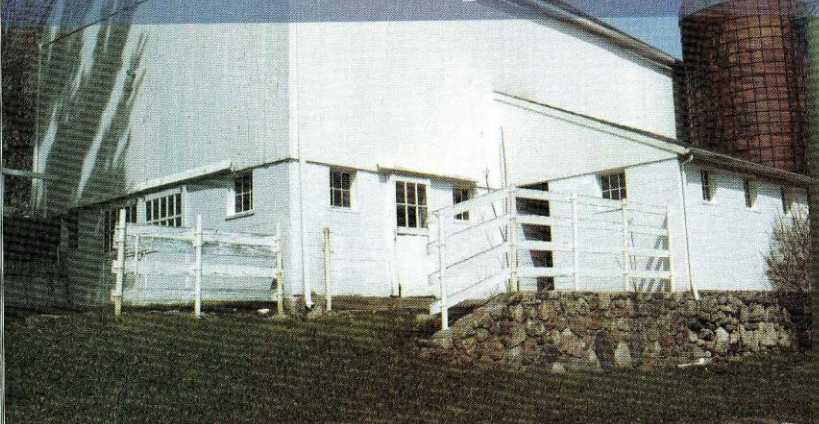
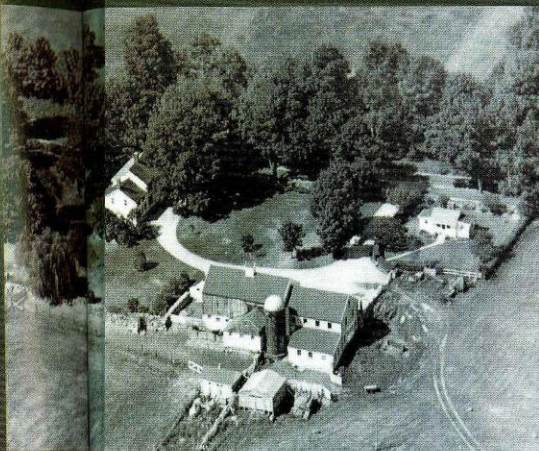


# History in the Re-Making



REMAINS OF THE DAY: (CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE): THE 18<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY DAIRY BARN; THE ORIGINAL ESTATE; THE PREVIOUS OWNERS SOLD OFF PIECES IN THE '80s, LEAVING AMANDA AND STEPHEN NESIS WITH A BIG YARD AND AN OLD FARMHOUSE; THE ORIGINAL HARDWARE REMAINS ON THE FRONT DOOR. THE NESISES ADDED THE FRENCH DOORS OFF THE KITCHEN AND A NEW STONE PATIO; AMANDA WITH HER SON, GRADY, 3.



"I LOVED THE LAND," SAYS AMANDA NESIS ABOUT WHAT DREW HER TO HER HOME. "THE HOUSE WAS A CHARMING OLD FARMHOUSE THAT FELT VERY AUTHENTIC, JUST THE REAL DEAL."



Gut jobs are tricky, but the toughest home renovations are about preserving the past.

by bill cary • photographs by mark vergari



The problem with buying an old house is that you're often purchasing generations of bad taste and "what were they thinking?" faux pas. Putting your creative stamp on such a place is easy—just undo everybody else's mistakes. Sometimes it takes several years to make an old house your home. And then sometimes, like Amanda and Stephen Nesis, you just get it right.

Just three years after settling into their 18<sup>th</sup>-century Greek Revival farmhouse on the North Salem-Brewster border, the couple has transformed a cramped, dark warren of small rooms into a comfortable, modern home—and they've put their signature on every airy inch. While some new homeowners come in, tear down, and start over, the Nesises had a more conservative goal: to maintain. Keeping the original footprint of the

2,500-square-foot house and the historical integrity of the three-acre property took top priority. Fortunately, they had a lot to work with: There was no awful 1950s linoleum, no 1960s paisley wallpaper, no tacky 1970s paneling—it was just a wonderful old house in need of a respectful renovation.

"It had been beautifully maintained, but nothing had been updated," says Amanda, a part-time physician's assistant in Brewster. The bare-bones kitchen was frozen in the 1930s, and the only bathroom was a half bath upstairs, which consisted of just a toilet and a claw-foot tub. The sink was around the corner in another room, and there was no shower inside or out.

"What we really wanted to do was just add to the bare necessities that were there, to leave the house as untouched as possible," Stephen says.



WHEN THE NESISES BOUGHT THE HOUSE, THEY KNEW THEY'D HAVE TO UPDATE—ESPECIALLY WHERE THE BATHROOMS WERE CONCERNED. ORIGINALLY, THE HOUSE WAS HOME TO A MERE HALF BATH WITH JUST A TOILET AND THIS CLAW-FOOT TUB (ABOVE). THE SINK WAS IN ANOTHER ROOM! TODAY, THAT SAME TUB HAS FOUND A NEW SPACE—IN THE MASTER BATH, BENEATH A LARGE WINDOW THAT OVERLOOKS THE BARN.

That's exactly what they did. Today, the three-bedroom house is home to central air-conditioning, a six-burner Viking range, and three bathrooms, including a master bath with a steam shower, to go with a root cellar and 12-stall dairy barn that's probably as old as the house itself. But even with these 21<sup>st</sup>-century luxuries, the old farmhouse is still an old farmhouse.

#### This Old House

House hunting is never easy, and what the Nesises thought would be a quick search turned into an 18-month odyssey. At the time, they were renting in Stamford, Connecticut, and while they were flexible on location (they scoured Northern Westchester and Western Connecticut), some points were non-negotiable. First, Amanda was pregnant with her son, Grady, and ideally, they wanted to move before the birth. Next, they sought an old house—one built before 1900—and though they had made two accepted offers on other properties, both had fallen through.

By the time Amanda found this particular farmhouse, it had been on the market for about a year. "People kept telling us that you'll know right away when you find the right house," she says. "When I walked in, I knew."

"Our Realtor thought we were crazy," remembers Stephen, a partner in a White Plains energy-brokerage firm. "She kept asking whether we really wanted to buy a house with just a half bath and no real kitchen."

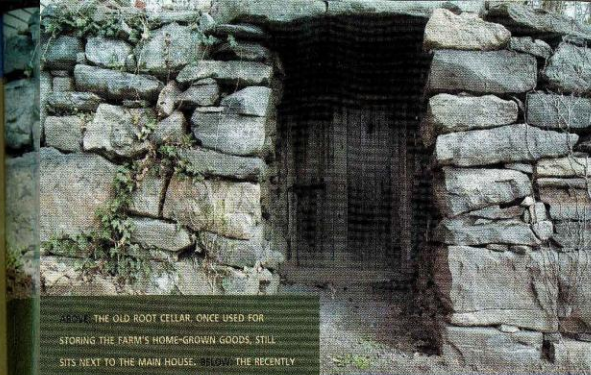
But the home's charms won them over. Only one family (albeit several generations) had lived in the circa-1790 clapboard house since it was first built. Given the tidy-but-tired condition, the family seemed to be fairly modest, with good, simple taste and a strong sense of historical authenticity. The last owners, May and Matthew Ratchford, liked the way decades of carefully applied brush strokes looked on their walls—they wouldn't even let painters use rollers when it came time for touch-ups.

Fast forward to 2006, and it's as though the house was built with the Nesises in

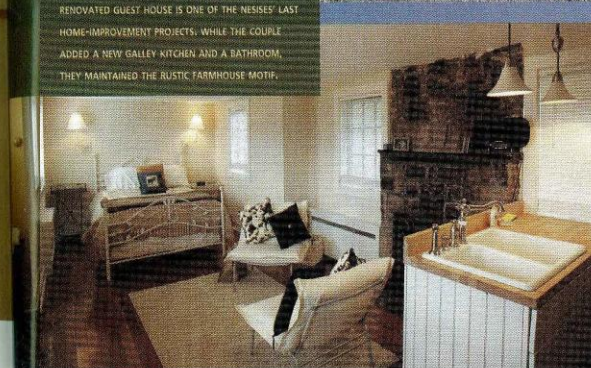
mind. Though by now, the family has grown: Amanda is pregnant again, Grady is 3, and they've adopted Roxy, an energetic black Lab rescue dog. The house is the kind of place that makes city dwellers long for a weekend in the country. It's nothing fancy, just cozy and comfortable inside with loads of room outside to roam the grounds or just hang out in the yard.

Walk in the merlot-colored front door, and you're greeted by a fairly simple floor plan: Ahead of you, a narrow set of stairs leads to the three second-floor bedrooms. Turn to the left and you enter a modest living room, furnished with a couple of comfy chairs and a couch that seems made for napping. Subtle green walls—neither minty nor olive—bring the casual space to life, and there's a play area for Grady and his soon-to-be brother or sister. A row of stacked baskets on the far wall holds toys and gives the room a sense of order. "I'm neat," says Amanda, "not obsessively neat, but neat."

What the house lacks is a dining room—the Nesises converted the former one into a family room and opened up the



ABOVE: THE OLD ROOT CELLAR, ONCE USED FOR STORING THE FARM'S HOME-GROWN GOODS, STILL SITS NEXT TO THE MAIN HOUSE. BELOW: THE RECENTLY RENOVATED GUEST HOUSE IS ONE OF THE NESISES' LAST HOME-IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS. WHILE THE COUPLE ADDED A NEW GALLEY KITCHEN AND A BATHROOM, THEY MAINTAINED THE RUSTIC FARMHOUSE MOTIF.



L-shaped kitchen. Together, the free-flowing space has emerged as the heart of the house. Antique pots and pans hang from the brick hearth, which also holds a built-in cast-iron bread oven. (The oven door sticks, so the Nesises rely on bakeries for fresh-baked loaves.) An old wire pot rack hangs over a new island with a gray schist countertop. According to Amanda, they wanted a natural-stone work space, something that would "weather well and get nicked up." The choice is perfect—random veins of black and white run through the stone countertop, making it seem used and aged, as if it's been here for decades. Even the cabinet doors conjure up the past—covered with a fine wire mesh instead of glass, they resemble an old pie safe.

"The room was a blank slate, a real opportunity for us to have what we wanted," Amanda says. "It's updated, but it's still farmhouse."

The kitchen—and its informality—flows right into the family room, home to

a sunk-in seating area and a large hutch hiding a television and other electronics. Amanda found the tan three-cushion sofa and matching chair at Pottery Barn, and the ottomans at Bed, Bath & Beyond. The end tables are spillovers from her days at the University of Vermont.

"I'm just so eclectic," says Amanda, who describes her style as "sophisticated country, not corny country." Though she has no formal interior-design training, she did all the decorating herself, shopping for lamps, fixtures, and hardware at home-décor stores, tag sales, and antique and secondhand shops. "Everything is from all over." Her motif is geared toward making guests feel comfortable and peaceful, "like you're in the country."

As we walk through the house, it's easy to see why the Nesises are so in love with their home. Old, wide pine-plank floors greet you in every light-filled room. Even the new floorboards—found mainly in the kitchen and the

## are you renovating?

Amanda and Stephen Nesises pulled together a great team to help them restore their farmhouse. Here, some of their top picks:

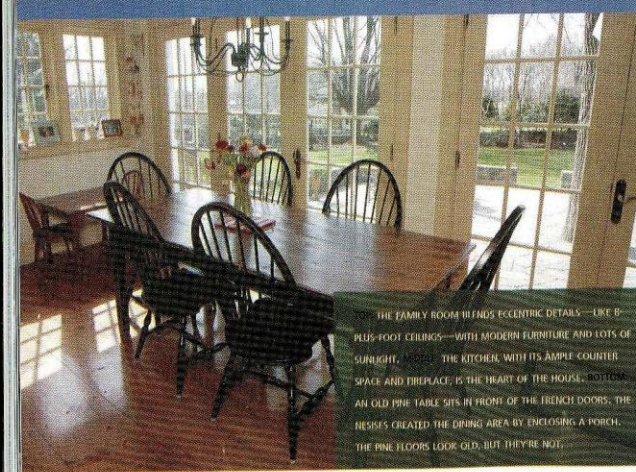
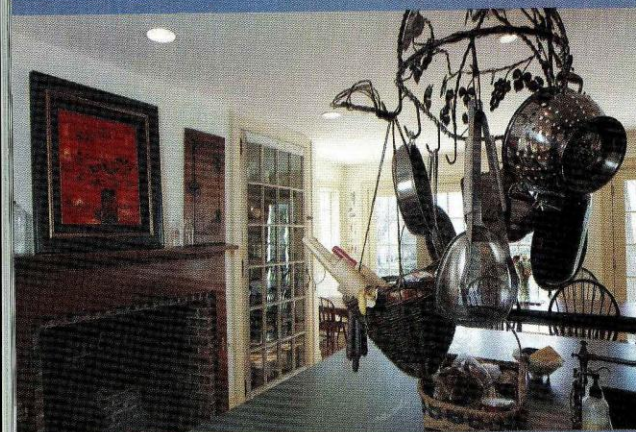
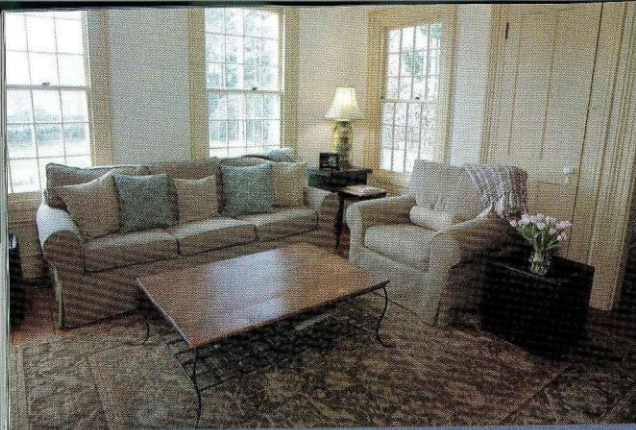
► **Designer:** Jason Landau, **Amazing Spaces, LLC** (30 Fountain Rd., Briarcliff Manor, 239-3725; amazingspacesllc.com). He helped redesign the kitchen, as well as reconfigure the other rooms. "He was phenomenal," Amanda says. "He's extremely patient."

► **Contractor:** John and Mary Larkin, **Willow Woodworking, Inc.** (44 Vails Lake Shore Dr., Brewster, 845-669-8016). He raised the ceilings in the kitchen and master bedroom, added new moldings that matched the old ones, and built bookcases to match an old one in the living room. "His price was fair," says Amanda. "He was honest and conscientious. We still use him."

► **Plumber:** John Goodman, **WKB Mechanical** (P.O. Box 37; North Salem; 497-2941). Goodman replumbed the whole house, including three new bathrooms.

► **Hardware:** **Katonah Architectural Hardware** (143 Katonah Ave.; Katonah; 232-7796). They found whatever they needed here, including Rocky Mountain Hardware, a hard-to-find high-end line.

► **Furnishings:** **Country Willow** (77 Bedford Rd.; Katonah; 232-8587). They bought their kitchen table here. "They're lovely people, very helpful," Amanda says.



TOP: THE FAMILY ROOM FINDS ECCENTRIC DETAILS—LIKE 8-PLUS-FOOT CEILINGS—WITH MODERN FURNITURE AND LOTS OF SUNLIGHT. MIDDLE: THE KITCHEN, WITH ITS AMPLE COUNTER SPACE AND FIREPLACE, IS THE HEART OF THE HOUSE. BOTTOM: AN OLD PINE TABLE SITS IN FRONT OF THE FRENCH DOORS. THE NESISES CREATED THE DINING AREA BY ENCLOSING A PORCH. THE PINE FLOORS LOOK OLD, BUT THEY'RE NOT.

master bath and bedroom—match the original so closely that I have to reach down to see if I can feel the difference. The tongue-oil finish, which registers dents and scuffmarks better than more typically used polyurethane, along with the blissful sound of creaking footsteps, only adds to the rural appeal.

#### Country Living

Amanda and Stephen, who both grew up in Dix Hills, Long Island, are crazy about North Salem horse country. Their house sits along a country road lined with stone walls—some are new and neat, but most are old and a bit run down. Their road, Dingle Ridge, is paved; nearby, others are not.

Neighboring houses include a mix of too-big new ones and rambling old farmhouses. Native stone and deep woods seem to be everywhere, making it difficult to create gardens where things can actually grow. Luckily, the Nesises have a wide-open sunny spot with a few great old trees, including two magnificent copper beeches, and soil that's rich and fertile from centuries of farming.

The house was once the centerpiece of a 100-acre dairy farm. Years ago, May Ratchford was an active member of the Brewster Garden Club who won awards for her lilies and vegetables, and her garden is where you're most likely to find Stephen on any warm weekend. "It's his spot," Amanda says. Tucked behind stone walls and new deer fencing, you'll find Stephen's two vegetable beds, full of corn, zucchini, lettuces, cabbage, pumpkins, Brussels sprouts, and "every single type of tomato you can imagine."

As Amanda and I walk across a wide swath of grass in the backyard, she points to a new stone deck and the guest cottage, where they've just added a new galley kitchen and bathroom. The couple is still finishing up a few final details in the main house. "We have to resand the banister and stain it—that's our last project," Amanda says, nodding toward the stairs near the front door. But then, any home renovator will tell you, you're never really done. Who knows what's in store for that root cellar and wonderful old barn? ■