

Clem Labine's Period Homes

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The Road Less Traveled

A firm on Philadelphia's Main Line specializes in houses with convincing narratives of evolution over time. *By Eve M. Kahn*

Traditional need not mean conventional. Why not make unexpected choices in reinterpreting historic architecture; why not front a fieldstone pool house in an austere plane of bead-board or build striped asymmetrical compositions out of chinked-log or half-timbered wings?

Architect Peter Zimmerman has taken design precedents onto roads less traveled for two decades. His imaginative firm in Berwyn, PA, has built hundreds of houses from Nantucket to Palm Beach, in an almost restless variety of styles. He'll field requests for formal Georgians, exuberant Mediterraneans or picturesque Adirondacks and Pennsylvania vernaculars, as long as the client is prepared never to be bored.

"Every project is about the total experience," Zimmerman says. "When we design an estate, for instance, we think about what the whole journey will be like from the driveway gates to the front door and beyond. What clues of discovery will there be on the way, what will the gravel sound like, what plants will the visitor smell, what compressions and expansions of the view will modulate the experience?" His clients, he adds, "will continue, we hope, to discover things that they'd never noticed before. The house should be as much of a delight after a decade as it was the day the last punch list was checked off."

Peter Zimmerman Architects, a 21-person practice (with 19 architects), is headquartered at a Georgian-flavored 18th-century farmhouse. It's made of stone, but has log-cabin ancestry. (It's an important footnote to Revolutionary War history: it was the childhood home of the mother of



Peter Zimmerman (left) and partner John Toates at a stuccoed French Country house in progress. *Photo: Peter Zimmerman Architects*

Below: An 18th-century farmhouse seems to have grown organically over time, with a picturesquely varied roofline. The original section is at the center; its small third-story window looks like a vintage quirk, but is in fact a Zimmerman intervention. *Photo: Erik Kvalvik*

General "Mad Anthony" Wayne.) Wood mantelpieces throughout the interior are original, as are marble fireplace surrounds from nearby quarries at Valley Forge or King of Prussia.

Zimmerman, who is in partnership with Syracuse University-trained architect John Toates, keeps needing more room at the house to handle 50 projects a year. So the office is now enclosing two more porches into workspaces — "in the grand tradition," Zimmerman notes, "of enclosed porches on Pennsylvania farmhouses."

The firm hires from time to time, typically from Notre Dame, Syracuse and the University of Pennsylvania. Finding staff who fit can be tricky: "The person has to be Classically sympathetic, but not rigid about that approach," Zimmerman says. "We're close to a true atelier for an apprentice. The less fixed the person's attitude is toward design, the better. We're looking for a sponge." He himself has remained a sponge throughout his career.

Zimmerman hasn't designed a house for himself yet, he confesses: "There are so many things I love, I'd have a hard time limiting myself. I'd be my own hardest client." At the office, Zimmerman, age 49, can usually be found elbow deep in either stacks of library books that clients have flagged with favorite precedents or construction documents noting just how dormer should meet flashing, log meet clapboard or steel casement meet brick sill.

"There's a total approach we take to line, light and shadow," he says. "There's a process we immerse ourselves in from the plan, section and



Above: In the farmhouse, low-relief swags have been carved into a mantel's reeded pilasters. *Photo: Erik Kvalvik*

Right: Molding bands create eye-catching stripes near a boldly patterned stone fireplace in new wings of enfilades. *Photo: Erik Kvalvik*

elevation down to the details, in ever-tightening spirals. Even if the program or site seems similar to the last one we did, we always come up with a fresh, independent response."

Local culture

Zimmerman first immersed himself in architectural history while growing up in the then-countryside 20 miles from the Philadelphia line. His parents owned an 18th-century stone house. "I'd go around the neighborhood exploring the farmhouses and the outbuildings, the springhouses deep in the woods," he recalls. "Now the area, and well beyond, has been



Zimmerman moved this stuccoed stone house a few hundred yards back from a busy road, and juxtaposed the restored old structure with new outbuildings, including a red barn. *Photo: Erik Kvalvik*

consumed by sprawl." While an undergraduate at Colgate University during the mid-1970s, he learned that the administration planned to raze a Richardsonian Romanesque classroom building. He and some other budding preservationists staged a brief sit-in at the president's office, and the plan was soon withdrawn.

Colgate offered no architecture major, so Zimmerman invented a coursework track for himself heavy on sculpture studios, and then spent a year at New York's Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies under the tutelage of Deconstructivists like Anthony Vidler and Peter Eisenman. They suggested he study next at Harvard, where his diverse mentors included Jorge Silvetti, Michael Dennis and Fred Koetter. "The program was taught in the true academic Classical tradition, but the expression wasn't traditional," Zimmerman says. "I learned to understand context, precedents and backdrops, and when it's appropriate or inappropriate to make a strong statement, a monument, and what an appropriate strong statement might be. What I still had to teach myself, and where I differed and still differ from so many of my professors, is that I believe architecture truly is what's built, and not what's written or theorized."

Shortly after graduating from Harvard in 1982, he co-founded a suburban Philadelphia firm called Solutions. The name, he notes, "was evocative of super-graphics. It had an anonymous corporate quality that would have been fine for commercial or institutional architecture." But the name was less and less comfortable as the firm took on more residential assignments, in an increasingly literal vein of traditionalism. When Zimmerman bought out his partner a few years later, he immediately gave the firm his own name — residential work, he says, "is a very personal, individual expression."

The firm reached its current size 15 years ago, with commissions clustered along the Main Line, south to Wilmington, DE, and north to Princeton, NJ. The existing buildings on the sites often have 1920s pedigrees: they were designed by the generations of traditionalists who preceded Zimmerman, especially Richard Brognard Okie and Mellor, Meigs & Howe. Zimmerman's commissions have ranged in scale from single outbuildings to farmsteads on hundreds of acres with their own vineyards and squash courts. Few architects in practice anywhere in the world, surely, have 15 barns on their resume along with 24,000-sq.-ft. mansions.

A new rambling farmhouse on 100 acres segues gracefully from stone to log to clapboard. Photo: Erik Krulvick



Individualized Attention

Zimmerman encourages new clients to pore through his 500-book library, which is heavy on Lutyns and other forms of English heritage, to find images of what they're envisioning but can't quite articulate. He can usually tell in advance those patrons that will prove most compatible with his practice: "We're driven by clients who understand we're creating timeless architecture, deep-rooted in Renaissance ideals of scale, harmony, proportions and honesty of material." If he ever feels he's on the verge of repeating himself in a design, he adds, he turns the sketch upside down, holds it up to a mirror or awaits inspiration during the next night's sleep or morning commute: "I'll walk in that morning like a bull in a china shop, knowing exactly where the project should be going."

A commission can spend up to five years in Zimmerman's hands, a third of the time in the design phase alone. And his teams of craftspeople know to expect to be asked for perfection and adventurousness. He's been known to spec 12 patterns of brickwork on a single Tudor exterior, and to have baking soda mixed into concrete to form cast columns that look like

coral. He has sometimes requested that flagstones be chipped to seem weathered and foot-worn, and that mortar be matched to a 1920s original, via a formula of brown and yellow sand laced with pebbles.

Far Horizons

Just don't ask him to create what he calls "overwhelming, soaring, impersonal, ambiguous spaces," or rooms that "are designed for extreme use, and aren't adaptable to different phases of life." So if, say, the client expects to entertain lavishly or has many school-age children, he explains, "the spaces can still be intimate, properly proportioned and appropriate in scale all the way through, and they don't become obsolete as soon as the kids are out of the house." He typically divides masses into a series of wings with stepped rooflines, so the houses seem to have grown over a century or so.

The effect can be lighthearted, but not lightweight: "We don't like to do self-important architecture, but we know when to be playful and when not to be capricious." These organic-seeming designs are carefully orchestrated



Above: A porch-fronted addition brings lofty family gathering space to a 1741 farmhouse. The new rosy fieldstone matches the original structure, and the new woodwork is salvaged barn boards. Photo: Peter Zimmerman Architects

Above right: Inside a cedar-clapboard cottage on Chesapeake Bay, floors are mahogany and a bedroom/loft is angled for maximum waterfront views. Photo: Bory Halkin

Right: On this addition to a ca. 1800 stone house, Zimmerman matched the original fieldstone hue and wood-molding profiles. A new steel-glazed conservatory (left) resembles a porch that was later enclosed. Photo: Erik Krulvick



to accommodate clients' changing needs. When there's a lavish party to throw, tents can be put up in the courtyards that are formed and protected by the wings.

Zimmerman is expanding his geographic range lately, discussing projects in Bermuda and Telluride. "I'd love to do a house in San Francisco, the Cotswolds, France, anywhere that would add to the diversity of cultures, materials and landscapes in which we're already well versed," The devout, intense personalizing that goes into his residential projects, he says, travels well. Just as long as the client doesn't mind being asked a lot of questions about exactly what they want, even at the job site. "I never seem to tire of fine-tuning," the architect says. "Adjusting, reevaluating, all the way through the construction documents - that's where the work turns into music." ■



Above: A Palm Beach, FL, mansion with pecky cypress woodwork pays homage to local Addison Mizner precedents. Photo: Sargent Architectural Photography

Right: On the Palm Beach house's loggia, steel-frame columns are sheathed in precast concrete that was mixed with baking soda, so the lightly pocked surfaces look like coral. Capitals were carved from coral. Photo: Sargent Architectural Photography



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