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KATE JOHNS: THE NEW TRADITIONALIST

BY JAMES ROPER PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRUCE CLAIRMONT AND MARGARET SULLIVAN



What looks like an early farmhouse with its wide front porch is actually new construction, built in 2006. A sun porch/dining room is included in a wing off the kitchen in the rear.

For 30 years, this architect has created traditional design for a new generation that cherishes it as much as she does.

“It was just something I always knew,” Kate Johns says. “I grew up loving early American architecture.”

Visitors to Kate Johns' website may have trouble distinguishing the photographs of restored period houses from new construction. There are structures with graceful columns, gambrel roofs, and decorative crowns over windows. A house with a front-gabled roof has wings that appear to have been added over several generations. Yet inside, rooms are reconfigured for people living in the 21st century, not the 18th or 19th. And all of the structures are expertly sited, blending gracefully and seamlessly into their surroundings.

To understand Kate Johns' love of traditional design, and the expertise she demonstrates in creating it, you have to meet some of the remarkable people who influenced her along the way.

She recalls weekend trips as a child when her father, an artist, would drive Kate and her sister around the countryside in Dutchess County, pointing out the historic houses, many of them in Colonial and Federal styles.

“He would talk about the houses—their windows, details and proportions, and also how they fit into the landscape,” she says. It had a profound effect on her. In fact, she still speaks with pride about the 11th grade paper she wrote about Colonial architecture. “It really focused my interest and I never wavered from it,” the architect explains.

As it turns out, her father would be the first of several people to have an influence on the young architect. After she headed off to Arizona State University to study architecture, she often found herself the lone Traditionalist among a swarm of Modernists at the school. But a history course provided encouragement. The teacher was none other than Cambridge-educated Marcus Whiffen, a former architectural historian of Colonial Williamsburg. He also was the author of many books, including *American Architecture since 1780: A Guide to the Styles*. He was the perfect inspiration for the young Traditionalist from New York City.



In this kitchen with its breakfast/seating area, a custom stainless steel hood above a French range is painted matte black; it features brass trim. Facing page, from top: This classical pavilion-style house is built in a Greek-cross plan. For the dining room of this new house, Kate Johns selected antique wide-board pine for the floors; doors are from the Federal period. The entry hall in this Craftsman-style house leads to an octagonal staircase; the columns are made of antique pine.





Above: The breakfast nook in this house looks more like a sun porch; its floor-to-ceiling double hung windows and transoms offer views of the Catskills. Left: This small guesthouse was inspired by the designs of rural Southern outbuildings; the central sitting room is flanked by two bedrooms. Facing page: A Rumford style fireplace using salvaged antique brick, and a Federal style mantel with fluted pilasters, graces this formal living room.



Kate Johns explains that Whiffen had an eye for classical elements and he demonstrated how the same ones could be used in different ways. "In other words," she says, "it's not a dead vocabulary."

After college, she and her husband Jason Shaw moved to Louisiana where she worked for the Historic American Buildings Survey, while he attended Tulane. Later she had a job with Koch & Wilson, a New Orleans architectural firm. About the same time she met another architect named A. Hays Town from Baton Rouge. Both the Koch & Wilson firm along with Town embraced the rich history and diverse cultures of Louisiana, designing houses with features including raised porches and courtyards, floors of salvaged brick and wood, and French doors and plantation shutters.

"Remember, at the time it really wasn't acceptable for an architect to do traditional design," she explains. "So, to actually meet architects like these, to see how revered they were, and to see their exquisite work . . ."—the experience made a profound impact on her. When she visited some of the houses with them, "it was obvious their clients adored them and loved living in their houses."

Kate Johns' own office in the small town of Chatham in Columbia County is a 19th century commercial building with "huge windows and lots of light," as Johns describes it. ❖

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Recently, we spoke with Kate Johns about her clients, her career, and what she looks forward to.

Q: *Do you have a typical client? What are they looking for when they come to you?*

A: "Some are weekenders who want a traditional house in context with the existing architecture and landscape of the Hudson Valley.

"Many are in their 50s, looking toward retirement; their children may be older or may have left home. They want a home that will work for two people, yet one that will expand to meet their needs when family members visit."

Q: *And what is that first conversation with a client like?*

A: "We talk about the basics. Do they prefer open, airy, cozy or dark? How are they going to use the space?

"What about the land, the views? What is the light like in morning, evening, at different times of the day? Do they want a formal dining room or a big country kitchen? How do they imagine themselves using the space?"

Q: *The light in the Hudson Valley is extraordinary. Could you talk a little about how you like to use it?*

A: "Light, and the play of light in spaces, is a major factor in home design. I like to use it as much as possible—with skylights, cupolas, roof monitors, glass floors, windows and French doors."

Q: *You've spoken about how you felt in school as a Traditionalist among a Modernist majority. Now, looking back on it, do you feel you got the last laugh?*

A: "I am just happy to be lucky enough to practice the architecture I love and to know that other people love it too. And I'm happy there is finally a professional organization, The Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America, which concentrates on and promotes classical architecture and traditional town planning."

Q: *Tell us about an upcoming project that excites you and why.*

A: "I'm working with several developers [she mentions Shaker Bay near Albany] who are interested in having me design traditional houses for their properties. Today there is a real trend toward responsible development—maintaining the look and feel of the Hudson Valley so that it doesn't become the Hamptons with one trophy house after another, all out of context with the landscape. These developers want their buyers to feel protected by knowing that the neighboring houses will be of a high quality and in keeping with their own houses."

Q: *What makes the Hudson Valley so compelling—the houses, the history, the need to preserve it?*

A: "Yes, one doesn't want it to change. After all, it's my home—I live here full-time, we've raised our two children here.

"But if it must change, at least do it well."