

How Green Is Their Valley?

Princeton architect
Bob Bennett
turned a dilapidated
1760s house
into a showplace.

For five years, one New Jersey couple searched for the perfect country house in the Princeton area. What they found, set on 75 rolling acres, was a small, dark house, its walls filled with straw and mud. This is the tale of how two homeowners, who choose to remain anonymous, joined with a bon vivant architect and a stalwart decorator to coax a house out of the ruins and into the spotlight.





What were your first impressions of the property back in 1989?

The house was set up as a hunting lodge of sorts. When we drove in, the owner—in full hunting regalia, with camouflage, face paint, and all—was shooting at birds flying overhead.

The ceiling in the dining room sagged, the furnace heaved, the hot water was unreliable, and the wiring was from the 19th century. But we loved the setting and the land. So, even though it was uninhabitable, we bought it.

How did you choose an architect?

After scouring the country for an architect, we found Bob Bennett right in Princeton.

In what way did he infuse his personality into the home?

Bob is an elegant man with an elegant vision, whose genius is integrating his new work with the old. He is also irreverent and has a wicked sense of humor. His proportions, massing of spaces, flow between rooms, visual interest and integrity, and fanciful architectural details create a sense of graciousness.

How did the work progress?

At a furious pace! Because the house was so old, and the ceilings so low, we decided we needed at least one room with 10-foot ceilings. The formal living room was added, and the old living room became our library. We also added an enlarged kitchen and a family room, and the upstairs was completely reconfigured.

Tell us about your decorator.

Ruth Stevens [of Concord and Gloucester, Massachusetts] joined the



Clockwise from top: Nell, part border collie, poses in the passageway. A painting reminiscent of Charles Howard and Seabiscuit hangs in the family's 1820s library. The living room holds a collection of family heirlooms.



Design of the great room, from the Stark rug to the sofa custom-made to fit the bay window, was finished just in time for former President Clinton's 2004 book signing. The pine table is a family piece. The curtain rods and gold finials were imported from England.



Just beyond the formal dining room, the couple sometimes entertains on the patio overlooking the formal gardens.



project at the beginning and pored over Bob's plans, making significant suggestions. They worked symbiotically, sharing the same aesthetic and the same sense of humor. Bob loved her superb aesthetic confidence, innate sense of style, scale, and whimsy. Mrs. Stevens is glamorous, demanding and — we soon discovered — always right. We wouldn't make a move without her.

Your newly renovated house suited you well through the 1990s. When did you feel growing pains?

We sailed along until our oldest daughter's first fateful winter break home from college when she arrived with 15 huge boys and a slightly smaller number of girls! We had no room big enough and casual enough to hold this boisterous gang safely. We called Bob and Mrs. Stevens and asked for help.

This second renovation was designed with entertaining in mind?

The kitchen and the great room were built specifically for entertaining. Bob's idea was to have the new room look like a barn. Its beams came from a 19th-century Bucks County barn. The ceiling consists of rough Cyprus planks.

Tell us about Bill Clinton's visits.

Mr. Clinton came in August of 2000 for a fundraiser for our much-loved congressman, Rush Holt. In August 2004 he came again, this time for a signing of his new book in the barely finished great room. It was a wonderful baptism for the room. Our builders, Marty Lucash and Chris Montgomery, were guests at the party, and the carpenters and painters from the job helped park cars, stack books, and drive dignitaries.



Above: A shaded walkway. Left: The garden, also a Bennett design, is framed by hedges, creating an outdoor sanctuary.

Did Bob design the outdoor spaces?

Bob's initial training was as a landscape architect at Stanford School of Architecture. With hedges, stonewalls, and folly-like pool houses, he anchored the great room in the landscape, and gave it a human scale. Using the existing gardens, he developed a series of highly architectural outdoor rooms with hedges and white picket gates separating them.

What piece of advice you would you give someone who is planning to go through such an extensive renovation?

Take your architect and decorator through the house before you buy it! Although inspectors dissuaded us from buying the place, romance, of course, prevailed. In the end, the creativity of our architect, the grace of our decorator, and the fortitude of our wallet made the sweet and utterly impractical farmhouse we purchased in 1989 the happy country house it is for our family today. NJL



Clockwise from top: Lemon and Lilly take a stroll. A garden designed to be an outdoor room. Equestrian events, clinics, and demonstrations have been held in the barn, which is now Lemon's home.



Bennett replaced the existing pool house with two: one with a bath, outdoor shower, and changing rooms; the other with garden supplies and pool equipment.