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The vernacular architecture of the French countryside and pastoral homes designed nearly a century ago by firms such as Mellor, Meigs, and Howe were among the inspirations for this new old house built along Philadelphia's "Main Line." The sense of compression and expansion inside the house is replicated in the landscape designed by Charles Hess Landscape Architects. Walking down the rear terrace toward the garage, one comes to an open area containing a timbered trellis and fountain. Continuing further, there is a contraction where the mass of the family room intersects itself. Beyond the family room, the space opens again in a small cottage garden.



House and Garden

Peter Zimmerman Architects creates harmony between home and landscape in Pennsylvania.



TEXT BY J. ROBERT OSTERGAARD PHOTOS BY TOM CRANE AND ERIK KVALSVIK



A house is more than just a collection of rooms. How each room is conceived—its scale, its details, its relationship to other rooms—and how we move about physically within each room affect our awareness of a house and color our perceptions of it. Peter Zimmerman, a Pennsylvania-based architect, explains it more succinctly: “Architecture is experience.” A new old house Zimmerman’s firm recently designed offers a sophisticated example of this philosophy as well as a model of successful design.

Along with project architect Mark Hoffman, Zimmerman and his team were originally asked to renovate an existing house on Philadelphia’s “Main Line” for a couple with one child already in college and another soon to leave for college. When it became apparent that their house could not be effectively recast to meet their needs, the homeowners decided to take it down and rebuild on a portion of the existing footprint. The resulting design was inspired by the Main Line architectural vernacular built nearly one hundred years ago by firms such as Mellor, Meigs, and Howe, and was shaped by Zimmerman’s intuitive understanding of the appropriate orchestration and composition of spaces, both inside and out.

Despite having a somewhat blank slate from which to begin, Zimmerman did face one important constraint: a narrow lot with a short setback. His solution was to orient public spaces at the front of the house and place family spaces to the rear, reaching out into the landscape. The public rooms—the entry, living room, stair hall, study, and dining room—are formal, and the garden room, rear hall, family room, home office, kitchen, and service rooms have appropriate degrees of informality.

The thoughtful arrangement of interior spaces is carefully composed to be experienced unconsciously by guests entering the house. The entry is atypical: It is neither a narrow, constricted hallway nor a cavernous space with ostentatious stair. (In fact, the stair is to the right in a dedicated stair hall.) Instead, the entry is a well-proportioned and well-appointed room where homeowner and guest may linger. “It’s really a receiving spot, not just a gesture that looks toward a stair,” Zimmerman says. “It’s a place to meet people, welcome them

Opposite: Rustic details such as exposed beams and chestnut millwork speak to a level of informality appropriate for a family room. The hand-carved limestone fireplace is meant to be a focal point, but it is not a static tableau. The homeowners use all six of the home’s fireplaces throughout the winter. Windows to the left and at the end of the room have views out to the formal gardens, the fountain, and the timbered trellis. To the right, French doors lead to a casual garden space adjacent to the home office and garage. Top and bottom right: The existing pink stucco originally covering the house was stripped and replaced with stucco meticulously sandblasted to expose the inherent aggregate to achieve an appearance reminiscent of an aged French country villa.





in, take their coat, have an early conversation, and not feel you have to immediately move on."

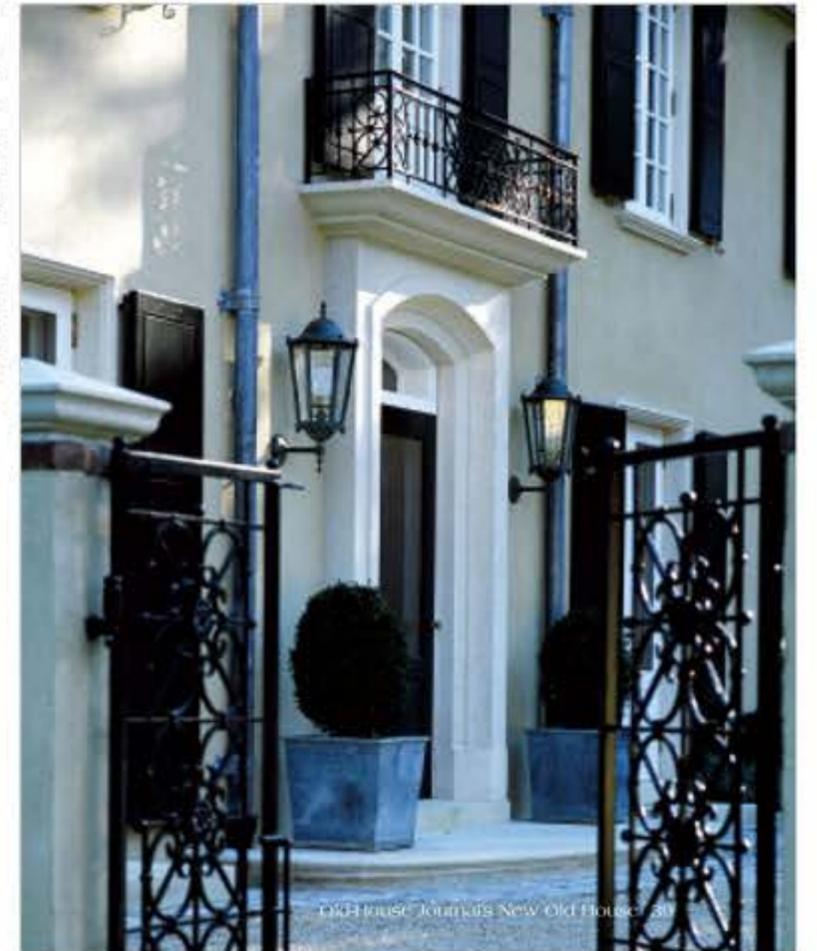
Even so, this is not a static space. There is a discreet dynamic at work here and throughout the house: a carefully organized sequence of compression and expansion. "You experience a sense of compression coming down the driveway," Zimmerman says, "and then an expansion at the wide entry court. There is another slight compression in the entry, but it resolves itself as you are pulled toward the light from the adjacent garden room and living room."

This dynamism draws you along within the house, but Zimmerman was careful to modulate this effect. "The hallways are wide," he states, "so you don't have the level of compression you sometimes feel in hallways that makes you pop out of them at the other end as quickly as you can. We didn't want you to feel hurried or manipulated through the space. Doing this creates a more relaxed living environment."

Another force at work here is a careful orchestration of light. When you reach the dining room and turn back, your gaze meets a large mirror placed with precise deliberation in the entry hall. "It reflects the natural light from the surrounding rooms, and it's important because it completes the view," Zimmerman says. "Many architects speak of the procession through a building, but in my opinion, recession is equally as important." Looking back through the rear hall from the garden room, there is a rhythm of light and dark from windows and French doors, terminating at the home office, which is brightened by windows on two sides. "You end in a room that's incredibly well lit," he explains, "which tells you subliminally there's a garden space there."

Creating a relationship between the garden spaces and the interiors was also an essential part of Zimmerman's plan. "If you are going to create a transparency between the inside of the house and the landscape, it's more than just visual; it's what the mind's eye sees." Zimmerman goes on, "If you give enough

Opposite: The latticework ceiling in the garden room is a lighthearted detail, but this room does not give merely a playful nod to the landscape; it is more intimately connected to the garden than any other room. As Zimmerman points out, you must step down to enter the room, so you are in closer proximity to the gardens both physically and psychologically. The limestone floor—employed also in the rear hall—joins this room to the flagstone terrace beyond the windows and French doors. Top right: The stair hall is off to the main entryway and displays a collection of antique oils. Right: The entry is within a walled motor court, and there is a mere four-inch step from the gravel surface to the block in front, then another six-inch step up into the house, so the house is thoughtfully grounded in its environment.



Another distinct ceiling treatment is found in the rear hall, which complements and validates the ceiling in the garden room.



windows in the round, such as in the garden room or the family room with views on three sides, the mind's eye can connect the landscape behind the walls. By raising the ambient light level in a room so it is equal to that of the light outside, when your eye travels to the window, light levels are such that your eye penetrates right through the glass."

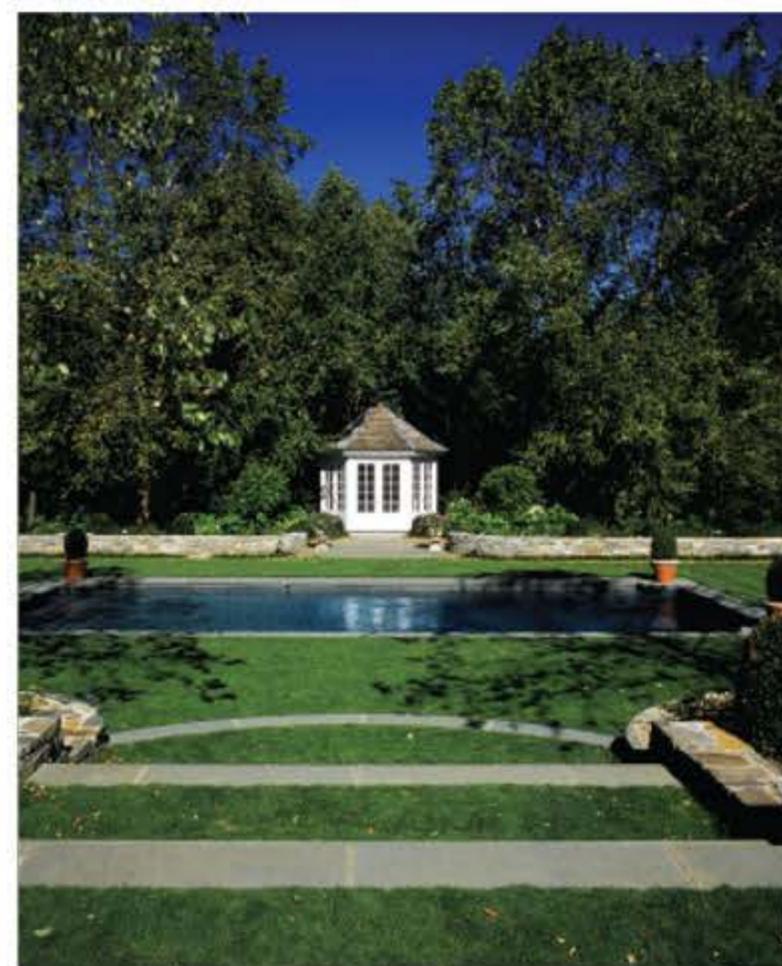
Strengthening the relationship between interiors and exteriors was also accomplished by matching the level of formality inside and out. The living room and garden room, for example, look out on a neatly tailored flagstone terrace where steps lead down to a meticulously landscaped pool and pool pavilion. From the study and the rear hall, the view is out to the formal rear terrace, an elegant fountain, and a Doric-columned timbered trellis. The home office looks out exclusively to a casual garden space, reminiscent of a kitchen garden or herb garden, which is bound by the family room, office, and garage. The family room straddles both worlds: "In the family room, you are very aware of the formal terrace to the left," Zimmerman says, "and to the right the more intimate garden that's adjacent to the garage."

The connection between interiors and exteriors is further reinforced by using the same dynamic of compression and expansion. Walking down the rear terrace, for example, you feel a sense of expansion on reaching the timbered pavilion, compression when passing the family room, and expansion once again on reaching the kitchen garden. "These sorts of clues are important and necessary," Zimmerman says, "and when taken together, they are what allow us to achieve our primary goal of creating the most positive experience we can for the homeowner." NOH

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For more information, see Resources page 72.

Top: Views from both the living and garden room follow terraced steps toward the pool pavilion, lazily reflected in the landscaped pool. Bottom: The reciprocating view from the pool pavilion returns a linear gaze across the pool toward the centrally located French doors that access both garden and living rooms.





Traditional Detailing

To achieve the look reminiscent of an aged French country villa, Peter Zimmerman Architects employed traditional materials in the project featured on page 34. Carved limestone tracings accent the custom mahogany casement windows in the formal areas of the house along the front, while openings in the informal

spaces are more simply detailed with wood jambs and limestone sills, thus developing a hierarchy within the detailing that corresponds to the hierarchy of interior spaces. The texture of the taper-sawn cedar roof complements the stucco and limestone. NOH

—Peter Zimmerman Architects