



Old-House Journal's  
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*This page* This hallway just off the front entrance hall in the new addition is flanked by a row of windows looking into the kitchen. The three-piece beaded door casing with backband is historically appropriate, as are the window casings. *Opposite* Responding to local historical precedents, Peter Zimmerman created a series of additions that blend with the original eighteenth-century stone structure.

# Inventing a Past

For architect Peter Zimmerman, the story line is as important as the blueprints when designing a new old house.

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Old houses tell stories. We discover their origins in stone foundations and door hardware, gather hints of hardships from the scars they proudly bear. We piece together chronologies from major alterations—a new entry added to reflect changing fashions, a wing attached to accommodate the next generation of children. New houses, on the other hand, can be as mute as sleeping babes.

Not so with a new addition designed by the Pennsylvania-based firm of Peter Zimmerman Architects. The addition—a whole new house, really—envelopes the earliest section of an eighteenth-century Pennsylvania farmhouse, creating an entirely new façade and rear wing. To fulfill the homeowners' desire to live in a faithful "interpretation of a historical house," says Zimmerman, he took great pains to *invent* a history for the new home while also making the new construction compatible with its centuries-old counterpart.

"These Pennsylvania farmhouses grew over time," says Zimmerman, who works on projects up and down the East Coast but most often here in the sylvan countryside near Philadelphia. "They tell a clear story about how the volumes went together and were added on to at different periods." So for this new house, he and his team of architects followed a similar story line, only they drew from fiction rather than fact. The result? A new house with the whimsy and charm of a home that grew organically over many generations.

Like all good design, this project relies on proper proportions. Before he delved into the details that make this a winning new old house, Zimmerman considered the home's relationship

to its surroundings, including a mill pond and mill ruins, pristine woods and pastureland, and other early American farms. Even though the original farmhouse had colonial origins, a towering Georgian mansion would have seemed out of place. "To create a house of this size without overpowering the site, you need to break the mass down into multiple volumes," Zimmerman says. His farmhouse-scaled two-story home stretches out in the shape of a T, with the entry wing and kitchen forming the stubby leg and the rest of the home forming the T's long cap.

Sticking to the time period of the original farmhouse, the architects designed an asymmetrical Georgian-derived field-stone house with very little ornamentation. The main three-bay mass, the most formal part of the entire house, features a noble entry—the crisp white paint in striking contrast to the gray and tan stone—boasting a traditional Georgian entrance with fanlight. Like the rest of the home, the entry carries a story line: "As the English and Welsh settled this area, they built simple homes to shelter themselves," Zimmerman explains. "A farmer might have traveled to Philadelphia, seen a more formal Georgian doorway, and returned to put a similar doorway on his home."

Connected to this three-bay mass is a two-bay section—the home's first "addition." The materials are consistent with the main section, suggesting it followed by a decade or two. The wall is set back a few feet, and the roofline is lower for proper scaling. From here, the home turns the corner in both directions (the T), and as it does so, it enters a new century.



*This page* Zimmerman specified antique flooring throughout the new spaces, including the entryway. Historical trimwork is arched entryways lead to the living room. *Opposite left* The pantry is fashioned after traditional Philadelphia pantries. white glass-front cabinetry with small rat tail hinges and wooden knobs. *Opposite right* The Dining room is located in an original space, although the paneled walls and fireplace mantel are all new millwork.





Left The master bedroom was designed with historical nineteenth-century formal millwork, including an overmantel and built-in cabinets and drawers for clothes storage. The King of Prussia marble around the firebox is marble that would have been locally quarried during that period. Below The guest bedroom received a simple overmantel. Dutch doors lead to a screened porch. Opposite A view into the living room through an arched doorway.





*Left* The kitchen has a soapstone sink and marble countertops and has the best view in the house—down the stream to the waterfall. Zimmerman wanted the room to be full of natural light, so he incorporated paned windows into the design, which look out onto a hallway and beyond a garden. *Below* The living room is in the same wing as the master bedroom and has the same formal millwork and King of Prussia marble as the master bedroom.



At this transition, the architects faced a challenge. In order to create the illusion that the two perpendicular wings were not designed at the same time (“the hard thing is designing a house that doesn’t look *designed*”), Zimmerman “had to find some subtle way of turning the corner that fit with our story line.” The solution? Where the two wings meet, the roofline slants down to a single story, forming what looks like a small tacked-on shed—a shed that perhaps survived a renovation. It worked brilliantly, lowering the scale in the corner and making the entire transition look like a pragmatic choice made by that same farmer.

Throughout the house, the architects devised similar tricks for progressing with their narrative. For instance, they altered the grade of fieldstone and mortar joints from section to section. In the three-bay main entry, you find flat dressed stones, with big, beautiful rectangular stones climbing the corners in a sort of country quoining. Complementing this buttoned-up look are German V mortar joints, lightly brushed to make them look weathered. But in the more primitive wings are rubble stone jointed more haphazardly (on purpose, of course) with either a wide, flat brush pointing or a technique called barn dashing, which leaves stones spattered with traces of mortar. “In the past, farmers didn’t care so much about looks; they just wanted to make these things tight,” says Zimmerman. By contrast, “we treated the main mass as if the farmer had hired a mason to do the entire thing.”

The team applied the same level of creativity to the inter-

ior detailing as well. They used a combination of antique and reproduction materials, such as early brass locksets and mirrored sconces in the main mass. But as you move into the “nineteenth-century additions,” you see more primitive wrought-iron hardware, not because these rooms—kitchen and informal dining room, mud room, bedrooms—are older but because they are more private. A similar progression from fancy to plain occurs in the wood floors, which begin as chestnut and oak in the living and dining rooms and transition to wide-plank pine in the lesser areas. In one transition between rooms, a stone sill stands between two different wood floors, like a ghost marking a forgotten exterior passageway.

Is this degree of detail really necessary? “The suspension of disbelief is only maintained if you really take it down to that level of detail and thought,” Zimmerman says. “We want the client to continue to discover things in the house—to have a greater understanding of what we’ve done—5 years, 10 years, 15 years down the road.”

In other words, even a new house can tell stories. Not with words, but with stone and wood and metal, with rooflines and wings. Never all at once, but spooled out slowly, over the years. And then someday the new house is an old house, with even more stories to tell. *NOH*

*Logan Ward is a freelance writer living in Virginia.*

**For Resources, see page 87.**



Opposite left Zimmerman designed a freestanding bench in the family entrance. Opposite right The billiard's room is located opposite the library in the new wing. This page The library is in the original structure. Zimmerman opened the space to two stories and incorporated a staircase and balcony.

### CREATING A STORY LINE

A master of designing new old houses, Peter Zimmerman knows that it takes more than a Palladian window and reproduction hardware to make a traditional house. It also takes a deep knowledge of history, an attention to detail, and a contractor who "takes intellectual and personal interest in what you're doing." Here are some of the building techniques he and his clients' contractor, Robert Griffiths of the Pennsylvania-based Griffith's Construction, used to help create a fictional narrative for these history-loving homeowners.

**Ghosting.** The team inserted a belt course of stone above the first floor on the façade of the main entry mass to mimic the ghosting from an old front porch. "The line of stone is a little flashing detail that the porch roof would have gone under," says Zimmerman.

**Cutting corners.** In more than one place, Zimmerman ran one "addition" into another with a setback rather than connect two same-size rooms with a hyphen. "Building stone corners is hard," he explains, "and builders back then were very practical. Why build extra corners if you don't have to?"

**Whimsical touches.** Knowing when and how to break the rules so that you're not designing a plan book home, is essential for making a design look "undesigned." On this house, Zimmerman intentionally left one shutter off a first-floor window to make it look like a small wall and fence were "added" at a later date.

**Shutters.** Different types of shutters send a visual clue that wings were built at different times. On this house, the main entry mass has more formal wood shutters, while the nineteenth-century wing has more primitive shutters.

**Timeworn millwork.** After interior trim was milled, the carpenters softened the edges with sandpaper so they didn't have a crisp new look.

**Layers of paint.** A sure (and sometimes frustrating) sign of age is all those accumulated layers of paint built up on windows, doors, and trim. To cultivate a painted-30-times-in-two-centuries look, the painters applied multiple layers of paint on interior woodwork.

