

Tweaking Tradition

Small Is Beautiful in an Interior Designer's Guesthouse in Upstate New York

Architecture by Dennis Wedlick, AIA/Interior Design by Matthew White of White Webb
Text by Michael Frank/Photography by Peter Aaron/Esto



IT'S ALWAYS INTRIGUING to see what a seasoned architect does with a set of clear constraints. When interior designer Matthew White and his partner, Broadway producer Thomas Schumacher, approached Dennis Wedlick with the idea of building a guest cottage on a verdant parcel of land they'd recently acquired in Columbia County, New York, they gave him several fixed parameters. The cottage, which was to go up in advance of the main house the pair were still in the midst of planning, was to be no more than 900 square feet. Within that space it was to be wholly livable, with a bedroom, bath, living area and kitchen and—somehow—an extra space for guests or private time. It was to stand in a pleasant but unassuming corner of their 50 acres, on a narrow ridge by a

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ABOVE LEFT: "We made our own little history," architect Dennis Wedlick says of Matthew White and Thomas Schumacher's

New York guest cottage. Marvin windows. **ABOVE:** White, who designed the interiors, painted the patterns on the mudroom walls.



"You don't quite know what's going to be around the corner," Wedlick says. Silk-screened panels from White Webb's Intaglio line hang in the living area. Schumacher wing chair damask.

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stream. It was to be appropriate to the setting and take advantage of the handsome views of a nearby meadow and cluster of trees, and it was to have lots of character and a sense of whimsy besides.

They had come to the right man. Wedlick made a name for himself in the area as the architect of clever small houses when he designed his own intimate country house in nearby Kinderhook in 1992. He has since gone on to build on a more ambitious scale, in Co-

lumbia County and elsewhere, but he has always retained a special fondness for diminutive structures: "They can have a childlike quality to them that a larger house never will," he remarks. "In a small house, every gesture must be made to count."

For White and Schumacher, Wedlick came up with a house that both tricks and engages the eye. From the road, it gives the impression of a building that is smaller than it in fact is, whereas seen head-on, the house looks larger than it actu-

ally is. Wedlick achieved this kind of trompe l'oeil of scale by breaking the house into three modules—in essence three separate houses joined together as though an original structure had grown over time—and by giving each element a subtly different treatment.

"What was so great about working with someone like Matthew is that you don't have to work toward conventions," says Wedlick. "In this house, for instance, we didn't have to have the bathroom adjacent to

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the bedroom. The bath is in the third module—across the living room. It feels added on, as it well might have been in an older house. The challenge is to let go of preconceptions about what a floor plan should look like.”

While the basic vocabulary of the guesthouse’s architecture is borrowed from the 19th-century wood-frame farmhouses and barns of Columbia County, Wedlick’s clever tweaking and articulating of the component parts infuses the house with a surprising vitality. Each of the three roofs, for example, has a different pitch; the façades are not symmetrical but have the feeling, as he puts it, “that they could have been”; the bedroom window pokes out from a flat elevation; and since there is an entrance to the side through a cozy mudroom, the front door is more symbolic than functional. “I’ve always appreciated raw architecture,” Wedlick says, “houses built by people who actually lived in the homes they built. I hoped for a similar random quality here.”

Inside is another set of surprises. The modest, quirky cottage draws you in through the mudroom, then delivers a visual wallop as you step into a more modern, barnlike open space—the combined living area/dining area/kitchen, which, with a ceiling that soars to 21 feet, feels much larger than its dieted-down dimensions (16 by 20 feet). Within

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RIGHT: The oak dining table “holds dear memories,” says White, whose mother bought it when White was 14. Above the doorway to the master bedroom is a pastel portrait by Harrison Storms.



“I like the idea that you can experience the same environment from two levels.”



“Essentially, this is a cottage for two people only,” comments White (above left), “though we did want some drama. Even spaces that are casual in intention can still have a bit of grandeur.” **ABOVE:** The airy loft overlooks the main living space.



LEFT: The soft colors and rich wood in the master bedroom provide a perfect backdrop for the graphic headboard, from Intaglio. Blanket, coverlet and pillowcase, Restoration Hardware.

BELOW: “The bath,” explains White, “like the house itself, has a decidedly old-fashioned feel, but in a fresh way.” It features a diamond-shaped window and a pedestal tub, which is tucked into the bay.



RIGHT: Designed to ramble, the cottage is made up of three parts: the mudroom, left, the main living area and the bedroom. The porch faces a stream whose banks are dotted with apple trees.



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this space, Wedlick was able to give his clients the extra space they’d hoped for—a loft that overhangs (and demarcates) the kitchen and dining area and is reached by a steep staircase that looks as if it were copied from a dollhouse.

This room-above-a-room

resonates in a personal way for Matthew White, whose grandfather built a summer cabin in Colorado in the 1940s where the children’s sleeping quarters were reached by a long open gallery. “I’ve always liked to look down on rooms,” White says. “I like the idea that you can experience

the same environment from two different levels.”

Lofts, open galleries, dollhouses, tree houses—all these associations are present in the work Wedlick and White did on the project. Wedlick, for his part, claims that he never put “so many joists in so tiny a house.” To keep fussiness at bay, he used simple though beautifully joined materials, such as a combination of board-and-batten and cedar siding on the exterior, and inside, open beams, tongue-and-groove paneling on the ceiling and isolated walls, reclaimed-wood flooring and moldings that are crisp but generously scaled.

It fell to White the designer (as opposed to White the client) to keep all these elements in coherent relationship. From

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the start, he knew that he wanted all the interior woodwork to be painted a clarifying white; he also knew that he wanted to use a bold color on the walls. He settled on a sharp apple green, because it seemed to amplify the landscape in the summer and provide some missing vibrancy in the winter.

The smallness of the house appears to have been very freeing for the architect and the designer alike. White painted a freehand "wallpaper" in the mudroom in a single afternoon. He adapted some of his White Webb trademark silk-screened engravings as a headboard and as witty roundels and panels to animate the ample

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walls in the common areas. He covered a wing chair, cartoonish in shape, with a similarly cartoonish bold fabric patterned with stylized leaves and fronds.

"The thing of it is, I'm not really a very cottagey kind of person," White says with a laugh—and maybe to help explain the 19th-century tabernacle mirror, Neoclassical and gilded, that hangs rather regally by that symbolic front door or the large-scale lantern that sparkles overhead. More modest items have found their way into the house too, such as the oak table from White's childhood home and the collection of Caswell coffee cans, a nod to Schumacher's namesake (his middle name, Caswell, pays tribute to George W. Caswell, the 19th-century San Francisco importer of coffee and spices, a friend of his great-grandfather's).

Intimate yet expansive, simple yet intricate, elegant against casual, deliberately designed while unmistakably personal: How does all this push-and-pull cohabit so comfortably in White and Schumacher's house? "It's very easy," says White. "In a small house you don't take yourself so seriously. You're not afraid to have fun." □