



*A New York  
interior designer  
finds the former  
horse barn of  
a Connecticut  
Vanderbilt estate  
worthy of being  
transformed  
into a home*

★  
STORY AND  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY JACKIE CARADONIO

# STABLE VALUE

This nearly 6,500-square-foot home in Stamford, Connecticut, is set among copper beech trees on five-and-a-half acres. The home owes its unique U-shape to its past: It was erected in the 1920s as a stable on a Vanderbilt estate. An antique weather vane on the roof is one of the few original ornamentations remaining with the home.





**FAR LEFT:** The living room combines designer furnishings—such as the floor lamps with steel mesh shades by José Esteves and the coffee table by Intérieurs—with items discovered during homeowner Francine Gardner's travels, including a wood-block ottoman from Indonesia, urns from a Burmese market, and a stool from Afghanistan.

**LEFT:** In each of the four corners of the living room hangs a painting by Austrian-born artist Paul Rotterdam, in addition to several Indonesian artifacts and antique tables. **BELOW:** The living room's fenestration provides views of the front courtyard and the backyard's gardens (shown). Nepalese pillows add color to the pair of Rensselaer chaise lounges from Parisian designer Henry Beq's company, Modérature, which flank a Berber table discovered in Morocco.



**T**HE STORY OF THE East Coast's Gilded Age cannot be told without mentioning the Vanderbilts. The prominent family epitomized the splendor and prosperity that ruled the early 20th century—and they had the homes to prove it. With their grand scale and Beaux-Arts ornamentation, the elaborate Vanderbilt estates—numbering somewhere in the 20s—are still sprinkled throughout the Northeast today, a testament to the opulence of their time.

Several of these estates have since been subdivided, and in the early 1990s, when New York-based French designer Francine Gardner

discovered a 1920s stable once part of a larger Vanderbilt property in Stamford, Connecticut, she saw the opportunity to create a personalized abode. For several grueling months, Gardner had searched for a retreat reminiscent of the homes in her native Bordeaux in which she and her husband could raise their two sons. Upon seeing the historical structure's U-shape—a common home layout in southern France—she was immediately smitten. “It occurred to me that it was just like a house I would live in back home,” Gardner says. “I wanted to make an offer without even going inside.”

Only after the deal was done did she discover what was hiding within the structure: The home had been converted into a residence in the 1950s and its dated decor, which included wall-to-wall plywood and shag carpeting, was an alarming contrast to its bucolic exterior. The discovery had Gardner regretting her impulsive decision. “There is good ‘50s design and poor ‘50s design. This was poor ‘50s design,” Gardner recalls. “I thought to myself, ‘What have I done?’”

And so began the enormous task of tearing down and rebuilding. To respect the structure's historical origins, Gardner chose not to alter the home's

exterior or framework; instead she removed the walls and closets erected by the previous owners to unearth the stable's original stone walls. She also elected to expand the residence outward rather than upward, adding several bathrooms and renovating and enlarging a guest cottage. “We wanted to maintain the structure of the original stable, so we did not add a second floor,” Gardner says. “We didn't want to hide what it really was.”

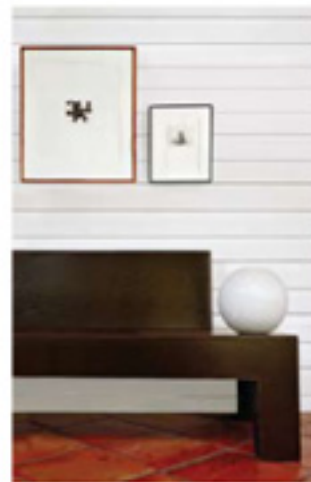
While history dictated the nearly 6,500-square-foot home's floor plan, Gardner envisioned a more contemporary style for the interiors. “I wasn't interested in creating a vintage-stable theme for the





**RIGHT:** In the playroom, a globe chandelier by José Esteves hangs from the original wood-paneled ceiling. Behind the sofa is a vintage movie poster. For the floors, Gardner re-created the look of traditional French tiles by staining and waxing tiles from Mexico.

**DETAILS:** A Berber trunk from Morocco and a bench from Intérieurs complement the hand-stained floors and white-washed walls. Stairs above the trunk lead to a storage attic and were discovered upon removing walls erected by the residence's previous owners.



Gardner gave the master bedroom a Zen-like quality with an antique scroll from Beijing and a Burmese Buddha statue. The canopy bed, which Gardner designed specifically for the space, is draped in handwoven cotton from Bali.

house," says Gardner, whose design firm and showroom, Intérieurs, is located in New York City. The result is a modern home that scrupulously avoids the clichés of a historic New England retreat, instead emphasizing simple lines and muted colors that are augmented by a collection of one-of-a-kind antiques and artwork discovered throughout Gardner's world travels.

The living room, Gardner's favorite room in the house, best showcases this modern-meets-

ethnic blending of styles. "Every object in here has a story behind it," Gardner says, pointing out two red urns she found in a Burmese market and a wood-block stool from Indonesia. All furnishings that were not scavenged from flea markets and antique shops around the world share the same clean lines and earth-toned color palette, such as a pair of chaise lounges from Parisian designer Henry Becq, which flank a Berber table from Morocco. Like most rooms in the house,





**LEFT:** The saltwater pool was installed in 2007.

**BELOW:** A José Esteves dog light sculpture sits on top of an antique white-stained vanity from France.



the living room benefits from the home's U-shape, enjoying views of both the front and back of the property. "When you have rooms that are open on both sides, you feel like you are part of the landscape," Gardner says.

Hallways off the living room, which once served as breezeways between horse stalls, now connect six bedrooms and five bathrooms, a study, a playroom, and a media room—known as the "purple room" because of its oversize plum-hued sofas—to the home's center. In the master bedroom, on the property's west side, the previous whitewashed panels were exchanged for cream-colored walls, which, together with a canopy bed and Burmese Buddha statue, create a Zen-like retreat. In the residence's east wing, the playroom exhibits the stable's original wood-slat ceiling, although the tile floors, which are found throughout the house, are Gardner's handiwork. Wanting to re-create the antique flooring typically found in French homes but unable to locate an adequate reproduction, Gardner imported Mexican tiles that were then hand-stained and waxed to

perfectly mimic the look of the floors on which she treaded as a child.

A much-needed overhaul of the landscaping, which had long been surrendered to overgrown brush, completed the home's transformation. Gardner designed lush gardens and multiple patios and lounge areas to beautify the property's five-and-a-half acres, three of which are devoted to a reserve. The recent addition of a saltwater swimming pool and deck was the last big project for what Gardner now sees as her masterpiece.

The outcome is a residence far more luxurious than anything a stable hand of the early 20th century would have ever imagined. But despite the Vanderbilts' legacy of conspicuous elegance and decorum, Gardner appreciates the home's contemporary yet lived-in feel. "I believe a house should be warm, harmonious, and very personalized," Gardner says as she reflects on a decade-and-a-half of renovations. "It is always a work in progress, but at this point, to me, our house is a sanctuary." **PHOTO**

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