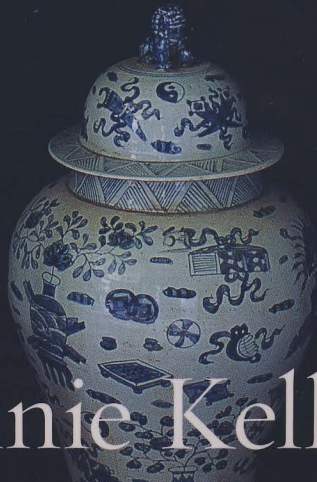


# Rooms to Inspire in the Country

THE INFINITE  
POSSIBILITIES  
OF AMERICAN  
HOUSE DESIGN



Annie Kelly

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM STREET-PORTER

# AN ITALIANATE COUNTRY HOUSE

## Ally and Jock Spivy's Victorian in Upstate New York

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE SMALL TOWN of Kinderhook, in upstate New York, looks just about perfect. It is a charmingly intact Dutch settlement that was founded in 1788. Jock and Ally Spivy discovered the town in 1984 and bought Fox Point, an elaborate nineteenth-century Italianate country house, on a quiet road that leads out of town along fields of apple orchards.

They were searching for a bigger house than the one they owned in nearby Putnam County, and while visiting a good friend, the poet John Ashbery, the Spivys stumbled upon this jewel-like Victorian villa. Richard Upjohn, who had remodelled a local house owned by former U.S. president Martin Van Buren, is believed to be the designer and architect. Influenced by the English Regency style, the brick house has porch roofs painted with stripes that resemble awnings and many of the “wedding-cake” details typical of the period, including a roof cupola, which the couple completely rebuilt.

With the help of local architect Kate Johns, most of the house was renovated by 2002. This included restoring the rooms to their original proportions and replacing newer mantels with nineteenth-century versions salvaged from Elmhurst, a nearby Upjohn house. Rather than replacing the original plaster walls, they restored them, avoiding a classic mistake that amateur renovators make with drywall. This kept the texture of the house intact, retaining the period charm of the rooms.

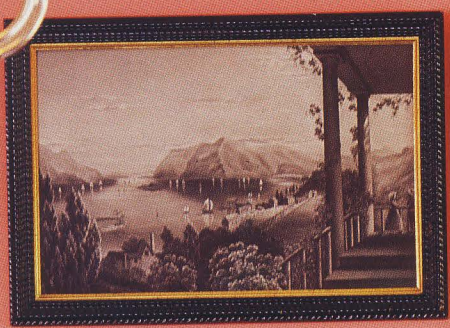
The Spivys decorated the house with a collection

of Empire furniture, which includes family heirlooms as well as pieces bought at auction and in nearby Hudson. The American Empire style developed in the nineteenth century, when there was a lot of enthusiasm for historical styles: pattern books and journals disseminated designs inspired by archaeological discoveries in Egypt and ancient Greece, as well as the furniture of the Renaissance and Gothic periods. This translated into the elegant chairs, chests of drawers, sideboards, and sofas we see today. This is probably one of the most undervalued periods of American furniture, and in Fox Point it is used in a spare, modern manner. The quality of both the materials and proportions of this furniture are obvious. The Spivys' Gothic Revival chairs, which have beautiful lines, work well in these rooms.

The main entrance to the house is at the back, through a small landscaped garden. Here, a comfortable entry area leads to the kitchen, which was originally located in the basement. The Spivys resisted the suggestion to create an open kitchen—a popular choice today that often creates an awkward space—as it would have impacted the period restoration of the house. A small breakfast table provides plenty of room for a quick meal.

The formal dining room, hung with Niagara Falls paintings on a rich pink background, manages to be a modern space due to its elegant simplicity. Ally, a critic, art historian, author, and former magazine editor, describes the art on the walls. “In the dining

*The formal dining room has warm pink walls. A nineteenth-century American sideboard stands below the Spivys' collection of black-and-white sandpaper paintings.*



room we also have a bunch of black-and-white sandpaper paintings, several of which are versions of Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* paintings. Sandpaper paintings are basically charcoal drawings on paper that has been coated with marble dust. They were very popular in the American mid-nineteenth century." She adds, "Certain artists specialized in them, and young ladies were also encouraged to try and make them." From the dining room, a door opens onto a broad porch at the front of the house, which is perfect for summer meals.

A house of this period always had a formal living room, and the Spivys continued the water theme downstairs by hanging a large chromolithograph of Frederic Church's *Third Niagara*. "I suspect Church touched up our picture, as there is some oil paint on it," explains Ally. "We found it in Vermont, where Church is not as revered as he is around the Hudson." The room also has prints of Thomas Cole's *The Voyage of Life* series (*Childhood, Youth, Manhood, and Old Age*). "The four original paintings are at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Museum in Utica, New York," she adds.

Upstairs, the elegant proportions of the house continue. Long, high-ceilinged passageways lead to the bedrooms, and stairs go up to the restored cupola. These rooms are furnished in the same spare Victorian style as the rest of the house.

Both of the Spivys are very busy—Ally is finishing a biography on the elegant Baron de Meyer (often described as the first fashion photographer), while Jock is a partner in the consulting firm of Baldwin, Bell, Green in New York City. The couple spend much of their time here. "Not only has the house provided a place for three generations, it has given us the ability to be part of a small village community with deep historical roots in American history," explains Ally.

*Gaily striped green and white awnings shade Fox Point's back porch. The Spivys added the cupola on top of their nineteenth-century Italianate country house; the original had vanished at some point over the years.*







*ABOVE: A large globe lends scale to the ground-floor staircase landing. Against the wall stands one of the Gothic chairs from the Spivys' collection. RIGHT: The upstairs landing holds an elegant arrangement of nineteenth-century furniture. The expansive ceiling height is typical of houses of this period.*





*The front porch, overlooking the road into Kinderhook, has become the perfect place for summer lunches. Next to the dining room, it has a linen-draped outdoor table and green majolica plates that match the awnings above.*



