

DESIGNERS' OWN HOMES

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Michelle Morgan Harrison

The designer behind Morgan Harrison Home updates a
200-YEAR-OLD HOUSE into a like-new **FOREVER** home

INTERVIEW WITH MICHELLE MORGAN HARRISON, MORGAN HARRISON HOME | PHOTOGRAPHER JANE BEILES



DESIGNERS' OWN HOMES ISSUE

Tell me a little bit about your house. We bought the house in 2015, and it turned 200 years old in 2016. It sits on a three-acre piece of property, and it was originally part of a much larger farm. It was owned by one of the Weeds, an important local family. We are technically the fifth owners, and the previous owner had a lot of historic information about the house in a few boxes in the attic. Looking at some of the old photos, you can see it was much more of a farmhouse and had more meager beginnings. An addition in the back that includes the kitchen and breakfast room is about 125 years old. A widow named Mrs. Clement Guion bought the house in the 1920s, and she hired a well-known architect, Alfred Mausolff, who had designed the New Canaan post office (now Citibank), to renovate it into more of a classic center-hall Colonial. She also had blueprints drawn up for the landscape design, but it's unclear what was actually implemented. We still have those plans, which is fabulous. There are four structures on the property—the main house, the main house's garage/barn that was rebuilt in the 1980s, an original 1920s garage that I converted into my office, and a garage for that building as well. What really got us when we saw the house was the property—it's so beautiful, and there's a gorgeous view from the screened porch. That, to me, was it—we could see it.



right: In the side foyer, an Oly Studio metal demilune table is beneath a Carver's Guild mirror, and Aerin Lauder's Jacqueline flush mount and a hall sconce are from Visual Comfort. The rug and stair carpet are a two-toned cut-pile wool by Radici Custom.



far left: The family's dog, Finnegan, sits facing a blue leather bench from Oly Studio. The door hardware is from Baldwin. **near left:** The formal powder room is covered in Schumacher's Hollyhock wallpaper, and Ash Gray marble from AKDO was fabricated by Dushi Marble & Granite for the countertop. The satin brass faucet from Newport Brass was paired with a medicine cabinet mirror from RH Modern, and the sconce and Balthazar flush mount are both from Visual Comfort. Black woven seagrass baskets from West Elm corral essentials. **below:** In the living room, seating includes chairs from Theodore Alexander in Romo's Strie velvet in Ivory, a Wesley Hall Belmont sofa in a Kravet Grey velvet and stools from Lillian August for Hickory White in a Sahco metallic speckled greige velvet. Barbara Barry's Lotus standing lamp from Visual Comfort is next to a fig planter from CB2, and draperies made from a Champagne silk from Fabricat hang on Ona gold leaf hardware. Vintage starbursts are displayed over the mantel.





above: Pillows in a lavender textured satin from Larsen mix with pillows in a textured patterned Zimmer + Rohde fabric with Samuel & Sons fringe trim. A side table from Plexi-Craft cozies up to one of the Theodore Alexander chairs, and along the wall, a pale blue leather Oly Lounge chair sits beneath a vintage Swedish framed landscape oil painting.

After buying the house, what came next? My husband, two boys and I first lived in the house as is while we renovated the original 1920s garage. This garage had an apartment above it, so we gutted and renovated that into a full cottage so we could move into it while we renovated the main house. I designed the cottage to be my office, also knowing we had to live in it for a year, so it has a working kitchen and bathrooms.

What were some of the updates to the main house? It was a full gut. I did all of the architectural interiors, and we got an engineer to sign off on the roof. We raised the roof 18 inches and added dormers in the front. We brought a crane in to make the large, central fireplace a working fireplace again, because, with original antique homes, the big central fireplace is integral to the structure of the house. We replaced all of the windows in the exact design of the original ones. While the screened porch floor is original, we replaced the rest of the floors throughout, because they were mismatched over time. We

upgraded the insulation, plumbing, electric—it's basically a new house, but with 7-foot-3 ceilings! We also won a historic preservation award for this home.

Were you able to maintain anything from the original home? We kept the footprint of the original home the same, but we did some reworking to the newer, late-1800s-structure that included the kitchen/mudroom layout and the master bedroom and bath. We rejiggered the addition of the kitchen footprint a bit to fit in pantries. flipflopped the layout of the master suite, and took out the rear stair and relocated the first-floor powder room there. I kept the Dutch doors and original side lights, but I did the new ones in the same design so that they were weatherproof, soundproof and more energy-efficient. The house was at the point where it needed a full renovation, and I wanted to bring it back to its truer state. We did things in the same style as what was here before, but we upgraded everything.

“We’ve always believed that what you get from **KEEPING** an old house
and its **CHARM** is something you **CAN’T REPLACE.**”

—MICHELLE MORGAN HARRISON



Sounds like quite a project! This is the fourth renovation project since we've been married, and they've always been antique homes. The last house we had was in town, and we won our first historic preservation award for that, and it was also our first gut renovation. So, even though we had done renovations before, we had never done one on three acres with a lot of outbuildings. It was a big project and very time-consuming, but the house works really well for us. When we raised the roof in the attic, that became our older son's "lair," with his bedroom and sitting room. The second floor has two bedrooms in the front, one of which is my younger son's room with a sunroom (his "lounge"), and a guest room. Our master bedroom is in the back, along with the laundry room, master bath and closets. On the first floor, the main entrance was changed to the side entrance in the 1920s, and the new foyer is off of the side entry. We removed a corrupt chimney in the breakfast room, and that's where my bar is now. In the 1950s, a family room flat roof addition was also put

on, and in there, we ripped out wall-to-wall carpeting that had linoleum underneath it as well as paneling I like to call "Sears paneling."

What overall vibe were you looking to create? I started with the exterior. To me, the way to tie all of the structures together was to unify them with paint. I didn't want this to be another white house; a more modern, fresh take on it was to do a monochromatic look. I used Benjamin Moore's Ozark Shadows on the exterior, and that dictated from the outside in, with all of the interior doors painted Benjamin Moore's high-gloss Baltic Gray, which is very close to Ozark Shadows. Much of this house was taken from my old one; there are a lot of similarities. In my old house, I had open shelves above the bar, and I love displaying my collection of cake plates, so I just modernized it here. Instead of having one shelf with brackets, I did two-inch floating shelves. You don't get to do a lot of chandeliers when you have 7-foot-3 ceilings, but where I could,

opposite: In the dining room, underneath an antique chandelier Morgan Harrison found at a Paris flea market, an antique pine French farm table is surrounded by ivory dining chairs with gold striping and gray Pollack mohair seats from Modern History. The Roman shade and draperies are made from a pale gray sheer from Larsen with Samuel & Sons gray velvet tape, and the charcoal on silver wallpaper (seen below on the left) is from Cowtan & Tout. Pink vases from Ecri hold fresh blooms. **below:** Vases from Frances Palmer are displayed on the coffee table from Worlds Away. The walls are painted in Benjamin Moore's Silver Satin, and a flatweave carpet from J.D. Staron in lavender, pale blue/green, off-white and taupe anchors the space.





above, left and right: Artwork from Natural Curiosities is a focal point in the breakfast room; canisters from West Elm mix with a vintage jadeite bowl in the kitchen.

left: The open shelves and wet bar by Sterling Custom Cabinetry are painted in Benjamin Moore's Silent Night, and a vintage hotel silver tray sits on top of the Statuary marble counter by Dushi Marble & Granite. The cabinet hardware is from Top Knobs, and the faucet is from Dornbracht. Hobnail vases, cake plates and bowls are on display.

right: Statuary marble by Dushi Marble & Granite tops the kitchen counters, and a runner from Bolon is underfoot.





above: A set of dining chairs in a blush velvet from West Elm gather around a white oval table from Highland House. A bowl from Roost, a large vase from West Elm and a smaller vintage hobnail vase rest on top, while a vintage Murano chandelier hangs above.

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above: The open shelves and island are by Sterling Custom Cabinetry. The perimeter cabinets are painted in Benjamin Moore's White, while the island is in Benjamin Moore's Silent Night. Counter stools from Wesley Hall are topped with a Pindler & Pindler vinyl, and the lights above are Caravaggio milk glass pendants. The Thermador range and hood can easily handle entertaining. The recessed pull/mortised cabinet hardware is from Schaub, the square pulls are from Top Knobs, and the faucet is from Dornbracht. **opposite, bottom:** A sofa, chairs and coffee table from Kingsley Bate furnish the screened porch. Pillows from Serena & Lily top the furniture, and a Chinese stool from Van Cleve sits alongside. Benjamin Moore's Ozark Shadows imparts a serene feel.

I did, and I put in a lot of vintage lighting. And oddly enough, all of our furniture fit beautifully. Our farm table fit perfectly in the dining room; the desk and wing chair that we had fit perfectly in the library. It was an easy evolution.

How did you handle the living and dining rooms? That was one of my hardest challenges. I knew where the dining room had to go, so we ripped out the radiators and gained some storage there. The living room was more difficult—I originally tried putting the sofa against the front windows, but it just didn't work. I did replace the sofa and the coffee table and got a new rug, and we redid the fireplace. I call that sofa the “teen

sofa,” because my boys tend to lie on that couch more. My husband and I love entertaining, and what's great about the sideboard in the dining room is that you can load it up with food, and everyone can fill their plates and enjoy the view. The hutch in there hold all of my grandmother's china—she was an etiquette and home economics teacher in Baton Rouge—and I have every serving piece you could possibly have.

What were some of the updates to the kitchen? We had a tiny kitchen in our old house, so this was like, “Ooh, yay!” [laughs] I love designing kitchens; it's one of my favorite things to do. It's not just aesthetic—it's about where the utensils go, where Tupperware is stored; when you make the kids' lunches, do





this page. One set of the library built-ins displays a Haeger, McCoy and Red Wing vintage ivory ironstone collection (left), and a Pierre Frey metallic grasscloth is on the walls. A Fine Paints of Europe high gloss was mixed in Benjamin Moore's Baltic Gray for the woodwork, and a vintage mirror over the mantel was painted to match. A leather wing chair and ottoman from Pearson, seated next to a Champagne tripod leg table with églomisé top, face a white Hickory Chair desk topped with a vintage brass bowl. The Roman shade is crafted from a Thibaut crosshatch fabric, and the brass ceiling fixture and picture lights are from Visual Comfort.

you have to walk across the room twelve times? You have to think about how it works. We opened up the old kitchen and added a big bank of windows that overlooks the yard. I'm a baker, so that's how I thought about this island, which is where I would lay out dozens of my Christmas cookies. Nothing punctuates low ceilings more than short little upper cabinets, so to trick the eye, I used open, floating shelves and tall cabinets that sat on top of the counter, elongating the look of the upper cabinets. I also brought in a blue/gray palette as a counterpoint to the warm gray of the doors throughout the house. But the best part of the kitchen is the bar—we always have a bar set, just like my Southern grandmother did; the only thing she had to do was fill the ice bucket. We've actually been playing board games at the breakfast table, which means we've been eating dinner in the dining room so we don't disturb our game! Since Covid-19, we've been outside on the screened porch a lot, since it's accessible from the breakfast room and dining room, so that's been great. We just throw open the doors, play music and hang out.

Tell me about your master suite. The original bedroom was in the front, and the closets and bathroom were in the back. Because we had such low





this page: The master bedroom is furnished with a bed from Wesley Hall upholstered in a Rubelli greige cotton velvet, and an antique alabaster lamp with a linen shade sits on an ivory wood side table from Hickory Chair. The Roman shade and draperies are made from a pink linen from Fabricut, and the draperies hang on Ona custom gold leaf hardware. Benjamin Moore's Kitten Whiskers (cut) is on the walls, and a greige wool cut and loop pile rug by Surface Design is on the floor. A Hickory Chair Hunt chair in a Manuel Canovas pink velvet is seated at a Thomas O'Brien secretary from Century, and artwork by Zoe Bios adds another dose of soft color to the space. The master bath features Calcutta marble in a herringbone pattern on the floor, and the walls are Benjamin Moore's Silver Satin (cut). A Sigma faucet and Ralph Lauren sconces are elegant additions.



this page: In the family room, a gray velvet sectional from Vanguard and a Mr. & Mrs. Howard swivel chair in a beige woven fabric are centered on a square brass coffee table with a stone top from Century. Lightly lined soft greige linen sheers with Holly Hunt off-black woven tape frame the windows and hang on Ona gold leaf hardware. An Antrim beige wool rug with interlocking squares covers the floor, and Benjamin Moore's Silver Moon is on the walls. Accent pillows in a charcoal velvet from Kravet mingle with pillows in an embroidered pattern from Larsen. A brass Julian Chichester side table sits near a brass standing lamp with a marble base, and artwork includes a Robert Motherwell lithograph and pieces from Tulsi by Tara Hogan. A gray porcelain light fixture from Schoolhouse Electric and black woven seagrass baskets from West Elm can be glimpsed in the mudroom.





above: Morgan Harrison unified the various buildings on her property with Benjamin Moore's Ozark Shadows. She and her husband envision implementing a former owner's landscape design plans from the 1920s and adding a pool.

ceilings, I wanted to vault the ceiling to give volume and lightness to the space, so I shifted the bedroom to the rear. You now walk through a hallway with the bathroom on the left and the closets on the right, and I carved out a proper laundry room that you access from the hall. I chose Benjamin Moore's Kitten Whiskers (but cut) for the room, and it's a soft taupe-y pink. I did a higher headboard to elevate the eye even more; the secretary came from our old house; and I put in some new art.

How does this home compare to your previous homes? It's different than homes I've designed but similar to homes I've lived in. It's substantially larger in size, but it's the right size. It's taken the best of everything we've done and put it in one place; it was a natural fit. We've always believed that what you get from keeping an old house and its charm is something you can't replace. To me, it's how to do an old house, to maintain what you can and be as authentic as you can, while being energy-efficient and smart.

What's in the future for your home? One of my favorite movies is *Under the Tuscan Sun*, and one of the characters has a line about how she saw weddings in her house, children in her house. And that's true for me—when I look out at our yard, I see weddings. I have two boys, so one of them better get married here! [*laughs*] I have the next twenty years to evolve the landscape and bring it back to Mrs. Guion's plans, and put in a pool! That's my plan, and I want to stay true to that. This is it for us.

Resources:

Architectural interiors and interior design: Morgan Harrison Home, New Canaan; 203-594-7875; morganharrisonhome.com

Construction: Patrick Kennedy, PK Construction; 203-613-9040

Cabinetry: Sterling Custom Cabinetry, Bridgeport; 203-335-5151; sterling-custom.com

Stone: Dushi Marble & Granite, Stamford; 203-978-0038; dushimg.com