



PRODUCED BY MAYER RUS  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERIC BOMAN  
STYLED BY MICHAEL REYNOLDS  
WRITTEN BY LYGEIA GRACE

# NATURAL CHARM

WORKING ON AN 1840S HOUSE IN CONNECTICUT, INTERIOR DESIGNER THOMAS O'BRIEN FOUND HIS INSPIRATION IN THE RURAL SETTING

The Federal-style house, seen from across the pond, is surrounded by countryside that was restored and revitalized by Christopher Dindal of Morgan Wheelock Landscape Architects.





"Houses grow in generations," Thomas O'Brien says. "Every hundred years something happens." As proof, the interior designer points to the charming Connecticut Colonial he spent three years restoring and decorating for favorite clients. "It started as a little 1840s Federal-style farmhouse. In the 1920s the main part of the house was added. Now there's our part," he says of the extensive renovation that yielded, among other things, a spacious new kitchen, an intimate walnut-paneled library, and a luxurious master bedroom suite.

When the project started, however, large-scale reconstruction was not the plan. "The original idea was that it would be really simple," O'Brien says. "When they first saw the house, it was filled with American antiques. They loved it and thought that maybe they would just do it in a similar way. But that stuff belonged to somebody else's life. This," he says, gesturing to the graceful mix of traditional and urban furnishings that flows through the well-proportioned rooms, "is about the family that lives here now."

And indeed, the house seems perfectly suited to the Manhattan couple and their three young children who make it their weekend headquarters. "It's a large house, but it's intimate and cozy," says the wife, whose down-to-earth

THE PALE GREEN OF THE ANTIQUE CARPET, REMINISCENT OF THE WORLD JUST OUTSIDE THE WINDOWS, ESTABLISHES THE SERENE TONE OF THE LIVING ROOM



**TRADE SECRETS FURNISHINGS** In the living room, this page, O'Brien (seen in the family room, opposite page) paired plush custom furnishings with beautifully proportioned antiques like the George III mahogany library cabinet, left. Ca. 1920 gilt brass and green leather tooled tables from Lee Jofa are next to two custom sofas. **FABRICS** Sofas in Lelievre's Velours Cauchois-Mastic, curtains in Hadrian, both Old World Weavers. **CARPET** Antique Sultanabad, Abraham Moheban.





## TRADE SECRETS

**FURNISHINGS** For the dining room, above, Aero Studios designed a sleek table to match the George I walnut side chairs. In the breakfast room, opposite page, the side chairs are Jonas Upholstery's Dakota model. **FABRICS** Breakfast room chairs in Sabai by Designer's Guild, through Osborne & Little. **WALLPAPER** Cape Cod floral, opposite page, by Waterhouse Wall Hangings. **PAINT** Donald Kaufman's C1, this page.

manner belies the high-finance life she and her husband lead in the city. "You don't worry that you can't sit here or there." The children race up the baronial three-story staircase, battle over their favorite red armchair, and spend hours looking for frogs and snakes in the pond. "The kids needed a place to dig in the dirt, to lead an outdoors life," she says. "We wanted to be away from the New York City scene. I like how low-key it is here."

The rural setting became O'Brien's design inspiration. The couple had hired Christopher Dindal of the renowned Morgan Wheelock landscape architecture firm to restore and renew the surrounding countryside. O'Brien used the colors of the newly reclaimed meadow, stone walls, and flagstone terraces as his starting point. "One of the first things we bought was the living room carpet," he says of the enormous nineteenth-century hand-tied Sultanabad. "In the middle of the demolition, we rolled it out on the floor. Everything

was open to the outside landscape, and here was this mossy, mossy rug. It became the basis of the colors throughout the house." He painted the walls a soft Donald Kaufman green, covered a window seat with plump pillows in a range of teal blues, yellows, and pinks, and placed a pair of sofas dressed in a pale green striped velvet from Old World Weavers in front of the large fireplace.

Yet O'Brien didn't limit himself to a particular period or style. "The clients wanted the house to be traditional, but clean," says the 44-year-old designer, who is known for a sensual, modern look that draws heavily on the mid-twentieth century. In the living room, across from a George III mahogany library cabinet, he placed a pair of slender brass side tables from the 1920s. "Their delicate profiles don't take up much room," he says. "They float. Traditional furniture doesn't always allow you to maintain a sense of space." Similar juxtapositions abound: in a guest room, the simple



**THE BREAKFAST ROOM HAS  
A COOL, MODERN INFORMALITY  
THAT CONTRASTS EASILY WITH  
THE MORE FORMAL SENSIBILITY  
OF THE ADJOINING HALLWAY**







lines of a campaign daybed play off the strong pattern of a classic American quilt; the muted pattern of the dining room carpet lets framed crewelwork panels on the walls sing. "You don't want to overwhelm with one style," O'Brien says. "The rooms become modern in their simplicity."

This eclectic approach is most evident in the master bedroom, which has a 1770s English secretary, a Scandinavian gilded shield-back chair, a custom white-damask-covered bed, and a French eighteenth-century small bench. "There's something soothing about the room," says O'Brien, who was inspired by the wife's love of Venice. "It's pale, quiet, and so right for her."

This oasis is made even more enticing by two adjoining private baths. "Hands down, it's my favorite place in the house," the wife says of hers. An L-shaped space that incorporates part of a former bedroom, it's a glamorous showcase for the stylish fixtures and hardware that O'Brien created. "I love doing bathrooms big enough to hold furniture," he says. He outfitted the room with a hand-painted nineteenth-century chiffoier, a custom shower, and an enormous tub. ▶

**TRADE SECRETS**  
**FURNISHINGS** An antique campaign daybed from Coconut Co., NYC, outfits the guest bedroom, above. In the pool house living room, opposite page, Chippendale side chairs by Hickory Chair surround a 19th-century walnut table. **FABRICS** Curtains by Aero Studios; chairs in a Hickory Chair corduroy. **LIGHTING** A bronze and glass lantern from the Villa Fiorentina sale, Sotheby's. **CARPET** Custom wool and abaca, A.M. Collections.



**A CREAMY PALETTE AND HANDSOME BUT UNFUSSY FURNISHINGS INVITE RELAXATION IN THE POOL HOUSE'S BREEZY LIVING ROOM**





## TRADE SECRETS

O'Brien sets a soothing tone in the guest bath, above, with walls in Benjamin Moore's Wyth Blue and with a marble mosaic tile floor.

**FURNISHINGS** O'Brien designed the console; a Regency étagère sits to the side.

**LIGHTING** Wall sconces, Urban Archaeology.

**ACCENTS** Bath linens, basket, and mirror, Aero Ltd. See Shopping, last pages. For more, [houseandgarden.com](http://houseandgarden.com).

For the children, the pool house is the magnet. "It's so magical," says the wife. "In the summer we use it more than the main house." O'Brien built the delightful clapboard building from scratch. A faceted iron-and-glass lantern once used by Billy Baldwin at the fabled French retreat Villa Fiorentina sets the breezy tone. Wicker chairs wear simple coats of dark green paint, and sheer wool muslin curtains from Lee Jofa flutter in the breeze. Teak barstools tough enough to withstand wet bathing suits make easy perches in the dazzling tile and walnut kitchen. "Friends say they want to live here," the wife says with a laugh.

But the family is not about to give up the property. "This house is for the generations," says the wife, who is currently working with O'Brien on the family's New York City apartment. "We wanted a style that we wouldn't get tired of. Thomas has hit the high mark. It's classic and timeless." □

*Lygeia Grace is based in New York and is the features editor at Organic Style magazine.*

# trade secrets

In summertime, this secondary kitchen becomes the primary space for family activity. O'Brien's design balances utility with an uncluttered clarity that suits the relaxed season.

## SHIP SHAPE

WITH A SWIMMING POOL ON ONE SIDE AND A POND ON THE OTHER, THE BUILDING IS SURROUNDED BY WATER. O'BRIEN WORKS A MARITIME RIFF WITH YACHT BARSTOOLS FROM SOANE LTD., LONDON, IN TEAK AND STAINLESS STEEL. "I LOVE THE RUGGED CONSTRUCTION AND GREAT NAUTICAL LOOK," HE SAYS. HIS OWN MARINE-VARNISHED MAHOGANY COUNTERTOPS AND A FLUSH-MOUNTED DOME LIGHT FROM URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY CONTINUE THE THEME.

## ESSENTIALS ONLY

O'BRIEN DESIGNED OPEN SHELVING FOR A PARED-DOWN LOOK. SINCE THIS IS A SECONDARY KITCHEN, IT HOLDS ONLY THE DISHES USED MOST OFTEN. APPLIANCES ARE LIMITED TO ESSENTIALS SUCH AS A DUALIT TOASTER AND A VIKING RANGE.

## AT THE FARM

A DEEP WHITE PORCELAIN FARMHOUSE SINK FROM GRACIOUS HOME, OUTFITTED WITH A GOOSENECK FAUCET DESIGNED BY O'BRIEN, IS SET INTO THE COUNTERTOP.

## SUMMER WHITES

SOFT HUES BRING A SUMMERY FEEL. CREAM-COLORED COTTAGE-GLAZED CERAMIC TILES COVER THE WALLS; THE GROOVED CUSTOM CABINETRY WAS PAINTED IN FARROW & BALL'S DIMITY TO MATCH THE TILES, AND HAS VINTAGE REPRODUCTION FITTINGS FROM CROWN CITY HARDWARE.



