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# Gold Coast Renewal

A NEW HOUSE MAKES  
THE MOST OF ITS  
HISTORIC SOUTHPORT  
LOCATION AND THOSE  
BREATHTAKING VIEWS

**BY TOM CONNOR**  
**PHOTOGRAPHS BY** LARRY LAMBRECHT  
AND DURSTON SAYLOR



**FAR LEFT** The expansive facade and main entry to the new Southport shingle-style house at the mouth of the harbor is evocative of traditional New England seashore "cottages."

**BELOW** The living room is both formal and relaxed, grounded by a custom-made, earth-toned carpet, and warmed by painted Italian furniture and French and English antiques.





**ABOVE** With 12-foot ceilings and unobstructed views of the Sound, the kitchen is large enough to float an 8-by-12-foot island topped with honed Calcutta marble. **LEFT** A Mercury-glass mirror, stained mahogany paneling, and limestone and black marble flooring give this trapezoidal powder room a dark glamour. **BELOW** Inside the front door, a fluted column and low kneewall divides (but doesn't subtract) the classical foyer from the open living and dining rooms. **OPPOSITE** The Pier from Robards Landing, 195 feet out into the Sound. Paul Newman once arrived by raceboat to visit the previous owner, the late Jason Robards.



Waterfront property is as good as gold in Fairfield County. It's highly desirable, relatively rare and very expensive (the shoreline between Greenwich and Fairfield is called the Gold Coast for a reason). When a good chunk of it comes on the market, it causes people of means to do crazy things — like leave perfectly wonderful homes inland for the siren song of the Sound.

Several years ago, a young couple with three children were living happily in a 10,000-square-foot Adirondack-style house on six acres in New Canaan, with views of woods and a lake. Their only complaints were the steep driveway in winter and the long back-and-forth to the children's school. They began searching for property that was flatter and close to good, private schools, with one other condition: "I wasn't going to move anywhere," the wife says, "unless it had spectacular views."

In 2004 they drove up the coast to look at an old waterfront estate in Southport. The late '30s brick mansion belonged to Lois Robards, widow of the late actor Jason Robards, and it was on the market for \$18-plus million.

"It wasn't a terrible house," recalls Southport architect Mark Finlay, who had designed the young couple's New Canaan house, "but it was built for a different time and lifestyle. Besides, the husband hates brick."

What caught the couple's eye was the site: five-and-a-half acres and 350 feet of waterfront near the mouth of Southport Harbor, including a boathouse and a 195-foot-long pier out to a large wooden dock in the Sound, none of which could be replicated anywhere on the southern Connecticut coast today. And the property had views. In a word, they were "spectacular."

After purchasing the Robards's property, the couple had the existing house taken down. Finlay, commissioned to design a new house that would suit the Southport site, chose the traditional



shingle style, which had come into vogue at the turn of the twentieth century when architects like Stanford White and William Ralph Emerson designed massive, rambling "cottages" from Long Island to Newport and Mount Desert, Maine, for wealthy city-dwellers. Those archi-

tects made liberal use of balconies, porches and decks, then wrapped the structures in uniform, unembellished skins of natural cedar siding. Finlay did, more or less, the same.

"I knew how they lived," he said of the couple's informality and close, active family lifestyle. "This house had to be a little more appropriate to Southport, a little dressier than the New Canaan house, but it also had to be comfortable. And they wanted everything to be 20 percent bigger than the other house."

## VILLAGE LIFE

Actually, by the time the house was finished, it nearly doubled the size of their New Canaan home at 18,500 square feet. New and big aren't necessarily assets in Southport Village, however, which wears its wealth distinctively in Fairfield County. Even though the new mansion is invisible to all but a handful of neighbors, some village people — even some from outside Southport — seemed to have a visceral aversion to the new house and its occupants, suggesting that they had desecrated a sacred site and were planning to subdivide the estate.

"Our intention was always to take Mrs. Robards's house down," the young wife says. "The house that stood on this property didn't rake advantage of the views, and it wasn't a family house. We let [Mrs. Robards's] attorney know that we wanted her to know, but no one wanted to take responsibility for telling her."

Nevertheless, some bad feelings lingered, even after the couple had moved in. "[At first] it was not comfortable," she says. "There were moments when I thought, What are we doing here?" In



**FAR LEFT** In the master bedroom, the wall coverings are Venetian linen fabric; the bench is reproduction English Regency. **ABOVE** The wife's two-room dressing suite, with glass-topped dressers and a boutique-like shoe display. **NEAR LEFT** Waterworks wash basins and mirrors bring a spare, clean look to the master bath. **OPPOSITE** This glass-enclosed shower features full-body showerheads and a classical bench of honed Calacatta marble. Setting the shower back from the windows allows occupants to see out without being seen.

response, the couple had a screen of cypress trees planted along one border for privacy.

The Robardses themselves were relative newcomers to Southport, living on the property for less than thirty years — a blink of the eye in Southport time. Before them, the house was owned by Hoyt O. Perry, whose family has been in town since the 1600s and once owned the land under the Country Club of Fairfield. And before the Perrys were the Fords, and before the Fords, a very wealthy, very social couple who lived and threw boozy parties in a mansion known as the Castle, a place so large that it was eventually torn down for the smaller, cozier, 10,000-square-foot brick house that the Robardses bought. The land was subdivided into five, one-plus acre lots before they arrived.

One neighbor and longtime Southport Village resident, however, who recalls cocktail parties at the Castle, regards the most recent change in a better light. "I don't mind the house," she says. "You can't see it from the street. They built it for the kids, and if my son and husband were alive today, I would want the same thing."

## HOUSE TOUR

The new house champions luxury and comfort while honoring New England tradition and respecting the site.

"The house captures what the property is all about — the water, the views," Finlay says. "Southport to me is wearing a jacket every day but also wearing topsiders, and this is a Southport shingle-style house. It's a little more dressed up than if it were somewhere else, but it's a very easy house to live in."

The place also happens to look great, the unpainted cedar sheathing offset by a wealth of formal architectural detail: miles of dentil moldings and trimboard, Corinthian columns, fluted pilasters, volute brackets, and eyebrow windows with elliptical

tracery. (Translated from "archispeak," dentils are tooth-like ornamental moldings; Corinthian columns are grooved with shallow vertical channels and topped with leaf-like caps; pilasters are flat, column-like projections from a wall; a volute is a spiral scroll design — found here in the decorated supports under the overhangs or roof edge projecting beyond a lower story).

While the house is really big — there's no getting around this — Finlay took steps to downplay its presence on the land. The volute brackets, for example, are oversized to support the broad, second-story overhangs, but also scaled to make the big house look smaller. The architect also reduced the mass, or visual weight, of the house to lessen its impact while taking advantage of the natural contours of the property, a decision that was practical as well as aesthetic.

Big houses can't just be set down on lots like huge cargo containers or office buildings. Their volume has to be distributed to break up the box and, ideally, in ways that play to the site and serve family functionality.

"I DIDN'T WANT TO LIVE IN A MUSEUM  
...NOTHING FANCY OR OVERLY DRAMATIC."





The house is divided into three main parts. The central section runs roughly parallel to the coastline, directly facing the Sound and containing the public spaces. Wings on either side, containing public and private spaces, grab angled views of water, lawn and gardens, and give the house an akimbo kind of balance. From these wings, still other sections jut back toward the mainland, enclosing the entrance to the estate and protecting the property from the outside world.

#### A MARRIAGE OF STYLES

Across the herringbone slate courtyard and inside the front door, the main entrance is dramatically classical, even monumental — a temple to living well. The front portico, projecting from the facade and anchoring the big, second-story gables, is broad and grand because it has to be, given the size and scale of the structure. But it's also about welcoming guests, as befits two people who have many friends and enjoy entertaining.

## LIKE MANY MANSIONS ON THE GOLD COAST, THE BACK OF THE HOUSE IS THE TRUE FRONT.

What's unusual about a house this size, though, is how relaxed it feels inside. Aside from a few built-in benches, the foyer is clean and spare, which highlights the rich, architectural elements and sculptural essence of the space. From the foyer, the central section of the house immediately reveals itself to visitors.

The living and dining rooms share a large area with an easy grace. The house's long footprint encourages this kind of flow, but it springs from the owners' personalities and style. "I didn't want to live in a museum, where you can't sit in certain rooms," the wife says. "I didn't want to worry about the furniture, I didn't want to walk into rooms and have them scream at me. We wanted calm and neutral and nothing fancy or overly dramatic, because the property and views are so dramatic."

The furnishings, acquired for the couple by David Kleinberg

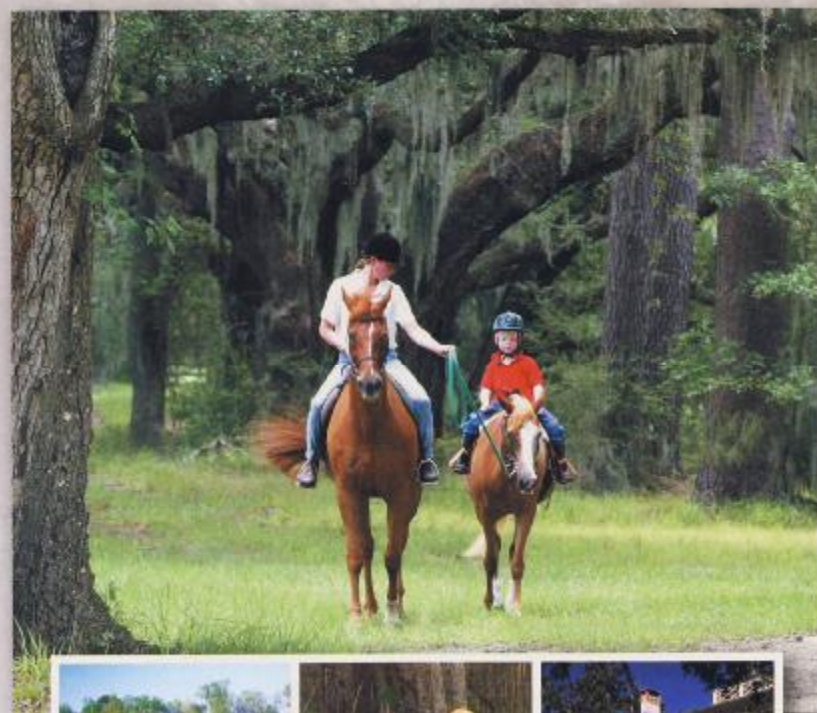
Design Associates in Manhattan, are eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English, French and painted Italian. But the floor coverings are contemporary carpets, which Kleinberg designed in light, neutral tones to keep the rooms from looking staid. Such tones also mitigate the scale of the house and soften the strength of the primary materials: slate, tile, granite, oak, mahogany and a small forest of paneled and painted woods.

"It would have been so easy to make a house of this size pretentious," Kleinberg says, "but that was never part of the program. This is not about impressing the neighbors. The owners are very relaxed, with a very good sense of humor about themselves and their lives. They're grateful for what they have; they take nothing for granted. They're the least pretentious people I've met in a long time."

To the left of the foyer, beyond the public living/dining area,

**OPPOSITE** Retractable blinds and a heated slate floor control the climate in this 18-foot-square sunroom off the kitchen and family room. **BELOW** The view from the master bedroom balcony; back lawn and gardens, original boathouse and the mouth of Southport Harbor. **UPPER RIGHT** To the right of the boathouse, a breakwall doubles as a sunning deck. **LOWER RIGHT** Inside the 800-square-foot boathouse, an eyebrow window bounces light off the water. A shingle-style miniature of the main house, the outbuilding is often used on weekends.





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a long, high-ceilinged hall lined with storage cabinets leads to the butler's, caterer's and service pantries. That there are three pantries speaks volumes about the kitchen — which is, of course, culinary state-of-the-art. An eight-by-twelve-foot island floats in the space. The top is honed Calcutta white marble, the cabinets below are cherrywood. Foot-pedal faucets operate the island sink.

Off the kitchen is the warmest room in the house — an eighteen-foot-square sunroom, casual and elegant, that juts into the back patio and overlooks a pool and the Sound. The room has a heated slate floor and electric sun shades that open and close with the click of a button.

All of the first floor rooms on the harbor and Sound side of the house, in fact, open to lawn, gardens and water. And everywhere can be found the fluted columns and pilasters that comprise the architectural theme connecting one part of the house to the next and reaffirming the timeless character of the place.

The formal, dressy columns and furnishings, mixed with the warm, casual colors and materials, express the owners' eclectic interplay of tastes. "The dressiness is her, the casualness him," Mark Finlay says. "This is a marriage of personalities and styles."

### SEPARATE WORLDS

One of the marvels of big houses is that they can contain separate worlds within the same walls. Just beyond the kitchen area, one wing of the house cantos slightly toward the water. This device allows the floorplan to breathe and flow, grab new views of the seascape and create room for the attached but separate family room — the real "living" room for a family of five. The ceiling beams are reclaimed timbers; the gigantic chandelier is an Italian reproduction, as is the Bugatti mirror. This wing also houses two three-car garages, one with staff living quarters above, that frame an enormous service courtyard and an arched passageway to the back lawn and water.

The portal to yet another realm is a rotunda on the far side of the central section, to the right of the entry foyer. The

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round, domed room contains basically nothing (and therein lies its beauty) but serves as a kind of switching room to shoot a far wing off the main section of the house and access the more private, and masculine, rooms on the first floor.

Immediately past the rotunda, tucked under the grand staircase, is a small, odd-shaped space that, in another house, might be considered a powder room. Here, by virtue (or vice) of Mercury glass mirrors and a honed limestone and black marble floor, it's more of a "power" room—a wash-room one might find in an exclusive, elusive, century-old men's club.

Farther down the hall is a fitness center (it's too large and well-equipped to be called an exercise room), followed by the husband's office and library. Here too, classic and modern coexist along with studious and relaxed. With the touch of a button, the fieldstone fireplace and rich mahogany bookshelves and paneling fade behind a large, drop-down viewing screen as the library converts to a high-definition home theater. The roomy, custom-made sofa and armchairs are almost too comfortable to rise from once seated. "That was the idea," says David Kleinberg, who designed them. "The husband had real-guy concerns. He said, 'I just want to be comfortable.'"

One of the bookcases swivels into a small, secret space with a spiral staircase that leads to the second floor master bedroom complex, where femininity rules.

"This is a woman's domain," Kleinberg maintains. "The biggest [problem] here was getting the husband's head around sleeping in a room with pink curtains and roses on the walls."

His dressing room—a wide hall, really, with mahogany drawers, high shelves and a library ladder—looks like an annex in a Polo store. But her two-room dressing area could be a small, fashionable boutique. A pair of glass-topped islands serve as clothing cabinets. A makeup table draws natural light from a private, semicircular balcony.

On the second floor, at the opposite end from the master bedroom, are the children's bedrooms and a large open study area with three work stations. \*



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## TO THE BOATHOUSE

Like many mansions on the Gold Coast, the back of the house is the true front, because the house faces the Sound and the yard extends across the open water all the way to the horizon. This is also where the family feels at one with the elements, and from where the house — its bedroom balconies completely exposed to the site — can be fully experienced.

Pleasure is the guiding principle here, especially in the warmer months. There is a pergola, an outdoor kitchen, a sophisticated vanishing-edge pool, an expanse of loggia (or open arcade) and umbrella-shaded patios.

But the jewel of the “backyard” (though the term hardly does the property justice) is the estate’s original boathouse. Mark Finlay remodeled the 800-square-foot outbuilding in the shingle style — it is now a miniature of the main house — with scaled classical portico and columns, eyebrow dormer window and stone chimneys.

In front of the building, at the water’s edge, is an elevated stone deck with a firepit that leads to a long pier and mid-harbor dock. The last visitor to arrive by sea was Paul Newman, who parked his raceboat and walked up the pier to call on Mr. Robards. The new owner hopes to upgrade the dock, which has been out of use since then.

On the southern side, stairs descend to a long, narrow walkway along the break-wall, then to a sliver, a crescent moon, of private beach. Stacked against the breakwall is a three-foot deposit of shells and tidal debris often found far north along the eastern coast but rarely anymore in southern Connecticut.

The remodeled boathouse has a full kitchen, living room, dining room and bedroom with bath. A couple could be happy living just here and nowhere else.

Although the size is impressive and the details exquisite, this mansion is less a showcase than a house designed around the particular priorities of a particular family on a very particular slice of the Connecticut coast. This is a family that knows itself and how it wants to live. ■

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