

DESIGN & DECORATING

HOUSE TOUR

A Cozy Time Capsule

This soothingly austere 18th-century guesthouse offers a stylistic getaway from the opulence of a Connecticut estate

BY SARAH MEDFORD

ROBERT COUTURIER and Jeffrey Morgan are both devoted to dogs, gardens, Bach's compositions for strings and 18th-century houses. In their first year of marriage, the couple is remarkably compatible, with one exception: When Mr. Couturier envisions his perfect 18th-century dwelling, he sees Versailles. When Mr. Morgan does the same, it's a New England farmhouse.

And so, on the grounds of their Kent, Conn., home, you'll find a French-inflected main residence—showcasing the taste of Mr. Couturier, a Manhattan-based interior designer—a short walk away from an early American guesthouse (known as Dover House), a restoration project that Mr. Morgan, a historic preservationist, oversaw. When weekend visitors show up in Kent, they have the luxury of traveling from lushness and extravagance to utilitarian elegance and restraint. They're not the only ones: Messrs. Couturier and Morgan do so, too.

"Late on Sunday afternoons," Mr. Couturier said, "I often walk up the drive with our [four] dogs and visit Dover House," a 1710 structure Mr. Morgan recently moved from nearby Dover, N.Y., and rebuilt. "It's always cool inside, always serene. And we lay down on the bed, all five of us, and we take a little nap."

The designer had to learn to love the rigorous beauty of Dover House. When he'd urge his husband to add another ceramic piece or two atop a cupboard, for instance, Mr. Morgan repeatedly drew the line. "The main house is very full and opulent," the preservationist said. "Dover is a visual rest."

"Between you and me, I'm incredibly happy that Jeffrey did not listen to one of my suggestions," Mr. Couturier admitted. "I would not have made Dover House as beautiful as it is."



Authentically stark

Historic preservationist Jeffrey Morgan arranged the furniture in Dover House—the guesthouse on the property he shares with husband Robert Couturier, an interior designer—as it might have been placed originally. This "settle" (bench) abuts

the kitchen fireplace, for instance. "Every piece has a place and a function—Jeffrey ponders the exactitude of each," said Mr. Couturier, an expert in French decorative arts who marvels at the difference between early American houses and

their *ancien-regime* counterparts. "These [American] houses were not meant to be heavily furnished, and everything had its use," he said. "In France, at the same time, things were there to be admired."



Telling textures

The bedroom's freshly whitewashed walls draw attention to the paint-scaled ceiling—a surface contrast typical of a centuries-old home, which would have been whitewashed more routinely than painted. An overnight stay at Dover House, said Mr. Couturier, is akin to a Rorschach

test for the couple's guests: "People who like all sorts of commodities don't understand it. It's their loss. [Sculptor] Claude Lalanne came, and she loved, loved it. Dover House is meant to be a moment in time—a small museum for us to enjoy."



All the right moves

Ravishing in its simplicity, the guesthouse—which dates to 1710, with a circa-1760 addition—is a stylistic vacation from the French neoclassical-style main house that Mr. Couturier and Mr. Morgan built for themselves in 2002. When Dover House was still in its previous location in Dover, N.Y., Mr. Morgan had watched it fade from working farm-building to tenement to near ruin. When he approached the owner about buying and moving it, he recalled, "The guy's response was, 'You want this? Fill in the hole afterwards and it's yours.'"

Real deals

Whenever possible, Mr. Morgan furnished Dover House with 18th-century antiques from eastern New York state, including this cupboard with its iron-oxide red paint. Though he revels in finding regionally appropriate pieces, he's not fanatical about it—especially when a client is involved. "Style should be consistent in the building," he said, "but that's not to say that a well-chosen new sofa can't look good in an old house, for those who feel that they must have upholstered furniture."



A case for small windows

In the calming, softly lighted dining area, rush-seated William and Mary chairs surround a trestle table. Though weekend guests head up to the main house for meals, the room gets plenty of compliments. For Mr. Morgan, it sums up what he admires most about early American domestic architecture: "Utility, a certain grace, even in very vernacular buildings, and the light (or lack thereof) that is created in these interiors."

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Given their backgrounds in historic preservation and the decorative arts, Jeffrey Morgan and Robert Couturier went into the restoration of Dover House with eyes wide open. Still, they added more than they thought possible to their store of knowledge. Mr. Morgan offers the following tips:

1. Sweat the big stuff. Stabilization must come first, and that means roof, foundation, window frames and sills.

2. Use the authorities... The historic-preservation office of your state government may offer a

directory of local restoration services. Some states also have nonprofit house trusts that provide similar listings and expert advice; Mr. Morgan serves on the board of the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation (ctrust.org).

3. ...But don't let them use you. If you plan on moving a structure, prepare to battle local building and zoning codes. "Modern codes fight or

even prevent restoration," Mr. Morgan said.

4. Surfaces matter, deeply. "Preserve as much original surface condition as possible, and convincingly create old surface where it is absent," Mr. Morgan advised. Even the best-restored rooms inevitably encompass different degrees of surface preservation—from raw, wormholed floors to newly

painted baseboards.

5. Finally, sweat the details. Vintage materials dating to the period, from bricks to hinges to paneling, are always a worthwhile investment, according to Mr. Morgan, who considers old materials and techniques ideal: "Whitewash, for example—cheap, beautiful, authentic and it kills bugs!" He makes his own with hydrated lime, kosher salt and water.