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FRENCH NORMANDY IN GREENWICH

SUSTAINABLE RESTORATION IN LOS ANGELES

CLIMATE CHANGE AND HISTORICAL STRUCTURES

For a French Normandy manor house on a Greenwich, Connecticut, estate, architect Charles Hilton took inspiration from Marie Antoinette's Hameau de la Reine at Versailles.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT BENSON PHOTOGRAPHY
(UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED)

While the finished product looks deceptively simple, bricklaying is a fine art, a skill that demands precision at every turn. Imagine the masons' confusion, then, when architect Charles Hilton stopped by a worksite of his one day and said to the craftsmen: "Throw away your transits, your plumb lines, your pointing. Just do it by eye." His encouragement of a free-style approach got the architect just the result he was after: more than 200 half-timbered bays in-filled with brick laid so randomly that no two patterns are alike.

Over his 40-year career, Hilton has put much thought into classical architecture's role in the modern world. He is a stickler for getting even the smallest details right, no matter what genre he's building in. But for this project, a French Normandy manor house in Greenwich, Connecticut, the definition of "right" was sometimes counterintuitive. "It didn't look rustic enough," says Hilton. "In the old days, they weren't doing all that stuff to lay the bricks straight."

Between the 15th and 17th centuries, in the Normandy region of France, the rural vernacular was expressed by post-and-beam dwellings clad in brick, stone, stucco, shingle, or any combination thereof. Decorative half-timbering on a portion of the façade was ubiquitous, and other features included multi-pane windows, dormers with hip or shed roofs, and plank-like entry doors with large decorative wrought-iron hinges. Barns were attached to the living quarters, and there was a central tower for the storage of grain or silage, usually cylindrical but in some instances square or octagonal.

The French manor house, a revival style that harkens back to medieval European architecture, inspired Hilton, whose charge was to design a residence on a 13-acre property where for over the span of two decades he had left his mark on a variety of projects—a Georgian house, a gazebo, a pool house, a tool shed and other service buildings, all complemented by landscape architect Charles J. Stick's magnificent gardens, orchards, and berry fields appointed with sculptures and follies. But it wasn't until a trip to France brought him to the Hameau de la Reine at Versailles that his stylistic hunch for the house in Greenwich was affirmed. "I loved the scale of the structures, the earthiness and tactile sense of the materials, and the playfulness of the designs," says Hilton. Built for Marie Antoinette in 1783, the Petite Hamlet so captivated the architect that he snapped hundreds of photos and once home announced to the homeowner, "I've found our aesthetic direction."

"It was really appropriate for the agrarian feel we were trying to create," says Hilton, explaining that his clients (husband and wife are both avid gardeners and cooks) dreamed

A sweeping spiral staircase with iron and nickel balusters and a French polished antique walnut handrail lead from the master bedroom to the master study above. Beneath is a hand scraped and finished Bordeaux pattern oak floor by Historic Floors in Greenwich, Connecticut.

Nicholas Rotandi Photography photo

The two-and-a-half-story great room is constructed with an antique timber frame in filled with French plaster walls. The west wall of the room opens to the property's ornamental gardens beyond through a two-story timber framed bay window inspired by Lutyens's Deanery.

"It's a journey I didn't know I was going on when I started."

—ARCHITECT CHARLES HILTON

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of having their own organic farm. "We used brick, slate, and stone, which were the materials we used on the main [Georgian] estate, so there was a tie to the materials used earlier, making it stylistically compatible but distinct." In contrast to the Georgian dwelling, the French Norman building, referred to as the Barn, is less formal in structure and uses more casual materials.

"Once we selected the architectural direction, we tried to stay fairly pure to that inspiration," says Hilton, "but we have to build for our local climate and to meet today's codes." So, for example, whereas an authentic French Normandy house would have been built with native beige limestone, they used Connecticut fieldstone, knowing that limestone wouldn't hold up well in the New England weather. To get one particular effect they wanted without using French limestone, "We had an off-white granite carved for the front door surround and some other accents," notes Hilton. Additionally, fieldstone for the base matches the stonewalls on the property, a vernacular treatment. In lieu of authentic oak windows from France that were beautiful but lacked proper weather-stripping and screens, the architect turned to Artistic Doors and Windows in New Jersey, who replicated the casements based on a traditional French knuckle design, customizing them in a way that was true to the period and style of the house. To get the right, period-appropriate colors, sizes, and shapes for the Roman brick nogging, Hilton commissioned custom bricks from Ludowici, who typically produce terra cotta roofing tiles.

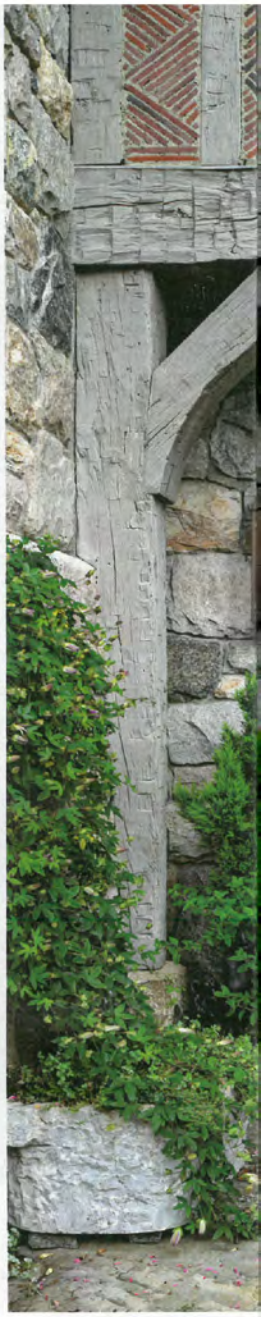
The French Normandy aesthetic continues inside where authentic materials were used more faithfully than on the exterior since weather factors weren't a concern. The great room's dramatic walk-in fireplace was a thoroughly transcontinental collaboration—the U.S.-based architectural team supplied drawings to a quarry team in France who cut, carved, and antiqued the surface texture of the French Camargue limestone pieces before shipping them to Greenwich. With its massive hearth and 30-foot height, the great room is the focal point of the home and sets its prevailing stylistic tone, overseen by designer Isabelle Vanneck. The soaring ceiling is composed of antique timber planks supported by a dramatic system of antique hand-finished timber trusses that replicate the old construction. Greenwich-based Stephen Gamble finished all the distressed stained wood, antiqued the casework, and skillfully applied the imported French plaster.

Adjacent to the great room, a 27-foot-long timbered arch announces the entryway to the kitchen, a near-professional grade work space where rustic period details like French Camargue limestone flooring and oak cabinetry set the stage for complementary elements like extra-large concrete countertops and other modern amenities. From top to bottom, the tower houses an office, the master bedroom, and a 250-square-foot wine cellar where several thousand bottles can be stored.

Hilton's French Normandy manor house took shape on a trip abroad, so it's apt that the architect refers to its detail- and labor-intensive execution, along with the other seven buildings on the property, this way: "It's a journey I didn't know I was going on when I started," he says. "I'm definitely lucky!"

ABOVE The guest bedroom is approached from an oak staircase with carved balusters and newel posts. A 12' wide pocket door retracts to reveal a balcony overlooking the soaring great room below.

OPPOSITE Opposite the dining area and bay window is the two-story carved Camargue stone fireplace and seating area with a painting commissioned from artist Robert Kushner.



ABOVE Visitors arrive up a stone and cobble lined drive to the parking court. A majestic stone tower anchors the northeast corner of the building overlooking the surrounding apple orchard.

RIGHT The third floor master study is tucked beneath the tower's roof and enjoys panoramic views of the farm's gardens and orchards below.

CENTER The façade is clad with Connecticut fieldstone with carved granite quoin accents, antique hand-hewn oak and chestnut timbers, and custom-made Ludowici Roman brick nogging.

FAR RIGHT The homes wine cellar is framed with heavy rusticated antique beams fitted with custom oak cabinetry. The flooring integrates the cellar Roman brick and Camargue stone flooring.