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## Gabriel de la Portilla's Hudson Valley cottage reno



This view: A sofa bed, accented with pillows covered in Sahco Hesslein's Palladio, can accommodate overnight guests in the tiny sitting room. Designer Gabriel de la Portilla added a salvaged church window and complemented it with an ecumenical assortment of furniture, including a 1960s Louis XV-style chair upholstered in patent leather. Above right: Greek Revival detailing integrates new extra-large windows into the façade.

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# EEK TO HIM

vation sprang from an original 1830s cornice



Before the real estate agent even opened the front door, she said, “Turn around.” Gabriel de la Portilla spun on his heel and faced woods and farmland rolling in majestic cadences through the Hudson River Valley. The view melted whatever buyer’s resistance de la Portilla might have brought to his search. “I decided to buy the house then and there, come what may inside,” he remembers.

The spectacular panorama prompted de la Portilla, a Manhattan-based interior designer seeking a weekend getaway, to see past nearly 200 years of home “improvements” that had diminished whatever charm the modest farmhouse may originally have possessed. With rose-tinted glasses, the otherwise clear-headed professional overlooked asbestos siding, crumbling plaster, knotty pine paneling, and an awkward Victorian porch. Stingy windows narrowed the view and, as though adding injury to insult, the six-foot four-inch kitchen ceiling barely allowed the six-foot two-inch designer safe headroom.

Reestablishing the shell required considerable heavy lifting, and then came the interior renovation. Though the 1,100-square-



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Facing page: The screen hanging on the dining room wall was covered with childish scribbles when de la Portilla spotted it in a junk shop. He went over it inch by inch with pink Pearl erasers. This page, left: In the living room, the raw-steel-and-glass coffee table adds a lot of surface but very little visual weight. Two battered leather wing chairs flank a table salvaged from the street and painted white.

foot house is twice the size of de la Portilla's one-bedroom Manhattan apartment, it's hardly palatial, and he had to use every trick in his inches-count city repertoire.

De la Portilla and his companion, Will Bell, started by removing the Victorian front porch and the asbestos shingle siding. The designer then moved inside and pried off layers of flooring to reveal original wide-plank boards (while adding three crucial inches to the rooms' height at the same time). He painted the knotty pine in the kitchen white, but elsewhere gutted the house wall by wall. "We were not planning to strip the building down to the timbers, but once you start repairing one wall, you might as well do them all," de la Portilla says. In the throes of renovation, the house glowed like a jack-o'-lantern at night, light escaping from all the gaps between the wood timbers and the new stapled-on insulation (which replaced corncobs).

No one knows exactly when the house was built, but construction methods point to the 1830s. De la Portilla latched onto one surviving detail, a Greek Revival cornice, to compose a believable period style. After looking at 20 different pattern books, he trimmed new front windows with Greek Revival surrounds and added pilasters at the corners. An architectural salvage store in nearby Hudson, New York, yielded an impressive 1850s door and a pair of sidelights.



Above: Marble candlesticks converted into lamps and an Egyptian marble bowl form part of a dining room vignette. Two circa-1890 English plaster friezes hang above the table, which is covered with a rug in the 17th-century manner. Left: De la Portilla on his new front steps.



Right: Windsor chairs and a collection of American milk glass are all the decoration the kitchen needs. Below: Tucked under the eaves, a turn-of-the-20th-century whiskey-ad eagle surveys the bedroom. The batik pillow on the chair is from Anthropologie; the kilim pillows on the bed are from Sutter Antiques.



“I turned the house into a Greek Revival jewel box,” he says, “which it probably never was.”

In his quest for a sense of spaciousness, de la Portilla widened the opening between the living and dining rooms from five to nine feet, making each of them feel less cramped. The designer extended the window frames up to the ceiling to accentuate the vertical and avoided crown moldings that would have had the opposite effect. In the upstairs bedroom, he removed the low ceiling to add the height hidden in the attic.

Having extracted every square foot of space from a small structure, de la Portilla was not about to lose any of his hard-won gains to clutter. “It’s not that I don’t have a lot of possessions,” he says. “I just put them away. In such a little house, you have to be ruthless about editing.” He opted for furniture with exposed wood frames that allow the tiny rooms to breathe. “Big furniture,” he advises, “makes small rooms look *bigger*.” Two substantial English wing chairs preside over the living room, and an American Empire pedestal dining table, surrounded by 1940s leather office chairs, holds forth in the dining room. The spaciousness and simplicity look effortless, belying all the labor. “Will and I wanted something easy, just a cottage in the country. Little did I know we’d spend two years restoring it.” ●

Right: De la Portilla added French doors and windows to a former toolshed, which now houses overflow guests. Metal garden furniture with cushions in a Kravet stripe is gathered around a 1950s French coffee table from Tom Noonan Antiques. The red Blenko glass vases date from the 1960s.

