

# rossiter revisited

*Breathing life into a venerable Washington home*



**NEW ENGLAND CLASSIC**  
Ehrick Rossiter helped distinguish Shingle Style architecture as a uniquely American take on other popular traditions.

BY ELENA DIXON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL MORAN



**IN TUNE** Gene and Barbara Kohn and their Bernese Mountain dogs, Allie and Winston. Just off the entry hall, the music room functions as a central axis for the ground floor.

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LUCKY DETOUR LED GENE and Barbara Kohn to the thoughtful restoration of a historic Washington home. It was a difficult call to make when the Kohns told their architect that they had decided to scrap plans to build a new weekend retreat and buy an existing house instead. The Kohns had driven past the enticing Shingle Style house near the Gunner many times and always admired it. One weekend in 2005 while staying in the area, they mentioned to a realtor that they had dreamed of owning it. "That's such a beautiful house," Barbara observed, only to discover that it was for sale.

Since plans were already in the works to build a country house, they let the issue go. But they couldn't stop thinking about it. "Maybe we should just go look at the house," Barbara suggested. Gene agreed. They ended up buying it the very next day. So they sold the other property and made that awkward phone call.

Architect Reese Owens of Halper Owens Architects LLC of Washington Depot remembers the conversation well. "We were assisting Gene with the design of a new house on a beautiful site in Merryall," Owens explains. "Naturally, we were disappointed when the project was abandoned. But the prospect of working on The Sumacs made the

PHOTOGRAPH FAR LEFT BY BLEACHER + EVERARD



**COMFORT ZONE** Ornate paneling and glazed earthen-ware fireplace tiles are original to the home. Carefully preserved window sashes above a quintessential Rossiter banquette illustrate the painstaking work that went in to ensuring historic accuracy.



pill much easier to swallow.” It was easy for Owens to understand the abrupt change of plans. “Gene and Barbara’s appreciation for traditional architecture, Rossiter’s work in particular, would have made for an easy decision,” he says. “And it made a lot of sense from a practical standpoint—with a large and private site, close to town, great details, and already built.”

Built in 1894 for the illustrator and naturalist William Hamilton Gibson, The Sumacs is one of several significant “cottages” designed by renowned architect Ehrick Kensett Rossiter. Notwithstanding some misguided attempts at modernization, this structure, over 100 years old, was in good shape and retained most of its character-defining features. Fireplaces with glazed earthenware tiles, 48 different types of windows, and elaborate turnings along the stairway were just a taste of Rossiter’s range of expression.

Ehrick Rossiter graduated from the Gunnery School in Washington in 1871 and went on to receive a degree in architecture from Cornell University. Many of the buildings he designed are now designated as historic properties. His many works in the area include The Gunn Memorial Library, The Mayflower Inn, Saint John’s Episcopal Church, and The Boulders in New Preston. He was also a conservationist. In 1889 he bought about 100 acres in the Shepaug River valley to protect the land from logging.



**FINE SELECTIONS** The kitchen features a custom Boffi walnut and stainless steel island. A 1960s George Nakashima cabinet is paired with a table by his daughter, Mira Nakashima-Yarnall.

none of the architectural integrity has been sacrificed



In 1925 he donated this parcel, which later became the first piece of the Steep Rock Land Trust.

Gene and Barbara are as warm and welcoming as their weekend home-away-from-home. Distinguished and genial, Gene is a founding partner of noted architecture firm Kohn Pederson Fox Associates. Petite and chic, Barbara Shattuck Kohn continues to act as a managing director at her investment banking firm Shattuck Hammond, but her lifelong love for design led her to pursue a new venture in 2007 when she and long-time friend Elaine Paul founded Paul Kohn Design, a retail furniture store and interior design studio in TriBeCa.

A meticulous renovation was undertaken with the goal of restoring many of the original elements of Rossiter's design while bringing the 6,600-square-foot house up to date. Formica counters in the butler's pantry, an echo of so many remodels that sacrifice the architect's art in the name of practicality, had to be replaced; other mid-century built-ins needed to be removed. The bathrooms and kitchen were sorely inadequate, so the kitchen was gutted and doubled in size by removing a mud room and two pantries.

In keeping with Shingle Style architecture, which prizes continuous volumes of space, several small rooms were reconfigured. Some of the original sleeping porches that had been closed in to create bathrooms (since there was only one installed when the house was built) were reworked. But the



couple did keep a charmingly vintage though somewhat dubious elevator that was added not long after the house was built.

A new heated mud room was skillfully added off the kitchen. Owens says, "It's a modern element in traditional dress. With historic structures, it is most important to maintain clarity between what is original and what is not."

But none of the architectural integrity has been sacrificed. They had the many window sashes carefully refurbished by Woodstock Glass Works of Woodstock, Vermont. Areas of paneling in the Music Room needed to be recreated. They made a pattern from the surrounding paneling that Jim Churchill of Churchill Builders in Woodbury used to reproduce the missing parts. Outside they replaced a small pool, and Gene designed a pergola for the new pool area. A stone wall was built to fence off the yard, and fruit trees and a walled garden were added.

Barbara brought her discriminating sensibility to the task of refreshing the interiors while honoring Rossiter's design. She brightened the old woodwork with a fresh coat of white paint. The warmth of the house was preserved by us-

**A GOOD MATCH**  
A heated slate floor echoes the stone of the exterior walls, showing the design of Halper Owens. New paneling in Barbara's office looks as if it was original to the house. Barbara's iridescent mosaic tiled bathroom features a "Knotted Chair," by Marcel Wanders that was bought locally at George Champion Modern Shop in Woodbury.





ing a deep walnut stain on the oak floors. “Our feeling is that when this house was built it was considered fairly modern,” she says. “So we thought we would mix contemporary pieces along with appropriate period pieces and then just upgrade it.” She choreographed a range of styles, mixing mid-century reproductions with Viennese Secessionist chairs. A number of bold and spirited contemporary paintings help unify the décor with the eclectic character of the house.

Reese Owens may have been tailor made to work on a project like this. As a boy he spent summers in the Turner house on the Green, which Rossiter renovated in the 1920s for Owens’s great grandfather. Despite the change of plans, the process was gratifying for him. “Working with the homeowners was pretty terrific—we were spoiled,” says Owens. “Gene supplied a steady stream of impressionistic sketches, very painterly, often on stationery. Barbara guided the interiors and landscape with sensitivity. They made a great team. No doubt The Sumacs is smiling.” ■

**AL FRESCO** The large back porch offers plenty of room for family gatherings. Newer teak floors and a bead-board ceiling are a sympathetic nod to the style and age of the house.