

A photograph of a garden bed. Large, rough-textured grey rocks are arranged in a border. In the foreground, there are several green plants with small, bright red flowers. To the left, there are tall, thin purple flowers. The background is filled with lush green foliage, including a large bush with small white flowers. The overall scene is bright and vibrant, suggesting a well-maintained garden.

Partnership,

Patience,
and Craft

Ben Nutter, Zen Associates,
Howell Construction
Building group and
Balhaakon Design come
together to create a new
old farmhouse.

A 19th-century
farmhouse evolves
through sensitive
additions and a
landscape designed for
modern family life.

BY JANICE RANDALL ROHLF
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NAT REA



Renovating a house is not for the faint of heart; renovating while building new and reimagining the entire landscape requires a particular kind of person—one with stamina and grace under pressure. Having a keen eye for design helps, too. Hanna and Ross proved to be just that. “I was definitely looking for an old house to renovate,” says Hanna, an artist who counts organizational skills among her strengths. “I knew I wanted a fixer.”

Sometimes, of course, you get more than you bargain for. The house they purchased—a modest Greek Revival farmhouse built in the 1840s—had been expanded over the years in a series of slipshod additions. But Hanna was drawn to its “really classic, simple face,” and quickly saw the potential for thoughtful new construction once the unsalvageable additions were removed. The couple lost no time engaging architectural firm Benjamin Nutter Architects, who collaborated with landscape architect Peter White of ZEN Associates, Hanna’s father, Howell Custom Building Group, and Kelly Healy of interior design studio Belhaakon.

The homeowners purchased an 1840s Greek Revival to renovate. The design program called for removing unsalvageable additions and creating new living spaces. The landscape was also completely reimaged.

Simply stated, the shared goal was to respect the old while thoughtfully marrying it with the new. “Our challenge was to create new, functional spaces—spacious enough to meet contemporary standards—without overwhelming the historic home,” explains architect Benjamin Nutter. With just under an acre to work with, the design allowed for a one-and-a-half-story ell that mirrors the scale of the original farmhouse and links it to a shingled two-story addition at the rear—barely visible from the street.

The landscape was conceived with the same sensitivity. Tucked behind the house, Peter White approached the backyard as much as Hanna’s father as her landscape architect. Recalling her childhood enjoyment of the family’s rural Vermont property, White was careful not to overdesign the outdoors, incorporating loosely placed boulders and informal farmer’s walls alongside more disciplined masonry elements. “We wanted the property to have a relaxed feeling in an organized way,” observes White, “and sometimes that’s hard.”

The first order of business was addressing the Greek Revival structure itself: how much of it could—and should—be preserved. “Where restoration was possible, we carefully



Interior designer Kelly Healy incorporated antiques the homeowners have collected over the years into the new spaces. Architect Ben Nutter created relaxed, light-filled interiors that work well for this young family.





maintained and reinforced existing structures,” says Garrett Moynihan, director of preconstruction at Howell Custom Building Group. “Where it wasn’t, we built in reverence—replicating original trim profiles, matching window layouts, and using salvaged materials to preserve the home’s architectural DNA.”

The ell serves as a transitional space between the past and the present, designed to avoid a stark visual break between the two eras. Historic elements in the original house—including wide-plank heart pine flooring salvaged from an 1860s New York warehouse—find echoes in features such as salvaged stained-glass windows, a beehive oven, and a newly turned custom newel post designed by Healy, who was inspired by the shape of a historical candlestick. “I loved that it felt simple but interesting, and sculptural,” says Healy. Hanna had been collecting vintage and antique pieces for years and finally had a home large enough to display them.

To help with some of the more overwhelming aspects of the interiors, Hanna turned to Healy, with whom she shares a creative studio space in downtown Ipswich. “From the start, Hanna’s vision aligned with my design philosophy: purposeful, deeply personal, and fearless in expression,” shares Healy. “We both gravitate toward the unique—the handmade, the found, the vintage, the storied.”

The original house is connected to new additions through an ell. This transitional space helps avoid a stark visual break between the old and new. Zen Associates incorporated a brick walkway into the front and side gardens.

Healy left her handprint throughout the house—from color and lighting schemes to millwork and cabinetry. All along, Hanna’s own artistic voice guided the process so that her personality shines through—from the pair of exterior doors painted a vivid orange-y red to the layered textures and unexpected patterns. “Hanna is fearless with the use of color and shapes,” says Healy. “Because of that, it was easier to create character in the new structure; the old structure already had it.”

With the original house’s only staircase removed to allow room for a full bath upstairs, the sole way to access the second floor of both structures is through the main door of the new house, which is angled off the axis of the original house. “The angle was deliberate,” says Nutter. “It resolved several site and program constraints: it respected the existing driveway and parking area; made the new entry clear and welcoming; and visually broke up the scale of the rear elevation.”

That new entry also establishes the center of daily life. For the most part, the family—including two young girls and a newborn—spends its days in the new portion of the house, which offers the scale and comfort of contemporary living. A large open space combines the kitchen and pantry with dining and sitting areas, creating a natural hub for daily life. The first floor also includes a brick-floored mudroom, a three-quarter bath, and a TV room. Upstairs, the two sisters share a bedroom and bath, and the primary bedroom and bath overlook the backyard and gardens designed by White: fruit trees, rows of raspberries, hedges of asparagus, cut flowers like peonies, iris, and baptisia, along with the raised beds.

But whenever possible, the family drifts outdoors—feeding their chickens, picking vegetables from raised garden beds, or simply getting lost in play. Blurring the boundary between house and landscape was as important as balancing old and new. “Our goal was to erase the hard line between inside and out,” says White, describing the yard as an evolving extension of the home. Even Hanna’s art studio sits close enough to the house and gardens to keep work and family life connected.

As with any thoughtful renovation, the transformation did not happen overnight. In this case, it took a close collaboration among architect, builder, interior designer, landscape architect, and homeowners—along with one other essential ingredient. “My challenge was patience,” says Hanna. ^{NSH} benjaminnutter.com; zenassociates.com; howellcustombuild.com; belhaakon.com



Whenever possible the family heads outside to feed chickens, work in the raised-bed vegetable garden, or simply running and playing in the grass. Blurring the lines between the landscape and the house was important in the design.

