

RD

RESIDENTIAL DESIGN

FOR ARCHITECTS AND BUILDERS
OF DISTINCTIVE HOMES

VOL. 5, 2025

Reimaginings

CASE STUDY





Begin Again

A historic stone house moves into the future alongside vestiges of its past.

BY CHERYL WEBER

FOUR WINDS

ARCHITECT: ROLFS ELERT OFFICE

BUILDER: TALLMAN BUILDING COMPANY

LOCATION: DARIEN, CONNECTICUT

With their proximity to New York City, Connecticut's coastal towns have long attracted wealthy families who built distinctive stone houses on pastoral tracts of land. Some of these structures were the work of architect and master stone mason Frazier Forman Peters, who reportedly built 41 homes in Westport alone between 1924 and 1936. One example of his work, in nearby Darien, attracted Rudi Elert's clients a few years ago. Although it was designed by local architect Calvin Kiessling,





Peters built the stately house with a slate roof, copper gutters, steel casement windows, and bronze screens, laying the masonry in a pioneering style he described in “House of Stone,” a treatise on stone construction.

Rudi’s clients, a young couple without children at the time, purchased it from an older couple who had lived there for many years. The clients moved in only briefly before renovations began—they had an apartment in New York City and decamped to the country with some friends when the pandemic hit. “They turned it into a kind of WeWork space for their friends,” says Rudi, AIA. “Once we broke ground, they left the house.”

Built in 1931, the two-story structure was modest. It included a one-story office appendage on the front, topped with the later addition of a primary bedroom. A one-story living room extended from the back of the house on the same side. Upstairs were four more bedrooms, including a guest suite over the street-facing garage, which formed an L-shaped footprint. Although the clients liked the old stone architecture, the interior had low ceilings and a choppy floor plan. They requested a five-bedroom house in which to raise their future family, including a big dining room where they could host extended-family gatherings.

“The project became more and more ambitious through the design process and into construction,” says Rudi. “In the end we could only salvage the masonry portion of building, but we took a lot of design cues from the original house. It’s essentially new construction with vestiges of the old stone building.”

Behind the entryway (top) is the new dining room (above) and refurbished two-part living room that juts out toward the back. Some of its ceiling beams were preserved and the paneling reportioned.

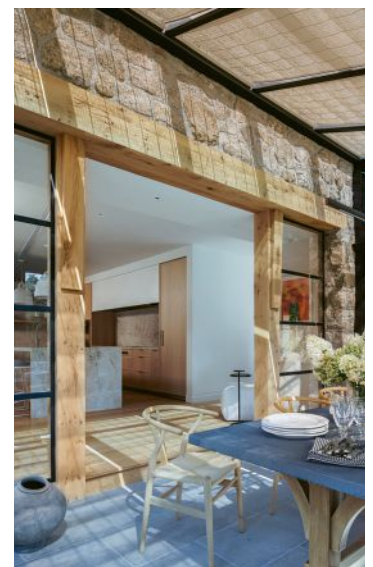


Clean Sweep

Houses like this often require a molting process. Here it shed the addition above the office, along with the muddled footprint. The new scheme extends the horizontal massing to the left, or south, as a rectangular two-story structure, creating gracious living and entertaining spaces on the main level, with the bedrooms concentrated above. “It was important to keep the integrity of the existing house, no rooflines taller and everything else subordinate,” Rudi says. The cleavage between the original house and the new building mass becomes clear at the central staircase, which was flipped front to back but is in roughly the same location as the old one. Here in the stair hall, the character of the former exterior stone wall is on full display, and everything to the left of the wall is new.



The dining room (top left) is separate from the kitchen, which forms a knuckle between the conservatory-like breakfast room (below) and family room (next page).





“The clients wanted to accentuate as much of the existing stone architecture as we could,” Rudi says. “We kept the stone wall planes predominantly in the three-story circulation knuckle. We put the addition against that wall, extruding the main mass and creating a vertical circulation gap between the old and new.”

Maintaining its original position on the northwest, the living room looks across a rear terrace to a new family room volume and porch that projects out behind the kitchen. In front, the garage was rebuilt with a three-car bay facing south, away from the front door, which allowed for a private family entrance. “We flipped the garage access to create a motor court in the back of the garage,” Rudi explains. “Daily living occurs on the left, and they see the car court as a play court for their kids—there are good sight lines.”



Upstairs, the primary suite sits atop the family room addition. Separated from the couple’s quarters by the stair hall, two more bedrooms inhabit the old part of the house on the north, and two more are situated above the garage. A partial basement contains a wine room, sauna and changing room, bath, bunk room, and gym.

Achieving this sense of spaciousness required a major excavation and a complete reframing of the house and roof. “There was an extensive amount of ledge,” says builder Bill Manderville. Blasting into bedrock, “we dug the basement 17 feet below the existing footings while underpinning the foundation.” They also lowered the first floor about 14 inches to achieve taller ceilings, raised the roof 6 inches on the second floor, and created vaulted areas on both levels.

New opportunities arose as the demolition progressed, and the project grew in substance. “It was a cascading effect,” Rudi says. “Once we realized the windows wouldn’t meet energy performance standards, we had the opportunity to raise the roof and put new windows in bigger openings. The window heads had been squat, maybe 8 feet. The client is tall, and we raised the second-floor window datum. As we got into lowering the floor and raising the ceilings, we had to reframe all the rooms to support the new roof. And we went through many program iterations to get the adjacencies right. Almost until construction started, we were flipping the orientation of

Top: A new family room faces the existing living room across a stone terrace. Above: The architects exposed the office’s original roofline after removing the addition above it.



the kitchen to better address the site around the house. Once we got through those decisions, it was smooth sailing.”

Well Manored

The living room is one of the few rooms that retained its existing volume. Although the window openings were expanded to the floor, the team preserved the fireplace, some of the decorative beams, and the two seating areas defined by a flat ceiling and a vaulted space. The office footprint and walls also remained, but after the bedroom addition above was removed, it received a vaulted ceiling. Its roofline matches the trace of the old roofline they could see on the exterior. And the office’s leaky, leaded glass windows were recycled and replaced in kind.

“The original house was quite simple and austere; it didn’t have crown moldings, and the trim pieces were rough cut, so the new detailing took cues from the old,” says Rudi. The updates included tapered brackets on the posts and some of the windows and doors, which lend an agrarian feel. A palette

of steel windows, plaster walls, and white oak imparts a clean and inviting vibe. These were detailed as plaster HVAC diffusers in the ceiling, rabbeted oak door jambs with plaster returns, herringbone-pattern flooring in the entry and primary bath, and oak casings within large openings and on select ceilings. The welcoming dining room the couple requested sits behind the entry hall where a sunroom once stood, its trio of French doors opening to the pool garden.

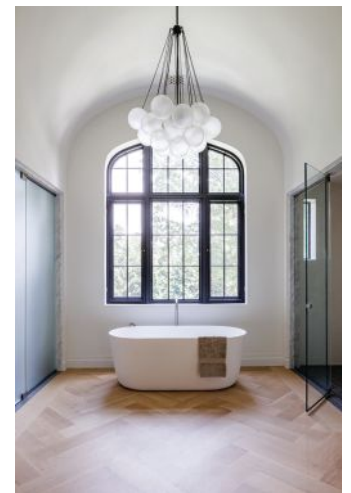
Stunning yet understated, the entry hall’s cascading staircase looks designed to ease the formerly urban couple into country-house life. Its curvaceous raised stringer holds bronze balusters—simple dowels—and a mahogany handrail. A full-length window at the end of the first- and second-floor stair halls accentuates the dividing line between old and new. “At first, the wife thought the big windows would be too contemporary, but they’re reined in by oak beams,” Rudi says. “As it evolved, the balance of contemporary elements with traditional elements like wood and heavy stone worked for them.” A skylight on the top floor sits flush with the slate roof, illuminating the stairwell all the way to the basement.

On the first floor of the addition, the core living spaces—kitchen, breakfast room, and family room—are separate but visually connected: the kitchen acts as a hinge between the family room and the conservatory-like breakfast room that bumps out on the south. “It’s not a particularly open concept, but there are adjacencies,” Rudi says. “They wanted separation between the kitchen and dining room, but the breakfast room is an important space for them.”

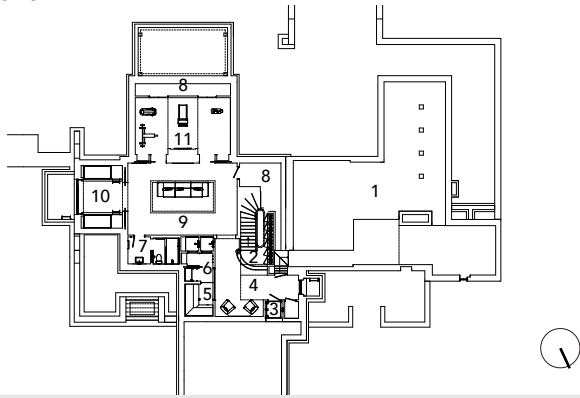
A study in light and serenity, the kitchen has bleached walnut cabinetry, a plastered ventilation hood, and a quartzite backsplash and countertops. White laminate cabinets in the back kitchen, directly behind the range, are combined with zellige-tiled walls. “The kettle bell lights were the wife’s choice,” Rudi says. “She had a family history with the kitchen designer and picked many of the light fixtures, tiles, and soft goods.”



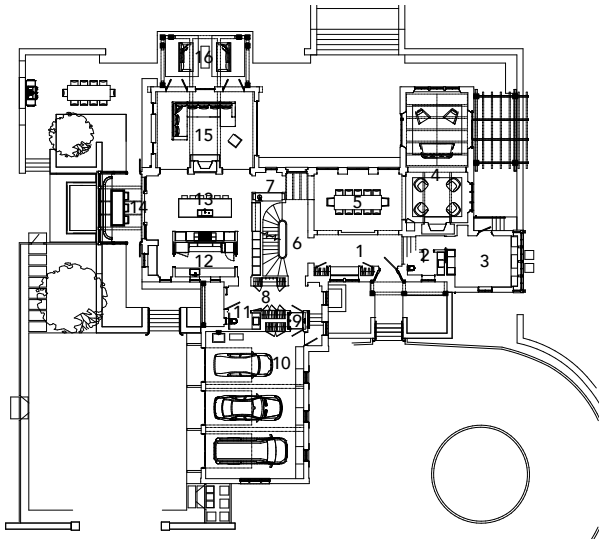
Original exterior stone and a full-height window (top) delineate old and new. Sloped ceilings in the primary suite impart a sense of being under the roof.



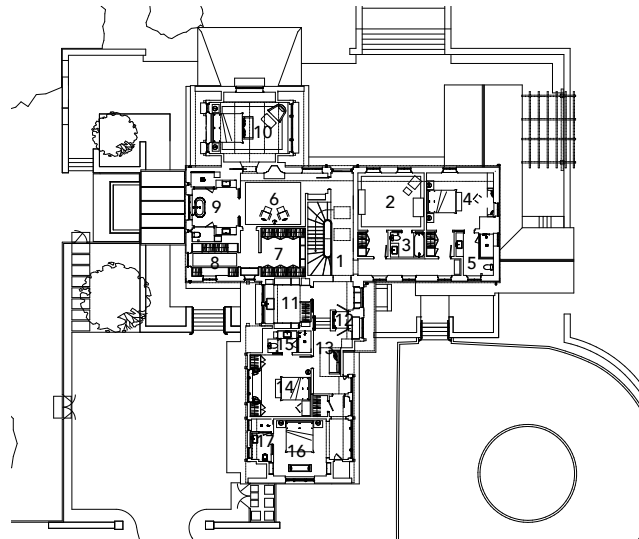
CASE STUDY



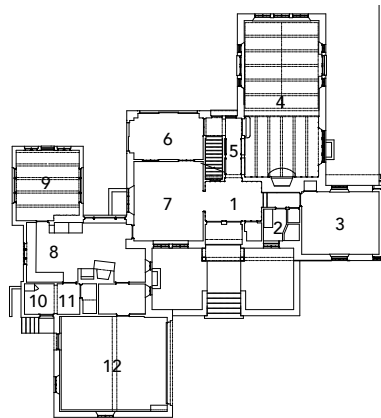
BASEMENT PLAN | 1. Existing Basement | 2. Wine Storage | 3. Elevator
4. Lounging Area | 5. Sauna | 6. Changing Room | 7. Basement Bathroom
8. Mechanical Closet | 9. Sitting Area | 10. Bunkroom | 11. Gym



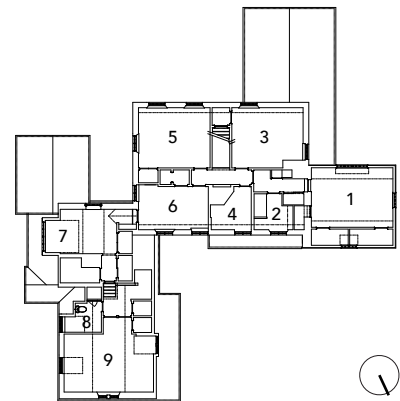
FIRST-FLOOR PLAN | 1. Entry Hall | 2. Powder Room | 3. Office
4. Living Room | 5. Dining Room | 6. Stair Hall | 7. Butlers' Bar
8. Mudroom | 9. Elevator | 10. Garage | 11. Powder Room
12. Laundry / Pantry | 13. Kitchen | 14. Breakfast Room | 15. Family Room | 16. Porch



SECOND-FLOOR PLAN | 1. Stair Hall | 2. Bedroom 1 | 3. Bathroom 1
4. Bedroom 2 | 5. Bathroom 2 | 6. Primary Sitting | 7. Dressing 1
8. Dressing 2 | 9. Primary Bathroom | 10. Primary Bedroom
11. Laundry Room | 12. Elevator | 13. Rear Hall | 14. Bedroom 3
15. Bathroom 3 | 16. Guest Bedroom | 17. Guest Bathroom



EXISTING FIRST-FLOOR PLAN | 1. Entry
2. Bathroom | 3. Office | 4. Living Room
5. Hall | 6. Sunroom | 7. Dining Room
8. Kitchen | 9. Breakfast Room | 10. Laundry Room | 11. Mudroom | 12. Garage



EXISTING SECOND-FLOOR PLAN
1. Primary Bedroom | 2. Primary Bathroom
3. Bedroom 1 | 4. Bathroom | 5. Bedroom 2
6. Gym | 7. Bedroom 3 | 8. Guest Bathroom
9. Guest Bedroom

Almost all the second-story rooms have vaulted ceilings. “One of the things they liked about the old house was the feeling of being under the roof and the sloped character of these vaulted spaces,” Rudi recalls. The primary suite includes a sitting area with a fireplace that they envisioned as a flexible nursery. Nearby is a well-appointed laundry-cum-craft room, outfitted as a small kitchen on the second floor.

Stone Soul

Like the old interiors, the original exterior was not bespoke, though it was unique for its time. Mosaic-patterned local stone had been laid on the inside of the formwork and a concrete shell poured behind it in 2-foot lifts. Peters developed the technique as an antidote to old European buildings, where, he theorized, horizon-



Light from a second-story roof window reaches down to the basement, which contains wine storage, sauna, gym, and bunkroom.

tally laid stones contributed to moisture problems. “He thought if he turned the stone vertical, moisture would be taken care of, and the concrete backing would be impervious to water,” Rudi says. “There was no practical way to recreate his technique. As their masons were

laying the original wall, they didn’t know what it would look like because they were working with the back of the stone and the formwork was on the front. And because the building had been changed over years, there wasn’t much of an original masonry language we could work from.”

Four Winds

Darien, Connecticut

ARCHITECT: Rudi Elert, AIA, principal in charge; Bryce Willis, project architect, Rolfs Elert Office, Port Chester, New York

BUILDER: Bill Manderville, Tallman Building Company, Southport, Connecticut

INTERIOR DESIGNER: Savage Designs, Fairfield County, Connecticut

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Janice Parker Landscape Architect, Greenwich, Connecticut

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: Edward Stanley Engineers, Guilford, Connecticut

CIVIL ENGINEER: S.E. Minor & Co., Greenwich, Connecticut

PROJECT SIZE: 12,400 square feet (original house 8,060 square feet)

SITE SIZE: 3.4 acres

CONSTRUCTION COST: Withheld

PHOTOGRAPHY: Stefan Radtke

KEY PRODUCTS

ACOUSTIC: ROXUL Safe ‘n’ Sound

CABINETRY: de Guilio (kitchen), Fairfield County Millwork

COOKTOP: Wolf

CLADDING: Stone veneer, Boral siding, stucco with Sto finish

COUNTERTOPS: Belgian bluestone, Taj Mahal quartzite, Indiana limestone, soapstone, Caesarstone, Nestos, Carrara, Alleanza Dolomiti Extra

ELEVATOR: Custom Elevator Manufacturing Co.

ENGINEERED LUMBER: Weyerhaeuser Trus Joist

ENTRY DOORS/HARDWARE: Creekside Millwork, Baldwin

FASTENERS: Simpson Strong-Tie

FAUCETS: Waterstone, Hansgrohe, MGS, Waterworks, Kohler

FOUNDATION: Poured-in-place reinforced concrete

GARAGE DOORS/OPENERS: Hormann – Northwest Door, LiftMaster opener

HUMIDITY CONTROL: Condair

HVAC SYSTEM: Lochinvar, Trane

ICEMAKER: Hoshizaki

INSULATION: ROXUL, spray foam

LIGHTING: BK, Aurora Light (exterior), Element/Visual Comfort, Q-Tran, WAC

LIGHTING CONTROL SYSTEMS: Lutron HomeWorks, Forbes & Lomax

MILLWORK AND TRIM: Mahogany

OTHER EXTERIOR MATERIALS: Green white oak columns, beams, brackets, lintels; red cedar pergola; bluestone pavers

OUTDOOR SHOWER: JEE-O

OVENS: Wolf

PIPING: PEX

PORCH HEATER: Infratech

RADIANT HEATING: Uponor

REFRIGERATORS: Sub-Zero

ROOFING: Vermont Slate

SAUNA: Harvia Sauna

SHOWER ENCLOSURE: Mr. Shower Door

SINKS: Rohl, integral stone, Kohler, Kallista, Fireclay

SKYLIGHTS: Glazing Vision (skylights), Renaissance Conservatories

STRUCTURAL/WEATHERIZATION/BUILDING PERFORMANCE: Winnick Steel Fabrication

TOILETS: Duravit, TOTO

TUB: VALLONE, Noken

UNDERLAYMENT/SHEATHING: AdvanTech subfloor, ZIP System

VENTILATION: Fantech

WASHER/DRYER: Electrolux, Miele

WATER FILTRATION/CONDITIONING: ZIP System

WINDOWS: Norwood (wood), All the Details (steel)




Even so, the builder took pains to match the flat mosaic stone pattern that remains on the entry and part of the rear façade. “It’s random, so you don’t see any horizontal or vertical lines,” Bill says, and stucco was mixed into the new elevations to break up the stone. The slate roof was peeled back, and new slate was woven into the pieces they could salvage.

The architects also retained the original reductive palette of steel windows with oak lintels, using green, rough-sawn white oak. Most of the second-story windows occur in painted cedar dormers and are wood framed. And posts on the entry and back porch have the same mannered, tapered bracket that occurs inside the house.

Out back, a new pool sits on the lower lawn, on axis with the central terrace. There the architects designed a minimalist pool house—essentially an open shade structure held within

simple stone walls. One side of the small building contains a cedar-lined changing room whose closed door reads as a louvered wall. The other side holds an outdoor kitchen; there the louvers are open to admit views through to the trees.

Since the project was completed, the architects have enjoyed watching the family, which now includes two young children, grow into the house. “Their in-laws have moved in across the street and they’ve embedded themselves into the community,” Rudi says. “The old clichés about renovations are true. They would have saved money by scrapping the building, but they saw value in spending the extra construction time to work with the artifact that was there.” Describing every architect’s dream client, he adds: “They had a very sophisticated design sensibility, particularly for their age, and a deep patience for the process.” 



On axis with the rear terrace, a trim pool house includes a cedar-lined changing room in the louvered side façade.