

AWAY

A Brand-New Very Old House

By KATHRYN MATTHEWS

“WHEN did you finish the renovation?” unsuspecting visitors would ask Gil Schafer, a Manhattan architect, when they first saw his Greek Revival-style weekend house in Dutchess County, N.Y. They were always taken aback when told that it was brand-new. It’s a gratifying compliment for Mr. Schafer, who designed his new house, built in 1999, to emulate the Greek Revivals nearby, most of which are well over 150 years old.

“People also perceive a timeworn quality because my house fits naturally into its physical surroundings,” Mr. Schafer said. This, too, is no accident.

The idea Mr. Schafer executed so successfully — a traditional-looking country house, outfitted with modern plumbing and state-of-the-art infrastructure (no ancient furnaces or fragile pipes, thank you!), that can accommodate a casual lifestyle — captivated many of the people who saw it. Soon, admirers of the house became clients. By 2002, Mr. Schafer had enough of a following to start his own firm, which, besides doing residential renovations and restorations, specializes in what he calls the “new-old” house. It

was a development he had not planned when he built his own place.

“I never intended to build a 3-D portfolio!” he said with a laugh.

In the early 1990s, when Mr. Schafer was a young architect living in New York, he began to dream of buying — and restoring — a 19th-century Greek Revival house in the Hudson Valley as a weekend retreat. His

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PHIL MANSFIELD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

MIDDLEFIELD Gil Schafer’s Greek Revival house, built in 1999.

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DETAILS From the left, the entrance to the new Greek Revival house of Gil Schafer, below, in Dutchess County, N.Y.; the handles on the cabinets only look old; a typically ornate staircase.

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love for old houses was deep-seated, harking back to a childhood spent in a 19th-century farmhouse in New Jersey. And working for a firm that focused on residential designs with classical origins, he had become especially enamored of the Greek Revival style common in the first half of the 19th century.

He concentrated his search in the village of Millbrook, N.Y., familiar and beloved from his boarding school days, and spent three years house hunting. The Greek Revivals he saw were beyond his \$400,000 purchase price limit, required prohibitively expensive renovations, or both.

In 1996, while driving down a country road in the neighboring town of Armenia, he spotted a sign that said "45 Acres for Sale by Owner." Wandering onto the property, he was captivated by the gently rolling topography and lush landscape. A dirt track led to a knoll overlooking a meadow ringed by black locust trees and a stand of old apple trees, bordered by hillside woodland. "I fell instantly in love with the land," Mr. Schafer said. "That's when I decided to stop looking — and to build my own 'old' house." Three months later, he bought the entire 45-acre parcel for a price he described as "less than \$200,000."

On a chilly Saturday afternoon in early November, the long, sinuous driveway to Mr. Schafer's weekend house offered glimpses of woodland, undulating meadow and a white colonnaded facade. At the end, where the drive ended in a gravelly crunch, Mr. Schafer appeared, dressed in a brown sweater, down vest and jeans, framed in the entrance of the house, which he calls Middlefield.

A Yale School of Architecture graduate, Mr. Schafer, 47, is on the board of

the Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America, a nonprofit organization in New York that promotes classical tradition in architecture; from 2003 to 2006, he was its chairman. His Manhattan firm, G. P. Schafer Architect, known for traditional residential architecture and particularly for old-looking new houses in pastoral settings, has worked on the country homes of the sitcom director James Burrows ("Cheers," "Frazier" and "Friends") and his wife, Debbie; the film producer Scott Rudin; and Donald Heald, a rare-books dealer, and his wife, Catherine, chief executive of a luxury travel firm.

When he was designing Middlefield in 1997, Mr. Schafer was limited by the bottom line. "As my own client," he said, "I had to be clever about squeezing value out of a dollar." Instead of building at the highest point on the land, where, he explained, laying down a driveway alone would have cost "zillions," he placed the house lower, on the pretty knoll in midfield that had originally caught his eye.

CONSTRUCTION began in November 1997 and took 14 months to complete. The house has 3,000 square feet of space, three bedrooms, three and a half bathrooms and three fireplaces, and is equipped with central air and heat, a stereo sound system and a lawn irrigation system. In the winter of 1999, Mr. Schafer moved in.

Though he declined to divulge the total building cost, he estimated that a client might pay about \$650 per square foot for the same house today. "Ten years ago," he said, "I paid around half that amount per square foot."

Determined that his house look as if it had been built in the 1840s, reflecting the local Hudson Valley vernacular, Mr.



Schafer studied local examples and consulted sources including pattern books by the 19th-century architects Asher Benjamin and Minard LeFevre.

The end result, a temple-with-wings structure, is rich in period details. Doric columns front a two-story central portico flanked by a lower kitchen wing on one side and an enclosed porch on the other. The pediment above the portico has a fanlight, and the front door has sidelights and a transom window. The main entrance opens onto a long hallway, with a double parlor dining room and living room off to the side. Mr. Schafer also incorporated historically appropriate molding profiles, stair balusters and pocket doors.

He had decorating help from Manhattan design professionals including the color consultant Eve Ashcraft, the decorator Miles Redd and the architectural hardware designer Rhett Butler of E. R. Butler & Company.

The furnishings are mostly 19th-century English and American antiques that Mr. Schafer inherited or bought at auctions and flea markets in New York and abroad. Ms. Ashcraft's colors are soft but sophisticated; most striking are hand-painted, two-toned sage stripes in the hallway and glazed cognac walls in the front parlor dining room.

Each of the bedrooms is distinct. The one above the east kitchen wing has two beds, neutral sea-grass flooring and a green-hued floral wallpaper based on a chintz pattern at Bowood House in Wiltshire, England. The northwest-facing blue bedroom, which feels vaguely British Colonial, is dominated by a metal canopy bed draped in a diaphanous Indian print. In the master bedroom, Mr. Redd covered the walls in wheat-grass-patterned linen fabric, producing a visual effect that Mr. Schafer likened to "being in the trees." Another playful touch is a "men in hats"-themed collection of mostly 19th-century paintings and prints adorning the walls.

Landscape design plays an integral role in giving Middlefield the feeling of a place that has long existed. Too often, Mr. Schafer said, new houses look as if they were dropped into a cornfield. Deborah Nevins, a garden designer, helped settle the house into the property with hedges, stone walls and terraced grades creating a framework of outdoor rooms and connecting the house with the outdoors. Grass-and-fieldstone steps lead to a 50-by-50-foot space framed by a hornbeam hedge where Mr. Schafer likes to play croquet in the summer.

Mr. Schafer found various ways to cut costs. His windows are mass-produced, not custom-designed. Kitchen cabinet drawer handles look convincingly 19th century, but they are actually brass bin pulls that Mr. Schafer bought from Pot-

tery Barn and then treated to give them a patina of age. Tubs and shower surfaces are inexpensive subway tile. Unable to afford beautiful old flooring in the whole house, Mr. Schafer installed antique wood in the hallways and bathrooms but substituted new Southern yellow pine in the kitchen and covered plywood floors in the living room and dining room parlors with wall-to-wall sea-grass carpeting.

HIS profession seems destined; his paternal great-great-grandfather and grandfather were also architects. Born in Cleveland, he grew up in Chester, N.J., from which his father, a stockbroker, commuted to Wall Street. His mother enjoyed animal husbandry, raising cows and sheep that Mr. Schafer helped tend. Fresh out of Yale, he took his first job in 1988 with the ultramodern Swiss-French deconstructionist architect Bernard Tschumi, then dean of the Graduate School of Architecture at Columbia University. Subsequently, he worked in several traditional residential architecture practices.

Coming from a family of introverts, Mr. Schafer admits to being a recluse. But the house has coaxed him into sociability. Ten years ago he couldn't have imagined hosting a dinner for more than six; last summer, he gave a cocktail party for 150. He said, "The house has helped me step out of my shell."

The beauty of the area still imbues Mr. Schafer with a magical sense of place. Several months ago, on a late summer evening, he was driving from the supermarket back to Middlefield. The sun was setting in the valley. Freshly rolled bales of hay dotted the fields. Compelled to indulge a simple but restorative pleasure, he said, "I pulled off the road and enjoyed the view."

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