THE NEW LIVING ROOM BOSTONIANS AT HOME PERFECT POOLS

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Between the time the cows moved out and the guests checked in, imaginative designers transformed a Berkshire farm into an upscale inn.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEORGE W. GARDNER

Exposed beams are Hardcastle's answer to the "ooky look" she finds in most rural decor.

Seen from the road, the Gedney Farm looks as though it could still be a working farm. If you hadn't noticed the gravel driveway and the sign, you might expect the capacious Normandy-style barns to house cows and horses and tractors. But one step beyond the barn doors and you know you are in a place designed for human hospitality—a country inn where guests can dine on roasted pheasant and where all the bathrooms have skylights and jacuzzis. Inside as well as out, though, the old barns don't let you forget their history.

That was precisely the intention of Bob Swain, the architect who renovated the Berkshire farm, and the people who worked with him, like Berkshire artist Pamela Hardcastle. "We wanted to preserve the wonderful rural character of the farm," Swain explains. "I thought the most important thing we could do was to save as much of the original buildings as possible. We wanted to make the structural renovations almost transparent."

In much the same spirit, Hardcastle strove for New England simplicity for the interiors. "We really tried to steer clear of that country-fancy-frilly look," she says. "We wanted to create a ruffle-free environment."

Thanks to her vigilance and Swain's preservationist instincts, the inn makes the most of its rural ancestry. The Gedney Farm consists of two picturesque barns built around the turn of the century on a lush parcel of Berkshire countryside in New Marlborough, Massachusetts. In the larger barn, diners enjoy gourmet cuisine where Percherons once munched their oats and hay. Across the way, what was once the dairy barn now houses eleven guest suites.

Until owners Bradford Wagstaff and Leslie Miller decided to convert it a few years ago, the Gedney Farm had actually been a working farm. Wagstaff, who also owns the Inn on the Green down the road, knew the requirements for an upscale inn, but wanted to let the place evolve gradually.

According to Pamela Hardcastle, who selected many of the fabrics and furnishings for the interiors, the absence of predetermined ideas made the design process fluid and enjoyable. "Once the basic structure was in place, we started bouncing ideas around. It was really an ongoing process. None of us had to work under a deadline—I think that helped create a sense of fun around the place."

The designers' sense of fun may be what gives the rooms some of their personality. When you enter the guest quarters, for example, you are in a chandelier-lit hallway with a ceiling that reveals the barn's original beams. A fire burning in the homey granite fireplace takes the chill off the spring air. The hall is its own space—at once barnlike and welcoming. The guest suites on two levels surrounding the hall seem almost like separate dwellings.

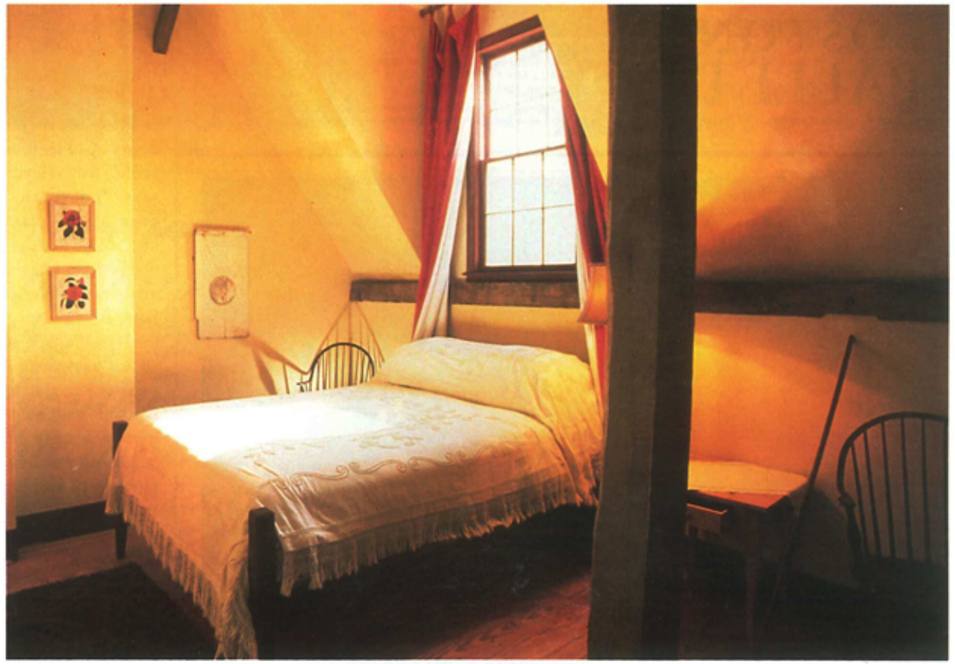
Architect Swain explains this effect: "We decided to try a building-within-a-building approach. That way, we could preserve the original interior without compromising the quality of service.

The idea is almost Tuscan—to create the appearance of a little village inside the building, with the hall corridor running like a street down the length of the barn. There's even a kind of town square in the middle—a little courtyard where the fireplace stands."

Adding to the village-like impression, each of the second-tier units has a balcony that looks out over the corridor. In the bathrooms, skylights open onto the original wood ceiling. "We wanted each of the rooms to have a direct connection with the old barn," says Swain.

Every guest suite has its own distinct character; each has slightly different dimensions, different roof angles, different windows. "We were committed to building a personal feeling into each room," Swain says, "while at the same time offering a uniformity of service. That is, every room is approximately the same size, and has basically the same types of furniture, but each one is a separate creation."

Hardcastle described how the design for each guest room took its own somewhat serendipitous course. "In one of the rooms, we had an 1836 red-and-blue coverlet that everyone just loved; so we took that as a starting point and designed the room around its texture. In another room, we found ourselves moving in an oriental, chinoiserie direction. We tried to let each room evolve on its own, rather than follow a preset plan."



Hardcastle kept the furnishings of the guest rooms stylishly spare, creating a pure, open feeling.

While there may have been no predetermined plan, there was the strong wish to honor the original architecture and to avoid frills and other distractions—anything that smacks of what Hardcastle calls the "ooky look." The furnishings in the guest rooms are stylishly spare. Each room has a bed, table, and chair, with an occasional decorative element such as a hooked rug on the wall.

The color schemes are less restrained—a sharp barn red and a colonial blue predominate. "The idea was to use strong colors to contrast the starkness of the barn itself," says Hardcastle. By mixing a yellow dye in with the plaster for the interior walls, she and her colleagues were able to create a neutral warmth for the background.

The rooms have a clean and open feeling. The effect is an almost Puritan simplicity. "Puritan" might not sound like a compliment to many designers, but Pamela Hardcastle puts the term in a historical perspective that gives it a positive meaning. "The Puritans are actually terribly misunderstood. The word "puritan" tends to conjure up a negative image for most people. But if you look at the homes of that period, many people actually owned beautiful Jacobean furnishings, and took great pride in them. They were working with limited means, so of course they had to keep things simple. But there's no question that they appreciated the finer things in life. Following in that tradition, we wanted to keep things simple, but we weren't afraid of the occasional flourish."

The simple-with-flourish approach achieves its most dramatic results in the old horse barn that houses the restaurant and public gathering area. The most striking thing about the barn interior is its airy expansiveness. The ceiling rises up to the cavernous round roof, the original wood of the walls and floors is exposed, and the barn doors open out to the old pastures (now the site of a sculpture garden), and the rolling Berkshire hills beyond.

"We made a commitment to preserve all of that interior space, rather than exploit it," says Swain. "With all of that room available, we could have easily added additional floors or made other structural changes, but as it turned out, we did the opposite: we actually ended up removing parts of the existing structure to create even more space."

This is not the sort of space you'd expect to find in a country inn—it's hardly what one would call cozy. But it's true to the rural character of the place, and another instance of how Swain and his colleagues gave the farm a new life while preserving the forms of the old.

The entire renovation is a testament to the creativity of the designers in re-utilizing resources. The original horse stables were converted into dining nooks. The old birthing barn—a long rectangular space partitioned off from the rest of the barn—was transformed into a large dining area with a banquet table fashioned from left-over shelving. Down below, the former manure stable now func-

tions as the service kitchen.

In another bit of recycling, stainless steel milk pipes were made into shower curtains and closet rods. Says owner Brad Wagstaff:

"After we shut down the dairy operation, we had no idea what to do with all this piping-this was extremely high-quality, expensive material, but we couldn't find any easy way to dispose of it. As it turned out, the pipes make a phenomenal material for the rods—you could do chin-ups on them."

Rising up one side of the barn is an enormous stone chimney which, despite its rustic appearance, is actually a new addition. The installation was a feat that involved opening a hole in the ceiling and lowering the entire stone column down inside with an industrial crane.

Swain had to tread carefully between faithfulness to the buildings' past and the building code requirements for a commercial establishment. The roof of the dairy barn, for instance, had to be insulated and completely recovered to meet code. "The easy way to do it would have been to redo the ceiling with a layer of internal insulation," he says. "But [owner Wagstaff] was intent on keeping the original ceiling visible. So instead, we decided to work in the other direction: we put a layer of foam insulation on top of the existing roof, then recovered it with slate. It was a much more expensive alternative—that's a lot of slate—but the result is almost transparent."

As you might expect in structures that were not built with human comforts in mind, heating was a major concern. Even after the insulation and rewiring were done, there was the problem of keeping the rooms warm without compromising the rustic appearance. In the guest quarters, Swain accomplished this by using electric radiant heat—a series of plastic panels embedded inside the walls. The huge space of the horse barn posed an even greater challenge. The solution: gas-radiant heating units circling the upper reaches of the structure. A plan is under way to seal off the lower part of the barn with a canvas canopy during winter.

Gedney Farm remains very much a work in progress, and the owners expect it to stay that way. "It's wonderful to work with a living piece of architecture, rather than a static design," says Swain. "This place is continually unfolding." □

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