a new mudroom with a diamond-patterned cement-tile floor.

The kitchen also flows into an oversized dining room, where there is space not only for a dining table and chairs, but also a tufted sofa and armchairs.

“When you wake up in the morning, there’s such beautiful light in the dining room. It’s a great place to sit on the sofa and read the paper,” Ms. Hendricks said, adding that the Shaker-style Chris Harter dining table “doubles as a work zone for laptops and kids’ homework.”

Throughout the house, they mixed traditional-looking furniture with clean-lined contemporary pieces — a scroll-arm sofa paired with a David Weeks Cross Cable chandelier in the living room, for example — to give it a fresh, collected look.

They covered some of the walls with patterned wallpaper, including a design based on abstracted pine trees from Fayce in the living room, and concocted an appealing color palette of unexpected hues based on the luminosity of each room.

“The closer you get to the southern side of the house, the brighter the colors get,” Ms. Hendricks said. “And then I just sort of embraced the north side and made those rooms more dark and moody.”



The house sits on 33 acres of field and forest that Ms. Hendricks described as “a fairy-tale setting.” Tony Cenicola/The New York Times



Ms. Hendricks and Mr. Churchill gutted the old kitchen and added a generous new island topped by a white-oak counter and bone-china Original BTC Christie pendant lamps (\$899). Tim Lenz



The dining room includes a casual seating area with upholstered furniture. A Shaker-style table by Chris Harter is illuminated by a Clark suspension lamp by Lambert & Fils (\$1,800). Tim Lenz

The rearmost section of the house was an odd two-story addition that appeared to have once been a shed, with a second-floor ceiling so low that Mr. Churchill, who is 6 feet 5 inches tall, couldn’t stand up. So they removed the second floor, salvaging the chestnut flooring to use in the entrance hall and other timbers for repairs. After fixing the foundation and straightening out the structure, they began transforming it into a double-height sunroom.



The renovation introduced built-in bookcases in the living room, painted Farrow & Ball’s Bancha green. Tim Lenz

While work on the sunroom continues, the rest of the house was completed in December 2018 at a cost of about \$750,000.

The family has now lived there for more than a year, but the past month has been the most rewarding, the couple said, as they shelter at home with their children.

“It was a little hard leaving our last house, because the kids were toddlers and formed their personalities there,” Ms. Hendricks said. “But we’re finally settling this new place as a family home.”

“We’re making family memories,” she said, “living in lockdown.”

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