

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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## Country Comfort

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Lake Houses, Aspen Resort  
and AD's Oscar Greenroom**





# The Grass Is Greener

REINVENTING A CARRIAGE HOUSE ON A HISTORIC LEXINGTON HORSE FARM

Architecture by Elby S. Martin  
Interior Design by Mona Hajj  
Landscape Architecture by William E. Esarey  
of WEE Landscape Architecture  
Text by Michael Frank  
Photography by Billy Cunningham



On historic Mount Brilliant Farm in Kentucky, architect Elby S. Martin and designer Mona Hajj renovated an 8,600-square-foot fire-damaged carriage house for the owners' residence. LEFT: The enclosed north terrace. ABOVE: Last Cat, a Storm Cat colt out of top mare Justenuff-heart, was bred on the farm.





Hajj (right, before an abstract work by Elmer Schooley) set her clients' furniture in the family room on a vintage Persian kilim. On the walls she paired antique Turkish textiles with paintings such as an oil by Roberto Marquez.



The accidents of time can either freeze a historical property into a museum-like state of unreality, or they can set it free. It all depends on how many buildings survive the centuries and how they are treated and tended over the years.

Mount Brilliant Farm, in Lexington, Kentucky, has a handsome pedigree. It was originally part of a land grant given to General William Russell in 1774 in recognition of his late brother Henry's service in the French and Indian War. Once upon a time a French-style château kept watch over its verdant pastures. On a particularly picturesque corner of the property, the abolitionist Cassius Marcellus Clay fought a famous duel with Samuel Brown. Although the land was divided up as it passed down through the generations, 400 of the original 2,000 acres remain in-

tact and operate as one of the region's most notable thoroughbred farms.

Where one might expect to find traces of the château, however, nothing survives. Nor is there anymore a porticoed, 19th-century replacement. There are a scattering of strikingly plain tobacco barns and, on contiguous Faraway, a beautiful horse barn from the 1920s that was fitted out for the famous stallion Man o' War. It holds such an important place in local history that it was restored with the help of the University of Kentucky (the stallion's stall gleams like a Chippendale highboy).

A carriage house, of uncertain provenance and no singular architectural distinction, was largely destroyed by fire. "It's all very accidental, of course," says Elby S. Martin, the Dallas-based architect who collaborated with the Baltimore designer Mona Hajj in reviving the damaged

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structure for its present owners. "But in a way it's also very liberating. The clients didn't feel they had to follow any particular agenda but their own."

The project began as one that was interim in concept: The clients intended to renovate the carriage house into a combination guesthouse and party pavilion and planned to live in it while they built an ambitious Federal-style main residence. The hitch? Martin and Hajj did such a good job remodeling it that about midway through construction the couple decided to jettison their grander plans and settle into the guesthouse for good.

"This required some quick work," Martin explains. "We were following the previous vocabulary and intent of the building. Sleeping quarters were so separate from the public side of the house that you had to go outside to get to the kitchen.

"I loved working with the client because when I introduced the idea of a baroque mirror in this setting, he understood what I was going for—the contrast, the touch of the superelegant," Hajj says of the dining room décor.





In the master bedroom, Martin refurbished an existing heavy-beamed ceiling. Over the mantel, Hajj placed a Milton Avery painting she found in her clients' storage. "The chandelier and tapestry are mine," she says, "the refined waking up the rustic, so to speak."





Backing up to an eight-acre lake, the rear terrace is a favorite place for entertaining. William E. Esarey designed the grounds of Mount Brilliant—comprising 400 acres that include prime Kentucky thoroughbred pasture—as well as the owners' 400 acres on neighboring Faraway.

Obviously, that would no longer work.”

Even with a more logical circulation, the house retains a feeling of its earlier, more public function, and therein lies much of its charm. The pitched standing-seam roof, the exposed-timber ceilings, the generous volumes and the lavish use of brick—on the two-sided oversize fireplace and as a paving material that continues from the main rooms onto the terrace—all contribute to the feeling that the house was never intended simply to be a place to tuck in for the night. “The clients give very large parties here,” says Hajj. “This is an open house, a welcoming

house. We wanted to do everything we could to help express that spirit.”

Hajj came to the project early on and adapted to its change of direction. Yet part of her mandate was rooted in the first plan: She was to use as much of the clients' furniture as she could, working more through clever reinvention than from a clean slate.

“I was fortunate in that my client is well traveled and very interested in beautiful objects and interesting rooms,” the designer says. “He wanted the house to hold up to some pretty intense use—there are children, dogs, large gather-

ings. But he wanted it to have style too.”

Clients and designer reached a successful working compromise. She would use the furniture on hand, as long as she could refinish or reupholster it as needed. She would also be free to introduce details and nuance through vivid textiles or the occasional splashy antique. In the large public dining room, for example, she hung a gold-framed George III mirror against the raw wood paneling, and she turned an antique Turkish wall hanging into a covering for a table that can comfortably seat 18. In the cozier private family room, she mounted handcrafted children's gar-



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ments from a bazaar in Istanbul—a frequent source for Hajj's signature punches of color and texture—and set a vintage faded kilim under the client's rehabilitated French-style furniture. In the master bedroom, she brought together a festive late-19th-century Murano chandelier and a Milton Avery painting of a horse and adorned the clients' steel bed with a 17th-century Flemish tapestry.

“If you list it on a page, the combination doesn't make so much sense,” Hajj observes. “But that's why designers work best in three dimensions. It's often the unexpected that brings a house to life.” □

ABOVE: When the horse barn was built at Faraway in 1921, it was considered state of the art. The owners worked with the University of Kentucky's department of historic preservation to restore the building precisely, including the stall of legendary American stallion Man o' War (top).