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Hail Columbia County

A Manhattan architect transplanted to upstate New York has spent 20 years building inventive houses steeped in regional design traditions. *By Eve M. Kahn*

Kate Johns is so busy she needs another Kate Johns on staff. Here's a partial job description: Be available to travel often to newly excavated driveways at remote job sites around Columbia County, in upstate New York; the ideal applicant should know how to lay fieldstone house foundations angled for the area's quintessential views of rolling horse pastures, cornfields, weathered barns and gnarled orchards. The job also calls for making a house skin – from Ionic portico to bracketed cupola to standing-seam metal roof – look built in stages throughout centuries. Oh, and the employee should be well versed in the art of hiding streams of high-tech wiring within enfilades of rooms divided by archways and pilasters. (Still interested? E-mail resumes to kate@katejohnsaia.com.)

Johns is the preeminent Classical architect of her county, a 636-sq.mi. swath just south of Albany settled by Dutch and Quaker farmers. Their characteristic designs, eyebrow-windowed saltboxes segueing into Greek Revival mini-temples, have become sought-after commodities for both full-time residents and weekenders. The supply of affordable vintage homes is drying up, and those that haven't yet been renovated tend to be situated uncomfortably close to roadsides. On her clients' idyllic acreages, Johns creates interpretations of old villas and farmhouses, each one a mixture of precedents and fancy.

Johns has been known to transform vinyl-sided agglomerations of 18th- and 19th-century shacks into convincing images of Colonial farmsteads turned Colonial Revival around 1920. She's measured the smoking ruin of an 1830s farmhouse that burned due to faulty wiring, before rebuilding the place as it had been, but better, with more natural light and clearer circulation patterns. She's crowned a hilltop in a five-part manse with Adamesque refinement and symmetry, and dreamed up Gothic barns-turned-residences. On some byways, with names like Haddock Hill Road and County Road 17, Johns' works crop up again and again for miles.

"There's such beautiful architecture here to begin with, it's inspirational," she says. "I keep on taking mental notes, always."

Her 20-year-old firm, with three staffers, operates out of a converted gas station in a hamlet called Old Chatham. (Shortly before she moved in, the owner had clad its concrete walls in clapboard and applied a wood-shingle gabled roof that has grown a moss patina.) Hand-written yellow Post-Its are collaged on her desk, and few computers loom over the piled rolls of drawings. Technology-resistant, she only adopted CAD five years ago, put up a web site in 2002 and learned to send e-mail this summer. This fall, the office will move into a Greek Revival house on the main street in the nearby town of Chatham, with DSL access lines disguised by restored original paneling.



Kate Johns poses on the front porch of her farmhouse. *Photo: Janice Patterson*

Top: A manmade lake reflects porches and sunrooms across this Adamesque house's rear elevation. *Photo: John M. Hall*

She'll rarely get to enjoy the office much; she's usually juggling 30 projects at once. On a breezy afternoon last fall, she stood beside a fresh foundation for a new farmhouse that will have an artist's studio tucked under its shallow pediment. The breeze smelled of freshly excavated earth. Yet she modestly talked not about her own impact on the landscape, but rather about her contractors' skills.

"I've been using Gary Lowe for 15 years, sometimes on two projects at the same time. He's one of a number of contractors in this area who are master carpenters and have a real feel for historic detailing," she says. As for the excavator, Bob Boll, who'd just carved the driveway where an AT&T switching station had stood, Johns adds, "I have utter trust in him. He gets on the machine and just knows how the terrain should be, and the drainage is always right."

How many commissions she's completed to date is something of a mystery, but it numbers in the mid-three figures, mostly in Columbia County, but also as far afield as Virginia and Texas. They've ranged in scale from a porch addition to a 12,000-sq.ft. rehab. She's focused on residential projects, while also taking on a few offices, restaurants and churches (plus the Albany-quarried slate roof of a Queen Anne mansion-turned-museum where Franklin Delano Roosevelt's mistress once lived).



Each room in this five-part house offers views of the surrounding pastures, cornfields and orchards. Photo: John M. Hall



Curves on the banisters echo the foyer's elliptical arch. Photo: John M. Hall



A mixture of stock columns and custom moldings ornament the house's enfilade of rooms. Photo: John M. Hall

"I think I last updated my project list 10 years ago," Johns laughs. "It would be really interesting to figure out the total. But who has time?" In her off hours she's raised two children with her husband Jason Shaw, a lawyer and part-time judge she met when they were first graders in New York City. They live in a former wreck: a 1780s Dutch farmhouse with an 1890s addition. She's fronted the newer portion in tapered piers, so it seems to date to the 1810s. In the backyard, on a spacious chicken coop she designed for the family flock, she installed 6/6 window sash salvaged from a stash of architectural elements in the builder's barn. It was the first of two chicken habitats she's built: the other, an octagonal outbuilding surrounded by a netting cage on Haddock Hill Road, technically counts not as a coop but rather an aviary.

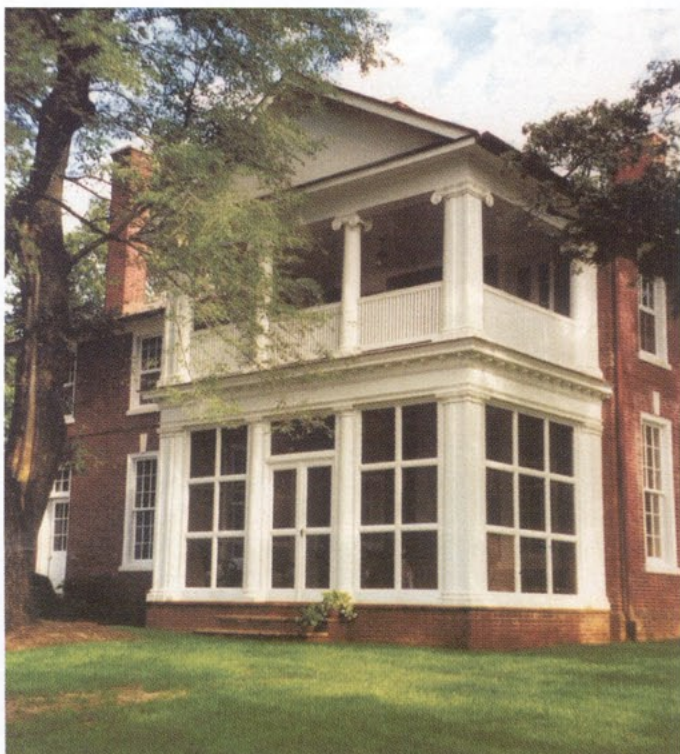
Her practice has grown purely by word of mouth. A number of her repeat customers are now downsizing — that is, they're selling their first Johns house and commissioning another. The only other tradition-friendly architects in

the area, she explains, either focus on commercial preservation or give just a few nods to the past — gables, shingles — and then leave out the needed moldings and muntins. "People come to me knowing exactly what kind of work I do, and wanting exactly that," she says, "and knowing that I'll be involved hands-on with every detail."

Artistic License

For four generations so far there've been artists and free-thinkers in Johns' family. Her paternal grandfather, himself the son of a marine painter, illustrated Madison Avenue ads for Packard cars and Arrow shirt collars. Her paternal grandmother, a fashion illustrator, worked on avant-garde magazine covers for Harper's Bazaar with art director Alexey Brodovitch. A great-uncle, Arthur B. Carles, was an influential abstract painter and teacher in Philadelphia. Johns' father Craig is a widely exhibited realist painter, and her mother Margaret was a pastel painter as well as a pioneering animal behaviorist, who studied mammals' reactions to pheromones. Her sister, Sara Johns Griffen, heads a nonprofit group that supports Olana, the Orientalist mansion-museum built by Hudson River School painter Frederic E. Church. During the 1960s, Kate and Sara grew up among artists, assorted bohemians and Italian immigrants in Greenwich Village. On weekends, her father drove them around the New York and Pennsylvania countryside, admiring old houses. "I think he was a closet architect," Johns says.

As an undergrad surrounded by Modernists at Arizona State University's architecture program, Johns recalls, "People would come to watch the spectacle whenever I gave presentations. The professors didn't know what to make of me. For one studio, I watercolored Beaux Arts renderings of a traditional European-style hotel, with terraces down to a lakefront. The professors were appalled. But one of the critics worked for a big hotel



Above: At a 1919 Georgian Revival House in Virginia, Johns salvaged the original fireclay laundry sinks and backed them in beadboard. Photo: Kate Johns

Left: Johns added a double-decker porch to the house that features a glazed Doric base supporting an Ionic open-air tier. Photo: Kate Johns



From a neglected Colonial farmhouse surrounded by decrepit additions, Johns created an elegant U-shaped compound. Photo: Michael Fredericks

company, loved the design and wanted to build it! I learned to be strong, to be committed even when almost everyone was discouraging me. I had to get special dispensation to take the one serious history course available, taught by Marcus Whiffen, who'd written a seminal work on Colonial Williamsburg. I use what I learned from him every day – about how the Classical idiom has been such a rich source of invention. There's not one way to work with it, and there never has been."

When Shaw started law school at Tulane, Johns took jobs first with the Historic American Buildings Survey, documenting Baton Rouge structures for the National Park Service, and then with the preservation firm of Koch & Wilson in New Orleans. She pored through archives at the firm, which was founded in the 1930s: "The files are full of drawings of Mississippi plantation houses that had been burned or altered." Her colleagues introduced her to A. Hays Town, the eminent Louisiana traditionalist, then in his 70s. He gave her tours of his recent buildings, their Creole Revival enfilades reminiscent of the antebellum structures she'd been documenting.

In 1980, she and Shaw moved to New York, where she specialized in terra-cotta façade restoration at the Ehrenkrantz Group: "There I'd be 40 stories up on swing scaffolding, tapping every inch of a hollow and cracked cornice extending 10 feet over the street." Once their growing family overwhelmed their Brooklyn apartment, they bought their 100-acre farm on a gravel road (which, as empty nesters, they now share with a West Highland terrier and a German shepherd).

The first time she had a foundation poured for a paying customer, she says, "I felt so



A conservatory with a varnished beadboard ceiling resembles a Greek Revival porch that was later glazed. Photo: Michael Fredericks



Above: The house's back wings embrace a planting bed for herbs. Photo: Michael Fredericks

Right: The owners of this house requested an emphatic color scheme of teal and tomato for the kitchen, based on the palette of Carl Larsson, an early-20th-century painter/ interior designer in Sweden. Photo: Michael Fredericks





A Greek Revival Revival villa, with flush siding and fluted Tuscan portico columns, has arisen where a 1950s cabin once stood. *Photo: Kate Johns*

lucky! I've had wonderful clients with great taste and beautiful sites. There's a growing number of weekenders who are building homes with the thought of retiring here someday. This has turned out to be a great area for me to have chosen."

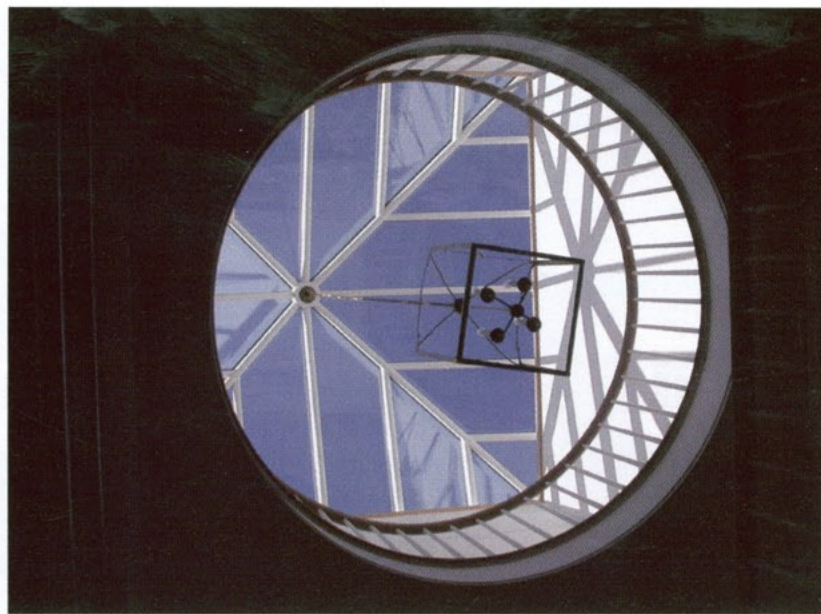
Painterly Compositions

At her latest Greek Revival Revival, a skylighted monitor rises above a row of filigree windows. On the interior's mahogany doors, nickel door-knobs gleam – "they're as close as you could come to the silver-plated hardware you see in the South, without going wild," Johns explains. In the kitchen, a reeded pilaster near the refrigerator is secretly a roll-out cabinet, its shelves conveniently open on both sides. In the basement, a roomful of wiring provides centralized controls for everything from the sound system to the skylight panes.

The house seems a bit sophisticated for its wooded setting, where a 1950s cabin once stood. (Johns incorporated the older structure's shell into a cathedral-ceiling great room just off the kitchen.) But the architect has persuasive local precedents in mind. The back roads, she points out, are full of unexpectedly grand houses, at settlements that started out promising but faded when rails or main roads were rerouted.

Columbia County is now experiencing some growing pains, she adds. The communities of course enforce zoning rules but don't impose any aesthetic standards of what's built in the countryside, and don't always carefully control change in historic districts. "There aren't quite McMansions yet," Johns says, "but there is development pressure, as more and more people live here full time. And there'll be more of a bedroom-community effect as big biotech companies come in around Albany." While providing custom luxuries in most of her designs, she's also created standard shingled house plans for a development near Albany called Shaker Bay. She wants to share more of her expertise with a broader population, no matter how busy her office gets.

"I would love to design small, modular, affordable houses in traditional styles," she says. "Modular, so the architect could control the quality of the construction, and not have some builder leave off the crown moldings or put in ghastly snap-in muntins. I'd love to be involved perhaps in a New Urbanist project, to have a chance to affect the wider landscape. That would be a wonderful challenge." ■



Above: To maximize natural light within a traditional design idiom, Johns often provides skylights on monitors or cupolas. *Photo: Kate Johns*



Left: Under a hip roof of standing-seam Galvalume, the filigree window grilles have a pattern of intersecting loops evocative of butterflies. *Photo: Kate Johns*



In restoring this brick 1840s Italianate, Johns discovered that its window sills were granite and the window trim carved mahogany. *Photo: Christopher Billingham*



Top: A Gothic Revival Revival compound, with a sequence of "big house, back house, little house, barn," pays homage to the traditional farmsteads of New England. *Photo: Geoff Miles*

Left: On the charred foundation of an 1830s farmhouse that burned because of faulty wiring, Johns re-created the house with larger windows and improved circulation patterns. *Photo: Craig Johns*