Clem Labine's

Period Homes

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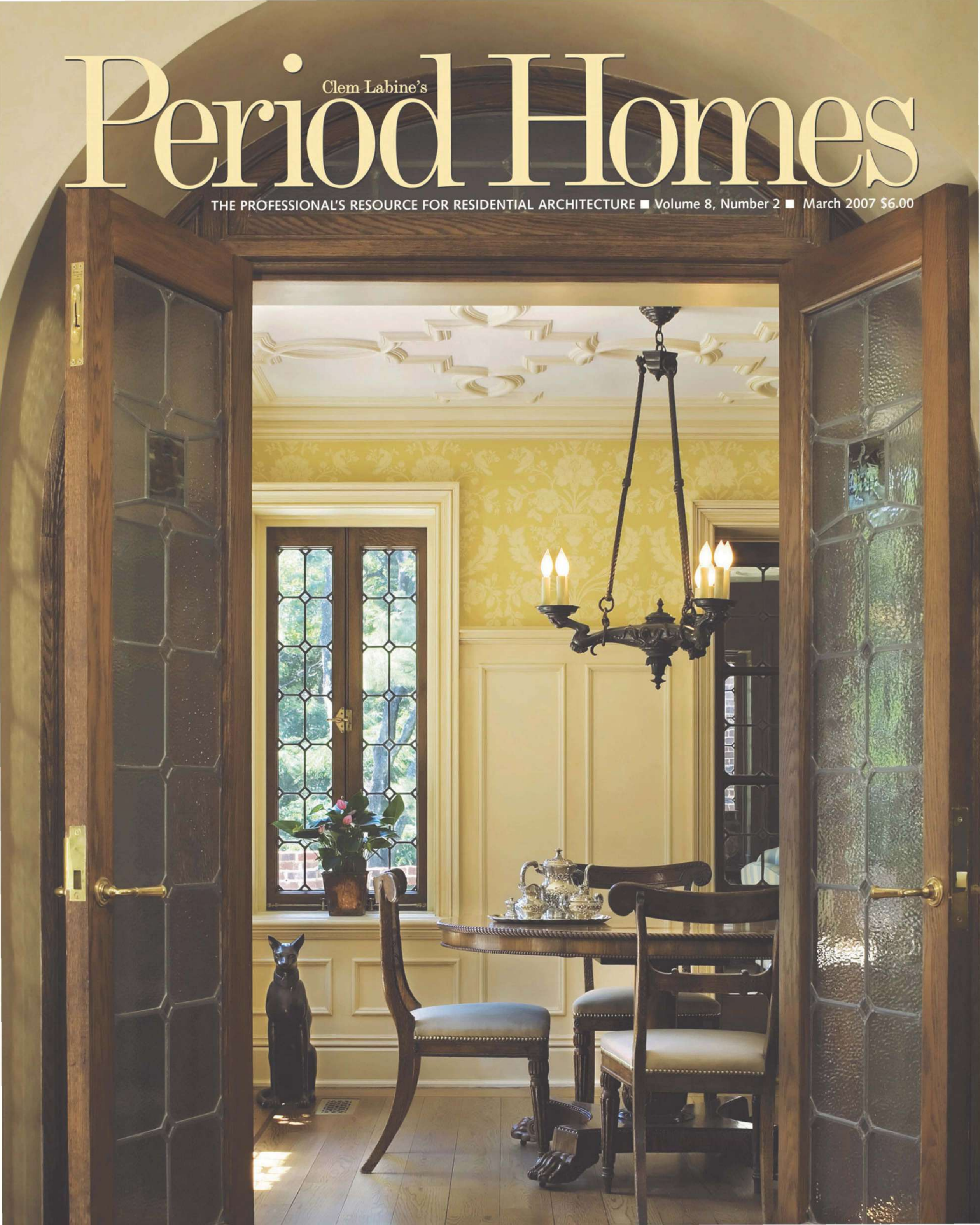


Natural Light

The demands of contemporary lifestyles can create a tension between elevation and plan in both renovation and new construction projects. However, the need for both openness and definition can lead to delightful solutions. *By Peter Zimmerman, AIA, Peter Zimmerman Architects*

People who live in or work on old houses are acutely aware of their idiosyncrasies – crooked window sills, sloping floors, mazes of dark rooms that are visual dead ends and stairways that tend to separate spaces rather than connect them – but they are drawn to them nonetheless. This is because they are Classical in proportion and scale and honest in their construction and use of materials. Inherent within them are century-old stories, told through the architecture, about the lifestyles and needs of the generations who inhabited them. Our challenge, as designers, is to remain true to a house's architectural story while updating it and accommodating the needs of a modern family.

My firm is located in Berwyn, PA, a western suburb of Philadelphia. As was true of so many suburban areas during the 19th and early-20th centuries, it grew because urban society wanted country retreats. In the Philadelphia area, high society migrated from the City of Brotherly Love to the Main Line, where they secured their country properties and built weekend estates. These homes can be seen up and down the eastern seaboard, but the patterns of use of these houses have changed dramatically.

The mirror that terminates this view acts much like a window would – expanding the space. Side light comes from French doors in the living room and a paneled door in the room beyond. *All photos courtesy of Peter Zimmerman Architects*

Of Its Time

The grand "country" house reflects the lifestyle of its time: large and rambling, it was designed to house families, guests and servants, thus creating separation between the family living spaces and the servant's quarters. Hence the desire of many of our clients, who acquire these houses to renovate and add on to, to remain sensitive to the historic fabric while creating an environment that meets their family's needs. Other clients want to design a new old house with a beautifully proportioned, traditional exterior and interior. They want to develop the historically appropriate story for their geographic area and they want the traditional elegance that lends itself to a less formal, more relaxed way of life.

Whether we are designing a reproduction Pennsylvania stone farmhouse, a Mediterranean Revival in Palm Beach, FL, an English manor in Maryland's hunt country or a New England Georgian- or Federal-style clapboard house in Massachusetts, my firm's design philosophy is deeply rooted in the historic tradition of architecture: Classical proportion and scale, the balance of shadow and light and the appropriate relationship between materials. The focus is on integration within the built and natural environment, remaining faithful to historic roots and sensitive to the cultural context. The property and its natural features play a large role in the design process. We care about the overall experience – be it subliminal, visceral, tactile, even auditory; we design properties to heighten the total experience of architecture. Good architecture should evoke memories, and create new ones.

This house pushes the envelope on window size; large openings are broken both vertically and horizontally with an assemblage of smaller units, which keeps the proportion and hierarchy consistent and appropriate. The house also incorporates a glazed porch that floods light deep into the house.

Openness and Elegance

Our design response to the lifestyle of the modern family, whether it be designing a new old house or working with an existing structure, manifests itself in spaces that allow for less formal lifestyles without losing their traditional elegance. The interior spaces are traditional though they have an open, airy, transparent feel without forfeiting Classical proportion and scale. To achieve this, we use large, properly placed openings with plenty of axial views. Though certain phrases are critical to my way of thinking architecturally, use of light encapsulates everything we do.

We start with an assembly of rooms and look at the natural light sources in these rooms, where the windows and doors are, and then we bring everything into play. Contrary to what many believe, one does not have to lose clearly defined rooms to gain a sense of light and openness. The same can be said for the flip side; massive, open, clumsily proportioned spaces don't necessarily create the desired sense of warmth, light and openness. In a new old house, we attempt to visually connect the house's interior to the outside. We try to design the majority of rooms so that they get natural light and we try to create views from a minimum of two, but, ideally, three of the four walls. The mind's eye, given enough clues that are provided by the openings, has the ability to complete the landscape behind the remaining solid wall. Although the spaces are traditional in proportion and scale, a feeling of openness and light is thus created.

The large opening to the living room keeps the formal living spaces in this house accessible in day-to-day circulation. The door under the stair gives a visual escape, which allows the house to be more transparent and open.

The window at the end of this view allows sunlight to penetrate the house and provides exterior views. Windows should terminate every axis in a house.

Sensitivity to the level and sources of light in a space is driven by the knowledge that the eye's retina is unable to adjust instantly from darkness to light. We have all experienced walking from one room to another and squinting or closing our eyes in order to adjust to the light. Our solution is to raise the ambient light level inside to the light level of the outside, truly making the windows and glass doors transparent and removing the visual block of brightness. When explaining this concept to clients, I use the analogy of being inside a dark cave and looking toward the opening, which becomes a bright, blinding hot spot that acts like a visual barrier instead of a visual corridor, actually removing the only available view. If, however, you were to raise the light level in the cave to equal the light level of the exterior, the visual obstacle disappears.

In an old house, it is not unusual to find rooms with one small natural-light source. When these houses were built there was little concern for light, but a great need for heat retention and security. One way to open up these rooms is to cut a large opening into another room or hallway that ends with a window. By creating more light, we are making sure that the eye never has to adjust. The connection between the two becomes seamless.

Also limiting the size and number of natural-light sources are low ceilings, which are found in some period houses. There is a fine line in these old houses between maintaining the scale and proportion and opening them up, but, in order to gain the much needed light, their scale has to be greatly increased. We push the exterior window envelope – enlarging the proportions of rooms and lifting them up without making a house look like it is on steroids. This effort requires an understanding of the archetypal symmetry and balance of the stylistic approach.

Circulation

A common complaint heard from clients living in old houses is that certain rooms are never used; they become wasted spaces. The reason: they are closed off, they are more formal and they are not a part of the natural circulation within the house – out of sight, out of mind. We believe that when a space is seen and appreciated daily, it feels used and becomes integrated into one's life. So through a conscious design effort, we control the circulation path from the first to the second floors. Also, in keeping with the proportions of traditional rooms, we solve the "closed off" feeling by creating larger doorways, which create visual accessibility and views. When those rooms are opened up and reinserted into the daily circulation path, they are seen, appreciated and not only feel used, but also are often used more frequently.

The rooms in our new old houses do not bleed together; there is a sequence of rooms, and they are clearly defined. It is my role to provide clients with the feeling of Classically proportioned, well-defined rooms, while giving them something more. Rooms are traditional in that they

Enclosing a porch in glass brings the exterior inside while avoiding a wall of windows.

This grouping of traditional windows not only breaks up the massing, but also provides both a vertical and horizontal hierarchy.

Above: Interior use of windows creates a physical and auditory separation, as well as offering views and the penetration of natural light from the room beyond.

Right: Multiple sources of natural light allow ambient light levels to remain high enough to create a seamlessness between the interior and exterior.

have four corners and an opening, which is cased even though it may be large. Casing an opening visually breaks the plane of the ceiling and creates a sense of proper proportion. This is also true in our use of thresholds, which allows us to change the floor surface either by changing its direction or by changing the materials used. Now there is a clear definition of space while a feeling of openness has been maintained.

There is sophistication to this experience in that the mind's eye is broken by non-continuous ceiling and floor planes. One can see out through several spaces, which creates an appropriate layering of spaces, thus allowing for the modulation of compressions and expansions within the procession. The viewer feels deep inside the house, yet feels a connection to the outside. We call this punctuating movement; very clearly, a viewer is leaving one space and entering a new one, often without awareness. This is what we mean when we speak about the overall experience; it's not necessarily quantifiable, it just evokes visceral reaction.

Proportion and Delight

We view the house's exterior, which is primary, in a slightly different way. When we physically make a larger opening in an exterior wall, which may seem inappropriately scaled at first, we mask its size behind certain elements that give the appearance of a more traditional façade. For example, we may use either a glass porch or an archetype of an orangerie to cover a large opening in order to maintain the quality of light and return a sense of balance to the house's scale and proportion. The solution to the problem, however, must be appropriate to the particular situation. This is where the challenges lie: finding the appropriate answers.

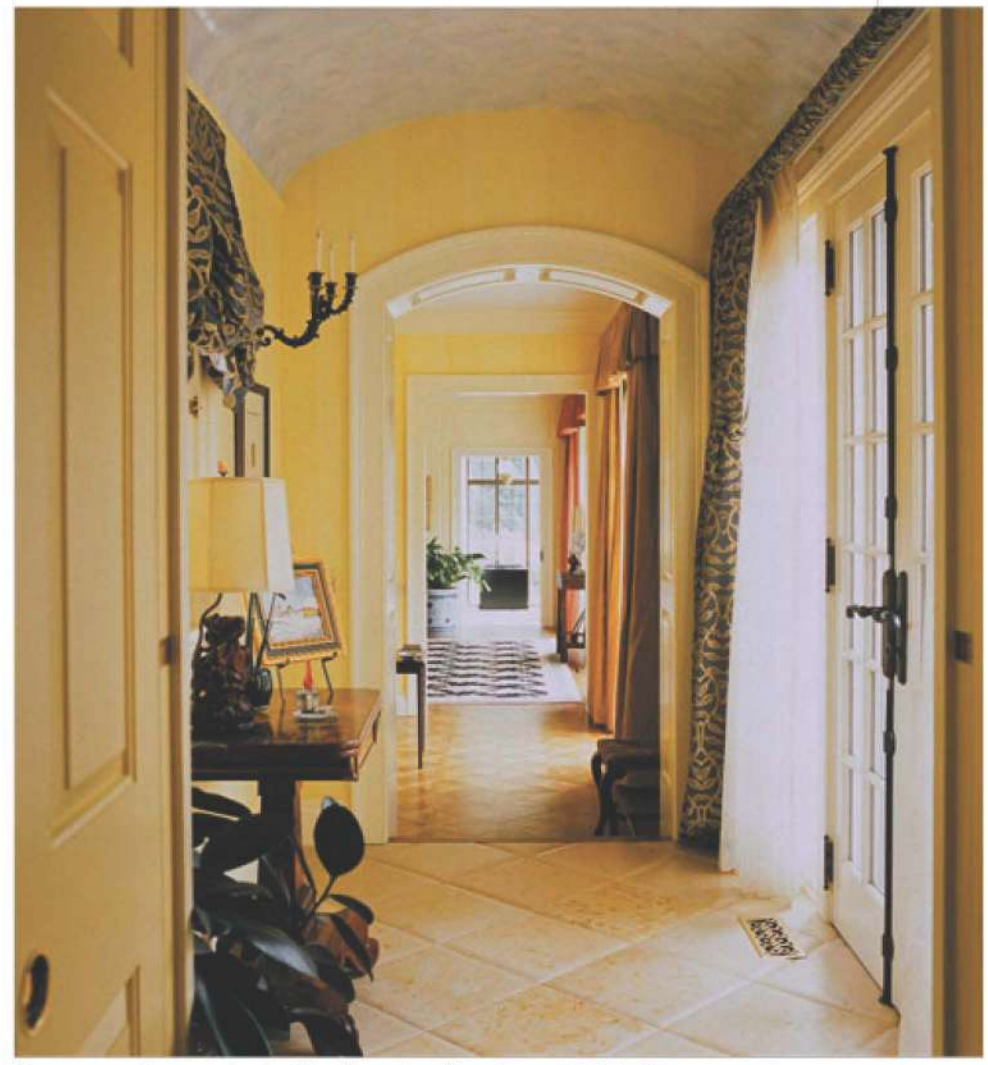
Our firm strives for design that creates a sense of transparency inside and out. Beautifully landscaped outside spaces are really exterior rooms; they are extensions of interior rooms. There is never just an inside and an outside, though we often encourage our viewers to see outside by utilizing axial views that imply there are spaces and experiences – beyond what one can see – that are visually and mentally important. Recession is equally as important as procession.

Good architecture is a subtle, sophisticated dance between the inside and the outside. Neither one can take command of the other. It's like a tango, or a good relationship; it requires balance, harmony of compressions and expansions and openness to trying as many approaches as necessary to find the right solution.

When we design a new old house, there is never one answer or one solution. Each situation is unique, because multiple issues are involved. Knowing when and how to break the architectural rules that create a rhythm or a sequence of spaces, removing the monotony and creating unique, individual punctuations in each space – this is what delights clients. ■

Peter Zimmerman, AIA, NCARB, is the owner and principal of Peter Zimmerman Architects in Berwyn, PA. Zimmerman's company was founded in 1982 and has received national recognition for excellence in comprehensive property design and architecture.

Flooding the interior space with light from four dormers and a large bay window creates an open, airy feel on the interior.



Rooms can be punctuated by changing flooring materials from room to room and introducing framed doorways to break up the ceiling.