

# Connecticut

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# FRENCH EVOLUTION

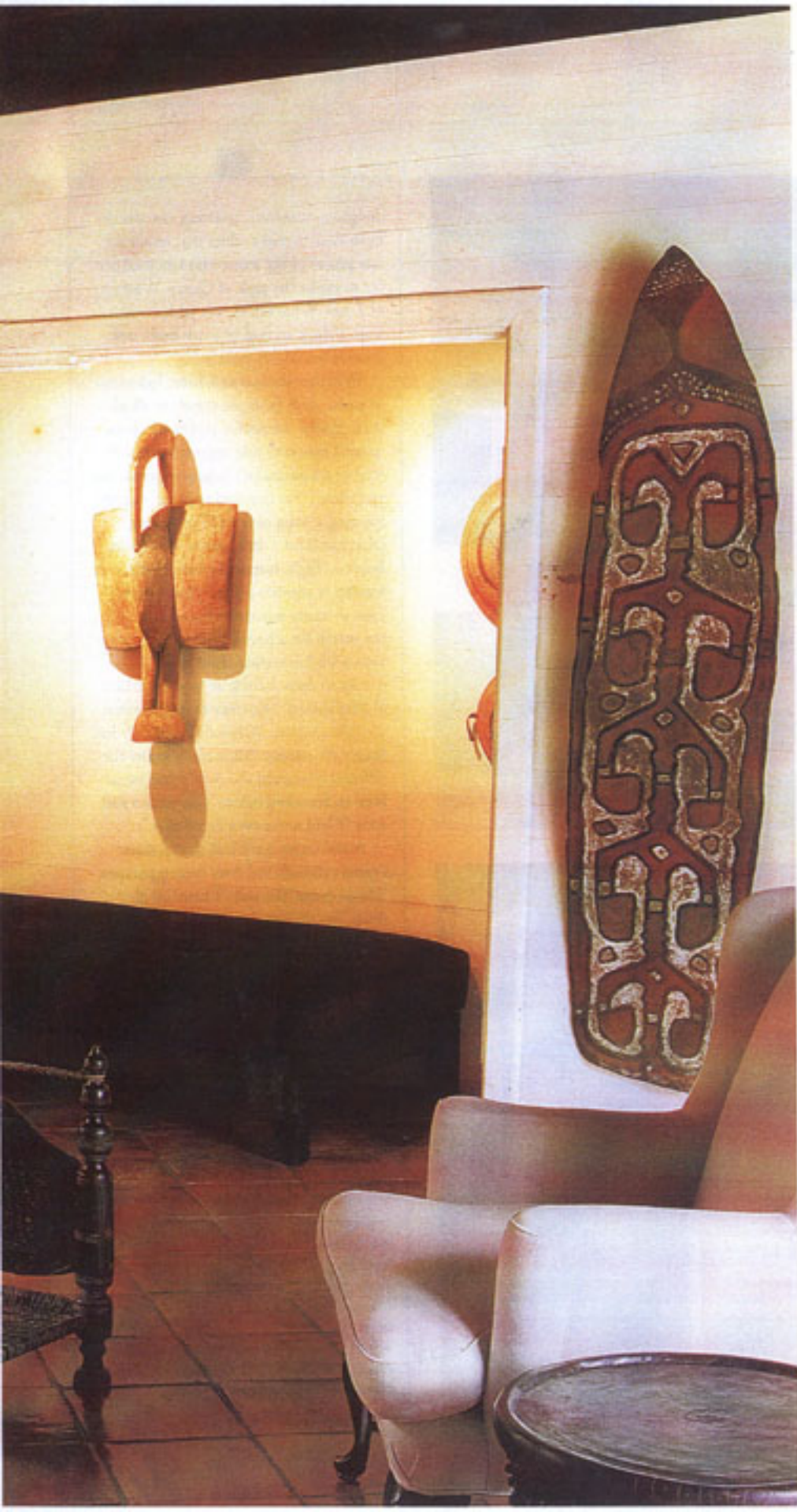
*A carriage house in Stamford gets a new look inspired by the South of France*

*By Diane di Costanzo | Photographs by ChiChi Ubina*









**THE MORNING IS** so misty and still that the former Vanderbilt carriage house looks like a tableau from a French oil painting. The details are so charmingly antique—weathered shutters, espaliered trees and a wide, circular courtyard for the carriages—that you expect to see a stablehand emerge with a horse on his heels, steam rising from the animal's dark coat. "Man with Horse," would be a suitable title for the painting, you decide. That is, until a tall blonde boy lopez into view, flipping open his cell phone. "Hey," he says. "My mom's inside."

Make that "Teen with Cell Phone" and, regrettably, you're not in Napoleon's France after all. In fact, you're in the city of Stamford, just a few minutes' drive from its congested highways and glass office towers. Safe to say, there aren't many places in these parts that one would confuse with the provincial countryside, but then again there aren't many interior designers with the panache of French-born Francine Gardner, who is also the aforementioned "mom." It is Francine who appears at the wide double doors—an opening large enough to accommodate a carriage—and welcomes you in for tea and a tour.

Along with her husband, Luke Gardner, Francine saved this carriage house from a ruinous circa-1950's renovation. A big job to be sure, but Francine, proprietor of a TriBeCa-based design firm and shop called Interieurs, does this for a living—imparting her clean, modernist style to homes all over the country.

Francine "starts with the tree" when

**Lofty Ambitions** | A small door (PREVIOUS SPREAD LEFT) served as the original access to the boy loft, which is now used for storage. **All American** | A black-and-white charcoal by Paul Rottenham (PREVIOUS SPREAD RIGHT) hangs over an antique American table. **Grand Central** | The living room (LEFT) is the focal point of the house. A daybed covered in Senegalese fabric is tucked into the space that once housed sheep stalls. Two small antique chairs are from Afghanistan. See Resources.





designing furniture, sourcing rare woods from Asia to make tables that retain the raw power of the forest—no fancy carpentry to evoke the style of Queen Who's-it or Louis What's-it. A side table is cut from a thick section of a tree limb, still gnarled but highly polished.

Whether sourced in China, Indonesia or India—and Francine travels to all of these places—Interieurs pieces are about natural materials and organic forms colored in a minimalist's palette of stone, flax and ebony. "Six hundred pounds," she says, running a palm over a 110-inch-long table, cut from a dark, glossy wood from Borneo. "Eight hundred pounds," she says, waving at another piece. "Maybe more." Like so many urbanites, Francine began her search for a house, nine months pregnant with her second child, using a teacup to draw a circle around the island of Manhattan. The cities that fell within its tight confines included Greenwich and Stamford, and she didn't really know the difference between the two. "I had never been to Stamford before." She pauses and adds, "I had never even heard of it."

A real estate agent had shown them typical colonials and boxy contemporaries. "Hated them," she said. "I hated all of them." So, she gave her agent the new directive to turn up "unloved treasures." But even she was a little shaken by the wreckage within the former carriage house. "It was," she says haltingly, "in disrepair." Some of the floors had caved in, there were hearing and plumbing problems and miles of wall-to-wall carpeting, mildewed and threadbare. "It was humid," she adds, giving the word a long, Gallic moment.

The previous owners had purchased the house from the Vanderbilt estate and attempted to create rooms within its cav-



**Marrakesh Mark** | An extremely rare Berber trunk from Morocco sits underneath the stairs (TOP LEFT). **Sliding Doors** | An old stable door (BOTTOM LEFT) divides the living and dining rooms. Mexican tile flows through both rooms and into the kitchen. **Make Room** | The dining room houses a French table (OPPOSITE) inherited from Gardner's family. See Resources.





erous spaces with cheaply paneled walls. The cheaper the better, Francine says with a shrug. "It was easy to take down." In fact, the renovation started as an excavation to get back to the original stone walls, cement floors, sliding stall doors and wood-slatted ceilings. When the dust settled, the floorplan for their new home was clear: the living room, dining room and kitchen make up the center axis with two wings flanking on either side of the courtyard.

In the living room, Francine chose to keep the creaky wooden stairway that leads up to what was once the hayloft, but she laid new roughly-cut Mexican tiles that remind her of the floors of her childhood home, a farmhouse in the 12th century village of Clermont-Dessous. In the bedroom wing, Francine created an elegant gallery with glass doors giving onto the courtyard. The bedrooms, once stalls for various animals, open onto the gallery. At the end is Francine's home office with walls the color of a blood orange and hung with photographs of her parents and grandparents.

The other wing of house is a work in progress, with an office for Luke and extra bedrooms to accommodate the steady stream of guests coming up from the city. Francine opens the door to a big space that the boys use as a playroom. It's clear that Alexander (teen with cell phone), 17, and Hadrian, 13, do play here. "They ride their bikes inside this room," says the boys' mother who, shaking her head at the clutter, shuts the door on it. Francine is a working mother after all—Borneo calls! A minute later, pea-stone gravel is scattering under the wheels of her SUV and, once again, the painterly tableau of her provincial passage is disrupted. Manhattan, hard as it is to believe, is less than an hour away. ●

**Play It Again** | Gardner recycled antique floorboards found in the attic to make a table for the playroom (TOP LEFT). The rug is by Carrii Lang.

**Go Global** | A Moroccan star lantern (FAR LEFT) sits on the blue window sill in the playroom.

**On Reflection** | A mirror in the gallery (NEAR LEFT) is handmade with driftwood from France.

**Tucked Away** | Gardner designed the oak bed in the master bedroom (OPPOSITE). See Resources.

