

CONNECTICUT HOME

By Maria LaPiana

dream weaver

Melding past and present (and with an eye on the future), an architect reimagines his own home overlooking the water in Branford.

Photography by Peter Aaron [®] Esto

Clad in clapboard and native stone, the Simon-Bellamy home in Branford is composed of two pavilions—one old and one new—that are joined by a new glass-walled structure. A sheltering courtyard with harbor views was created in the space between them.



Some people have a knack for visualization; good decorators, for instance, can imagine how a custom piece of furniture will look before it's commissioned. Fashion designers "see" how a dress will drape before a bolt of fabric is even unfurled. As a rule, architects visualize better than anyone, picturing whole buildings in their heads, then considering countless variables—scale, orientation, slope, safety, space planning, zoning laws and budget among them—and finally guiding construction from blueprint to reality.

Mark Simon is such an architect. He lives with his wife, Penny Bellamy, on the water in Branford, on the high side of a narrow street, in a home he saw in his mind's eye long before it came to be. What started out as a modest cottage has since nearly doubled in size, evolving into a home tailored to the way they live today (Simon is a founding partner of Centerbook Architects, Bellamy a

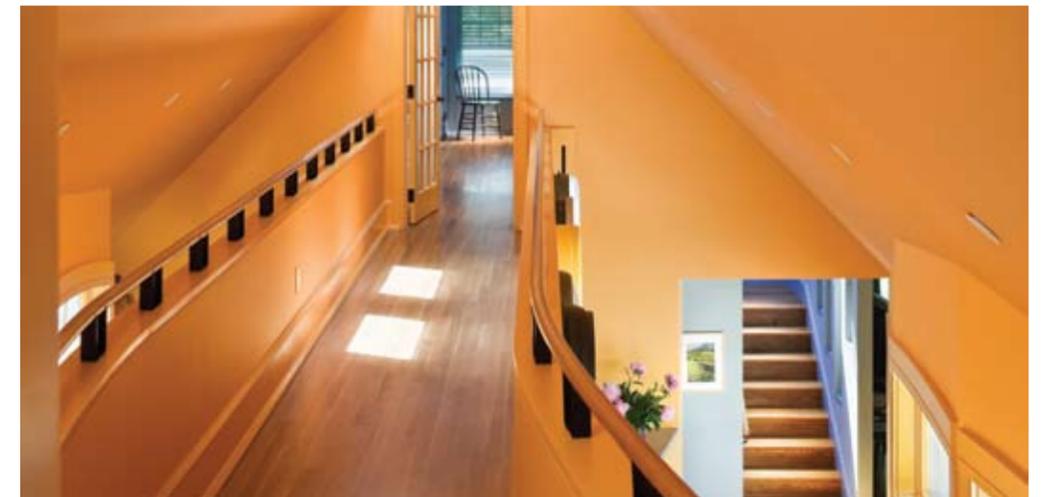
retired attorney and voracious reader who dotes on her grandchildren), a home that melds old and new, private and public, in a way only Simon could have imagined.

The original structure was designed by an unknown New Haven architect in 1918. "It had a simple but novel form—an amalgam of various American architectural traditions—Greek Revival, shingle style and summer cottage," says Simon. "I knew that when we got around to enlarging it, I wanted to keep its soul."

Today, that house is one of two pavilions connected by a glass-walled corridor, enclosing a three-sided terrace with views to the harbor across the street. It's built on a bedrock of beautiful Stony Creek granite, its warren of rooms designed with family—and the future—in mind.

Simon and Bellamy, who lived down the street at the time, bought the house from friends in 1997 and set about renovating it. They had planned to add on immediately, but time and money

A meniscus in three parts: The warm-toned "bridge" that connects the pavilions is a living space unto itself. *Opposite:* A small foyer opens up to a passageway bathed in light from front and back and graced with sculptures. *This page, top:* A streamlined galley kitchen forms the utilitarian piece of the puzzle; and, *bottom,* on the second floor, a catwalk artfully links the old and new wings of the house.





considerations postponed the expansion. “Those first renovations were what I like to call ‘a frontal lobotomy’ because they restructured the front of the house inside,” says Simon. The changes combined a small living room and dining room at the front of the house into one large living room. What had been a music room became a central dining room. They kept the small but serviceable original kitchen. Upstairs, two bedrooms and a glassed-in porch in front were reconfigured into a master bedroom suite with a new bath. “The original renovation had doors to nowhere,” remembers Bellamy, “but I knew it was going to be just fine. I totally trust Mark.”

many courtyards between buildings.” One in particular struck him, so he paced it off and made a mental note to revisit the design. Back home, in 2007, they took the plunge and added on the new wing: The space between the two structures became that courtyard, a sheltering outdoor room, visually expanding the now 5,000-square-foot home.

“I had decided that the kitchen, which is the heart of our house, should somehow be at the center, and have a view to the water. I tried a variety of ways to center the kitchen and create the courtyard, too, most of which were ‘extrusions’ of the house in a big U. I didn’t like them—I was stuck,” Simon recalls.

He turned to his love of Greek Revival architecture, and how it was used “to symbolize our new democracy in the early 19th century,” and it came to him: He would repeat the original design, which had large columns holding up a triangular second floor and roof. “One thing led to another, and I thought of two similar pavilions, both with columns front and back,” he says. “The new one would be smaller and deferential to the bigger, a ‘baby bear’ to the mom, 58 ▶

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imon and Bellamy traveled over the next few years, absorbing the sights and styles of the places they visited. “I kept the addition in mind on our trips,” says Simon. “The Alhambra in Granada, Spain, was especially inspiring, with its

The public rooms on the first floor are united by a cool blue palette and ultra-contemporary light fixtures designed by owner-architect Mark Simon. *Opposite:* A cozy dining room was fashioned from the previous owners’ music room in the heart of the house. *This page, top:* Bright colors, textures, sculptures and a glass-topped table filled with birds’ nests lend interest to the living room at the front of the original house; *bottom:* an unusual fireplace arrangement in the homey breakfast room.



Dream Weaver

◀49 so to speak. They are also ‘odes’ to Penny’s devotion to democratic ideals.”

To connect the two structures, says Simon, he settled on what he calls the “meniscus,” that is, “the funneling shape that a liquid takes when stretched between two solids, like water between your fingers.” This linking space would manifest as a glass-walled kitchen bathed in light from both front and back, painted in warm colors with a bridge overhead. “The image of a bridge above a kitchen has haunted my dreams for years,” Simon says. “I have no idea of its origin, but it lets you have a high space and use it too.” (The new kitchen allowed them to take out the old one, turning it into a great office for Bellamy.)

The new or “baby” pavilion, as Simon calls it, houses a comfortable breakfast room with an eye-level fireplace, a wonderful pantry with movable shelves, and an expanded living room, where colors pop and comfort reigns. “Every room has its own unique view,” says Bellamy, who selected the window treatments, the upholstered furnishings and other soft goods throughout the home.

She points out the bath adjacent to the family room, outfitted with accessible features in keeping with universal design, and

a sliding partition that one day might close off the two rooms from the rest of the house, making it a perfect master suite—“if there comes a time when we aren’t able to manage the stairs,” she says.

Simon elaborates: “When we bought the house, my father was slowly dying from his failing heart. He and my stepmother lived in a multistory apartment without an elevator; she had taken him to their house on the Cape, but had to have a carpenter construct a ramp into the house. It made a big impression on me. I designed this house with a ramp from the parking area and made sure that, if needed, we could live on one floor. I wanted all that to be ‘designed’ and cared about. It has been shown that seniors live longer and more happily if they can stay in their own homes as they decline. We’d like to do that.”

Nearby, a well-lit stairwell leads to the home’s second story, a paean to privacy. In the new wing: a guest room with treetop views of the harbor but no view to the courtyard. “This is what we call ‘the queen’s room,’” laughs Bellamy. “We designed it for our daughter and her husband.” The room has its own bath and can be shut off from the original house. Across the bridge suspended over the kitchen is another guest room, facing the back of the property, for the grandkids. Down the hall past several small bedrooms, a laundry room and bath complete the couple’s master suite,

its cozy walls lined with books, its windows taking advantage of the now-restored scenic vista of the waterfront.

Although the original house had been sited to take advantage of the harbor view, that view had gradually been lost over the years, according to Simon. “Perhaps the various owners had stopped caring, as two large trees across the street grew up and blocked it,” he says. “In any case, the front porch had been glassed in and the windows were limited. In both our renovations we increased the number of windows.”

The home is artful at every turn. Ever charmed by nooks and crannies, it has a modern sensibility, too, and is filled with paintings, sculpture, objets d’art. Simon’s father, Sidney Simon, was a professional artist, a painter and sculptor, and many of his paintings and smaller sculptures can be seen around the house.

Art is a family affair, explains Simon: “I have two artist sisters, one who designs lamps, a niece studying architecture, an artist stepfather and another niece, and our son, Tom, is getting his MFA in sculpture.” The couple’s collection includes a whimsical piece on the bluestone terrace in the courtyard: a spouting frog sculpted by Simon himself that squirts water into the feeder pool for water channels in the bluestone that flow down the stone steps at the terrace’s edge.

Throughout the house, color defines the spaces within. “I have always been comfortable working with color,” says Simon. “These colors evolved from the colors in our last house. We tried them in our first renovation, with the yellow-oranges in the kitchen, and liked them so much we kept them here. In this generation they emphasize the difference of the pavilions from the meniscus center. The center is very glassy and sunny by day, but keeps that spirit at night. The subtle blue-grays, which have a tiny bit of green, make other things look good—they are a great ‘background color.’”

Bellamy was in charge of the landscape plan. Exposed rock makes for a natural look while anchoring the house visually. Trees serve as a “green” device, shading the home in summer and allowing the sun to warm the interior in winter. A little bosk, as Bellamy calls it, to the south does a great job in that regard, says Simon. “Penny has led our landscaping design, and I love it.

“Somehow, although we came from different parts of the country with different traditions, we share an aesthetic that is simple but lively,” says Simon, who is a New York native. “Penny [who grew up in California] is my perfect client because she does trust me all the time, or at least is kind enough to claim that. We *have* had differences—about the color of a chair or couch, for instance—but we’ve always found a happy compromise. We both like to have fun and avoid being too precious.”