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Historic Living in Nashville

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A photograph of a dining room. In the center is a large, dark-stained wooden dining table with a vase of white flowers. The table is surrounded by wooden chairs with upholstered seats. In the background, there is a white fireplace mantel with two brass candlesticks. Above the mantel hangs a large, ornate chandelier. To the left and right are windows with patterned curtains. The walls are painted a light green color with white trim.

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Invoking the Classical Language

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TEXT Jordana White | PHOTOGRAPHY courtesy of Eric Stengel Architecture



It took two full years for architect Eric Stengel to construct a historically accurate, yet modernly equipped, 9,000 square foot 18th century Georgian-style home in Nashville. His clients liked the Georgian brick look, and Stengel had a passion for classicism; when the two came together, something far greater than just a lovely home was created.

According to Stengel, his specialty is "the classical language of architecture;" thus, when a client requests a specific style of home, like Georgian brick, he "uses that style to express the classical language." In order to truly understand the design and construction of any of Stengel's projects, it is crucial to first understand the "language" he speaks.

As Stengel explains it, "The classical language of architecture is a set of rules giving form to the sacred geometries of nature. It is the 'mother of all arts,' putting man's presence in harmony with the natural world." A home built classically needs to pay tribute to order, proportion and harmony. While a home built in the 21st century would certainly have newer features representing a modern cultural identity, the structure would still show elements in tune with older houses, if both were designed by an architect adhering to the tenets of classicism. Nowhere is this more evident than in Stengel's Nashville masterpiece.

A typical Georgian home constructed in the 18th century would have been built from brick and stone.

Stengel wanted to stay true to the period and used brick, limestone, slate and copper to build the home. While not necessarily typical for the time period, they were all elements that were periodically familiar. And in order to properly represent the "green" awareness of modern times, Stengel used inert, low-energy production materials that will last for a century or more.

With an exterior so painstakingly designed to accurately reflect authentic classic architecture, the task of appropriately decorating the interior was certainly formidable. Carolyn Kendall, owner and lead designer with Alcott Interiors in Nashville, was up for the challenge. While she knew that it was important to her client to have a fine, historically designed and furnished home, she also knew that, "in designing any house, whether it is an 18th century Georgian or a contemporary, (it is critical to make sure) it is comfortable and reflects and fits the family that lives in it." She took care to use historically authentic color palettes and appropriate furnishings, choosing hues that might have been used in an 18th century Georgian that still felt modern and mixing antiques from different countries to give an interesting, historical look. At the same time, historical features that might cause discomfort were appropriately altered. "We used antiques where we could," Kendall says, "but we also blended them with new upholstered sofas so the family could enjoy the scale and comfort of new pieces. Often antique sofas can be scaled a bit small,





feature

for today's males especially, and also can be a bit fragile for teenagers such as the ones who live in this home." So the designer made the choice to put the family's comfort ahead of 100 percent historical authenticity. Kendall also made sure that the home was equipped with all the latest appliances and fixtures, and that it was wired for the family's audio visual needs. "All of this is done very discreetly so when you are in the home your eye notices the beauty of the home and not the gadgets," Kendall says.

One of the most beautifully dramatic features of the home is the grand entrance, with a 23-foot ceiling over a presentation stair ellipse. According to Stengel, this room had particular significance to the homeowner because of the tradition the design represents. Stengel's client is Catholic; to pay tribute to the family's belief, he constructed the entryway using both elliptical and circular designs, reflecting the shift in church architecture in Italy in the 17th century. These features "gave the room special meaning for my client, in addition to being aesthetically pleasing," Stengel explains.

While the homeowners have their treasured spaces, others involved in the construction and design of the home have favorite elements as well. Kendall is particularly fond of both the home's living room and morning room, obviously for very different reasons. The living room, she says, "is elegant and soothing with the wonderful blue glazed paneled walls and a soft palette of shades of blue, gold and brown." Mixing beautiful silks and velvets with special pieces like an inlaid tea table from the 1800s, antique paintings and a gilded bronze chandelier adds to the luxurious yet comfortable impression. Special details like the brown marble custom fireplace, contrast beautifully with the color scheme, keeping the space appropriately balanced.

The morning room, on the other hand, is "a cheery place, with its sunny palette of gold, terra cotta and flesh tones," says Kendall. A sky light and

mosaic floor pattern were specifically designed to mirror each other in both color and design, creating a uniquely bright harmony in the space. Windows dressed in silk embroidery fabric with tassel trim, and carefully arranged furniture (an antique daybed, candlestick and French chest add aged character while still being inviting enough to sit on and enjoy a fire) "make the room perfect for reading or having a nice chat with a friend," Kendall explains. Thus the

breakfast room honors the family's need for both formal and relaxed living spaces, one of the designer's main goals.

For the builders charged with bringing Stengel's vision and design to fruition, something entirely different sparked their excitement for the home. With modern technology, construction is all too often left to machines and computer programs. Because of the fine detail involved in the room-by-room construction of this home, Stengel's crew did use electronic files and tools to "rough-cut" many of the details, but they were then finished with hand-held tools, allowing

his craftsmen to practice a skill that has been almost completely lost.

Considering all the carefully appointed details in the home, and all the architect's time afforded to the task, it might seem like constructing a classically designed house is an almost unattainable dream. Not so, Stengel says. Classical architecture is a language—the same rules can hold true regardless of the materials used. The beauty of the "language" is that the same effect can be produced using high quality brick or more modest lumber. As evidenced in this Nashville home and in other projects around the world, when the harmony of classicism is invoked, the result is an invaluable, timeless elegance.

See Sources for Details





