

# Rethinking the Outside of the Box

By Duo Dickinson

*Having it all in Guilford:  
career and family, history  
and design*



Campaigne and Kestner in front of their 1844 Federal in downtown Guilford's historic district.

## ATHOME

There are always plenty of reasons *not* to renovate your home. In this economy there are even more reasons not to do seemingly reasonable things — like turn a sow's ear into a waterproof fanny pack (times have changed). But there are universal verities in the human instinct to nest. No matter what the economic conditions, young couples desperately want to set down roots, many want to start spawning, and a few want create a place to spend their working hours close to home.

Russ Campaigne and Mary Jo Kestner wanted to do all those things in the “Buy Now” decade (1997-2007) when home prices were skyrocketing prior to a spectacularly disastrous implosion. They were based in Guilford and wanted to stay there. They were committed to

living in the town center, as Campaigne's family had for decades. They were also architects — and together they had created a wonderful design firm, CK Architects, and wanted to work close to home.

Campaigne and Kestner had the demographic imperative of nesting, the career imperative of office building and the advantage of pre-childrearing time and energy. When those life-centering priorities combined with more than a decade's worth of house-designing expertise as architects, their set of needs and abilities just needed a focus to create a home for a couple of decades of family living and an office to harbor their careers.

They found that focus on a small lot in downtown Guilford. A classic 1844 Federal home that had been “updated” in the years after World War II had its small backyard invaded and conquered by a hovering pressure-treated yellow pine deck that actually kept anyone from seeing that back yard if they were inside the house. The naked deck offered up a

enough sun to encourage any number of skin cells to invite melanoma in for a stay, along with West Nile-bearing mosquitoes to share their bounty of infectious potential with all those sitting exposed on its cracked and splintering perch.

Beyond these subtle hazards the home resided on Boston Street, a virtual parade of lovely 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century homes smack dab in the heart of Guilford's historic district — a district created precisely to outlaw that awkward deck and home improvement center-purchased “Colonial Brick” with their freshly painted “random” patches of white and black faces that formed a chimney flue screaming mid-1950s suburbia made absurd by being grafted on to a 19<sup>th</sup>-century house.

The house also leaked heat like a sieve, and had very little storage space. These were the *easy* fixes. High-performance insulation and renovated windows in the historic portion of the house and new energy-efficient units in the newer portions kept heat loss at a minimum.



Before (inset) and after views of both the house and the faux barn garage (below), which became virtually a new building, with studio above and shop on the ground floor.



For conscientious architects, finding storage within a tight envelope is an everyday professional obligation if you design homes for a living, and some careful retooling of the floor plans yielded newfound closet space. Extra space was created for two new bedrooms for their future family as well.

And then there was the brown overcoat. In its elegant simplicity, clapboard siding is almost a puritanical material. Painted white, it's a visual no-brainer, aesthetically inert (and occasionally mandated — with black or dark green shutters — by many historic districts). However, previous owners had chosen their own their favorite color — in this case the brownest of browns — to coat the clapboards. When paired with maroon eaves, the effect was just like those “Colonial Brick” monstrosities — neither historic nor creative, just aggressively sad.

Beyond the obvious challenges of a young couple starting out — dearth of cash being the most obvious disability — the Boston Street home was in zoning district that was a tightly controlled — not only by the town Zoning Board but by the aforementioned historic district



**The eaves that CK Architects added use natural wood — in this case Douglas cut to a decorative outline — and raw aluminum gutters to counterpoint the painted trim and siding.**

aesthetic review board. The easy answer was white. But Campaigne and Kestner had not dedicated their lives to design simply to roll over and play dead. They also knew how to play well with others, and conspired to manifest their obvious

creative talents in subtly expressive use of what they found.

First, they detoxed the most obvious offenses of the structure — set so tightly to a highly traveled street that it is a landmark by location, no matter what the design might be. The deck was removed, the brick was stucco'd over, and the brown paint bit the dust (actually, it *became* dust).



But the dead white easy-answer approach to this Federal's paint job was rejected by this designing couple. Instead, they saw life in the old bones by using a subtle palette of grey tones that are further enlivened by the touches of creativity that only thoughtful designers can bring to bear. Natural-wood posts, metal gutters, even carefully formed concrete piers seem new but playing happily with the carefully colored 19<sup>th</sup>-century home.

These gestures cost more time in design than actual cash out of pocket. An extra color or two takes a few more hours than a white wash, but will not break the bank. A great builder helps, and East Guilford Construction fit the bill, executing these small gestures with a crafty precision

The entire interior, including the parlor and dining room (below), has been restored to the simple elegance of a 19th-century home, with quietly expressive colors, clear-finished wooden floors and precisely sited lighting.



PHOTOGRAPH: Anthony DeCarlo



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that made them seem effortless (despite their tight detailing). Finally Kestner and Campagne jumped into the fray and executed many aspects of the renovation themselves in the great Yankee tradition of sweat equity — a valuable principle in any economy.

They focused the lion's share of their interior focus on family priorities: a full modern kitchen, back door and mudroom. Realizing that children were to dominate their lives for some time (the couple have three- and five-year-old Energizer Bunnies in full joyful rampage) High Art interior design awaits a calmer, emptier-nest period. But the offspring bedrooms were fully prepared for years of occupancy and the entire interior was brought back to the simple elegance of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century home, with layers of 150 years of wallpapering, carpeting and trim heresies removed — replaced with quietly expressive colors, clear-finished wood floors and cabinetry and precisely sited lighting.

Beyond this aesthetic transformation, the home was altered to create a screen porch, keeping melanoma and West Nile at bay, and the footprint of a 1968 two-car garage (of course painted “barn red” with white trim) was reused to build a new — and cleverly effervescent — headquarters of CK Architects that went a little further in the expression of the home's paint/wood/metal choreography.

The *faux* barn garage became a virtually new building with a shop below and a studio above, increasing its original volume with a five-foot increase in height beyond the code limit (authorized by the local zoning board) to get headroom. The roof of the new office is directly analogous to the tony paint job — it's expressive — shed-roofed entry and dormer, the lower portion supported by the same concrete booted natural wood columns applied to the home's rear porch. But the effect of the tightly crafted shape and eaves is so thoughtfully designed that it is neither impertinent nor kowtowing. The new studio and renovated house are subtle, expressive and finally approvable by all the regulatory bodies that reviewed CK Architects' design.

Cost constraints and binding regulations create mediocrity in home design only when creativity is wanting. Here need met opportunity — and overcame those restrictions. No matter what the economy, human resources always trump depressing potentials — given sufficient talent. ❖