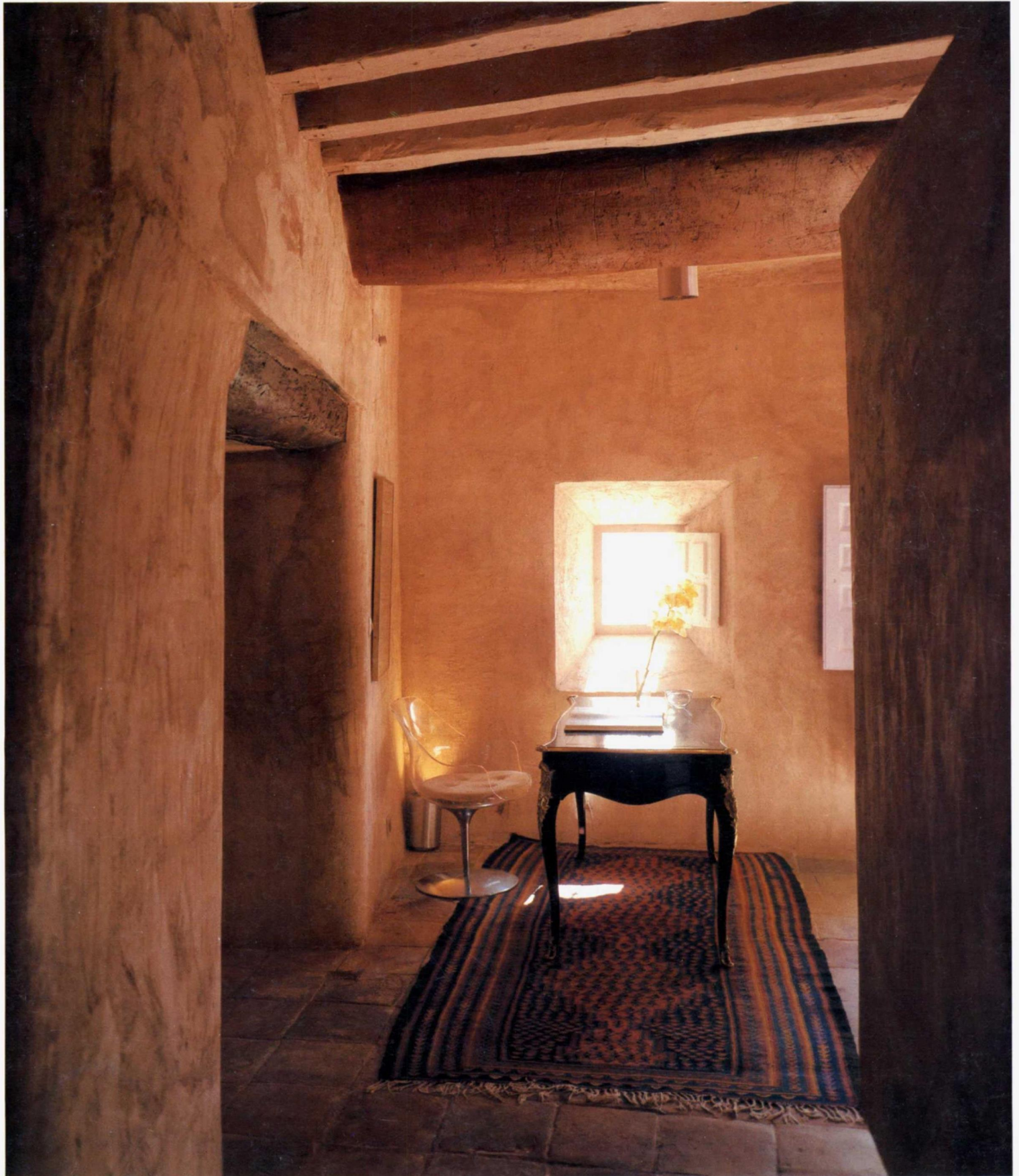


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Country Idyll

A Rustic Complex in New York's Hudson Valley

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WHEN A NEW YORK doctor and art collector first saw a group of dilapidated outbuildings that had once formed part of an estate in the Hudson Valley, an hour or so north of Manhattan, he was immediately reminded of the farm his family had owned in Norway. This memory was enough to make him stop and take notice of what most weekend house-hunters would have dismissed as a hopeless jumble of once utilitarian constructions: an icehouse that was little more than a weathered wooden cube; an imposing but ruined greenhouse, attached to a small cottage; a root cellar and two other large plain sheds. But the group of buildings spoke to him as stray houses sometimes do: "Take me in. Make something marvelous of me."

The setting was beautiful—an area of farms and some still-grand estates, with an occasional Rhenish "castle" on the heights overlooking the Hudson. The buildings were cut off from what had been the main house, by a highway, and isolated in a charming little clearing surrounded by woods that cover the steeply rising slopes behind. A large pond fed by a mountain stream had been "put in" next to the icehouse, and once provided the estate with its supply of ice.

The new owner first engaged an architect who wanted to impose his own concepts of order on the buildings. But when the owner saw the designs, he knew they would not work. The haphazard but functional

rural look of the place was what had attracted him in the first place. He had no desire to change this look, and he wanted the buildings to be themselves and still provide him with a livable environment. He next showed the place to an architect friend, Edward Knowles, whose experience includes both public and domestic architecture—among other designs, the Wolf Trap summer concert hall, near Washington, and artist Lowell Nesbitt's converted stable/townhouse, in Greenwich Village.

The mingled public and private aspects of the commission—the "house" being really a tiny hamlet—intrigued Mr. Knowles, as did the honest barn construction. He was pleased by "a certain cadence, scale, color and a very consistent vernacular architecture," whose qualities, however, needed to be emphasized. Mallarmé said that poets must "purify the language of the tribe," and Edward Knowles takes an analogous attitude toward the language of vernacular architecture. The owner had several special requirements. First, he needed a place to house his collection of American folk art, and both he and Mr. Knowles rejected a white-walled museumlike setting, which would rob the work of much of its subtlety. He also likes to entertain, and wanted a guest house far enough from the main house to ensure mutual privacy and near enough to prevent guests from feeling isolated. He enjoys giving parties that flow from space to space, starting with drinks in the living room, then dinner in the adjacent kitchen/dining area, coffee in the orangery, carved from one end of the greenhouse—the other end still functions as a greenhouse—and a nightcap in the towering interior of

Architect Edward Knowles has given new life to a complex of weathered 19th-century farm buildings—acquired in a state of delapidation—located on a verdant plateau in the Hudson River Valley. Nestled at the edge of a cooling pond fed by a mountain stream are, from left to right, the greenhouse/orangery, main house and guest house.





LEFT: In the Main House, differing floor levels demarcate the kitchen/dining area from the fire-warmed Living Room. Intriguing collectibles include a New Bedford whale weather vane skimming the top of an Italian winepress screw, its gilded cow counterpart above the stone wall, and an American Indian whirligig on a Laotian bronze drum. TOP: The entrance to the Greenhouse/Orangery—a restored Lord & Burnham structure—retains its antique charm. ABOVE: Simple modern seating, a Pennsylvania milking bench and flourishing citrus trees appoint the airy Orangery.



The Guest House at once preserves and adapts rural architecture. **TOP:** Aged vertical siding defines the former icehouse. **ABOVE:** Horizontal interior boarding and low Oriental furnishings heighten the dramatic effect of a tall narrow window. Refined Momoyama screens contrast with gilded pawnshop balls overhead. **RIGHT:** The amusing Victorian spiral staircase leads to a sleeping balcony enlivened with Japanese calligraphy; at right is a proud American Eagle ship's figurehead. The Sheraton sofa is covered in Brunswig & Fils velvet; flooring from American Olean.







“...a certain cadence, scale and consistent vernacular architecture.”

the icehouse, now the guest house.

Mr. Knowles restored the buildings by using old materials such as barn siding, masonry, floors from an old schoolhouse, and timber from the mountain, from which he made rough-hewn supports that allude to Japanese tokonoma posts, designed to call attention to the surrounding smoothness. The mix of old and new materials is so skillful that it is difficult to be sure which is which. This pleasant ambiguity is continued in the space itself, which never leads precisely where it seems to be going. The main cottage's one bedroom and bathroom are on the ground floor next to the front door; a staircase leads up to the living room; the kitchen/dining room is a few steps below that but not separated from it; and steps lead up to the orangery.

The original building was “superficially rational, but totally disorganized,” the architect says, “with the major supports not where they should be.” Rather than correct this waywardness, he capitalized on it—creating a space that is agreeably eccentric and, in terms of the owner's needs, highly functional. The collection of wooden decoys, weather vanes and handpainted nineteenth-century game boards seems to have been created for the weathered wood-and-stone walls that now frame them. One major change in the original structure is a glass bay, which provides a view of the water where there was none before. It has a “front porch” look, yet it is not cut off from the rest of the interior. The resulting view from the glass bay is a strangely lovely one, and fulfills another of the owner's requirements: He likes to look out of a window and

see not just scenery but buildings as well—a kind of counterpoint of nature and man-made additions. The ice house punctuates the view of the pond and trees in such a way. It is an austere Shaker-like structure, which provides an almost religious feeling.

Basically the ice house is now one vast two-story room, sparsely furnished with a few pieces of Chinese antique furniture, two Japanese Momoyama screen paintings and three enormous metal balls that once hung outside a Pennsylvania pawnshop. A cast-iron spiral staircase, found in New York, leads up to a sleeping balcony. Downstairs are a kitchen and bathroom. The room is lighted by a cupola, which Mr. Knowles added, and by a long slit of window extending from floor to ceiling, through which ice was once added gradually until the house was filled. The view from outside is felt, rather than seen, and there is an impression of foliage across the pond and a shimmering watery light that suggests Venice. Indeed, the light flooding into the room is one of the most exciting features of this interior.

The ensemble of living spaces is a typical embodiment of Mr. Knowles's theories—or rather, his rejection of theory. He has disavowed his Bauhaus-oriented training, and recently wrote: “Historical references, popular idioms, avant-garde statements, sculptural and painterly concepts all have a potential role in the design of buildings. Any academic approach to architecture is arbitrary and limiting. We are in an era that is a tornado of ideas. Our architecture should be no less.”

And indeed the architect has created a “tornado of ideas” with this odd but superbly convincing assortment of dwelling spaces in New York State. It is a small, quiet tornado—but a forceful one nonetheless. □

Dense woods surround the unusual estate, providing seclusion and pastoral beauty. Much material used in the renovation was recycled from other old buildings.