

Rural to Suburban

A traditional English cottage is inspiration for a new North Carolina home.

PROJECT: THE FISCHER RESIDENCE, GREENSBORO, NC
ARCHITECT: JAMES S. COLLINS, ARCHITECT, GREENSBORO, NC
GENERAL CONTRACTOR: E.S. NICHOLS, BUILDER, GREENSBORO, NC

During architect James S. Collins' initial meeting with his clients, "they told me they wanted a home that was similar to the traditional houses in their hometown of St. Louis. More specifically, they wanted it to resemble a house they had seen in a book on an English architect with an unusual name." Then they produced a monograph on Edwin Lutyns and opened it to a photograph of Gertrude Jekyll's house at Munstead Wood, Surrey.

It was a tall order: Adapting the U-shaped design of Lutyns' 1896 English cottage to a 4,800-sq.-ft., 21st-century home in Greensboro, NC — complete with guest rooms, game room and home office. Not surprisingly, Gary and Ellen Fischer had unsatisfactory interviews with several architects before they brought their vision to Collins, both architect and historic preservationist, who specializes in the design of traditional buildings and interiors. "The English Revival style was very popular in the United States between the two World Wars, although more so in the North than in the South," he explains. "But when I've had other clients interested in the same style, I've taken them to Philadelphia to see French as well as English-style houses. This approach was especially useful in planning the Fischer residence, because they could see how the rooms were arranged in these old houses. The rural cottages of England are small, typically one-room deep. But by studying the American prototypes of Robert McGoodwin, Edmund B. Gilchrist and Mellor, Meigs & Howe, they could see how houses measuring 3,000 or 4,000 sq.-ft. were made to look smaller." Collins gave the Fischers a design in which the massing reduces the impression of the house's size: "It's a very long house, but by having projecting gables, you reduce the scale of the façade and the structure seems smaller. The second-floor eaves are also very low, which gives the house an intimate feel."

Other exterior details of the Fischer residence are familiar evocations of this traditional style. The varied roofline silhouettes and the unadorned façade of the front elevation provide the massing and feeling of an English country house. Brick-vener walls were laid with tumbled brick in flush mortar joints, and finished with lime-wash paint to resemble the clay-lump block walls found in English farmhouses. Collins also intended the size and design of the casement windows to evoke the feel of a vintage



The entrance drive to James S. Collins' Fischer residence runs along the edge of the property and leads to a motor court of crushed granite, which provides off-street guest parking. A low garden wall screens the motor court to the west. The entry vestibule, sporting a bell-cast pine shingle roof with mitred hips, leads to the house's central hallway. All photos: Dennis Kale

house: "Houses by Mellor, Meigs & Howe used windows of these sizes, and I checked old metal-casement window catalogs to make sure that the size of the panes and mullions in the new windows we used would very closely approximate the old prototypes." Gable and eyebrow dormers, as well as diagonally oriented chimney flues, likewise bespeak the English country house, along with the pergola and screened porch, constructed of heavy wood timbers that are mortise-and-tenoned and pegged. Other timber detailing on the house is more metaphorical than literal. Collins describes how he gave the look of wood to the lintels above the windows. "The lintels are made of concrete and metal reinforcing bars. They were cast on-site, with the contractor having oiled the forms so that the wood grain would be exposed. Once they were cast and painted, they resembled heavy timbers. The same technique was used for the counterbalances at the roof eaves."

The roof's pine shingles are a vernacular building material, like the wavy-edged rough-hewn planks used on the gable end of the screened porch. The roofing, however, is one more instance of the Fischer residence departing from the local design norms: "For this region of the country," Collins notes, "it is somewhat unusual to use shingles for the roof; but that look was most in keeping with the character of the house — and having an eyebrow dormer on the rear of the house also necessitated shingles, to achieve the curved



Above: A central terrace, flanked by the projecting bays of the master bedroom and the family room, leads to a parterre overlooking the nearby lake. The central terrace is accessible from both the central hall and the family room; a western terrace, featuring a wrought-iron balustrade, is private for the master bedroom.

Right: The pine-shingle roofing was laid in a random pattern with closed valleys at all valley intersections. The roof has the 14/12 pitch that is typical of the vernacular buildings of England and France.



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The garage is connected to the kitchen of the main house by a cypress pergola with a bleaching oil stain. Its columns and beams are mortise and tenoned with pegs and further strengthened with rabbeted shoulders. The outriggers with decorative cut ends are notched to the beam of the pergola. Note the gates that separate the motor court from the dog run. Diagonal yokes stabilize their mortise-and-tenoned and pegged stiles and rails.

shape reminiscent of a thatched roof." Even more unusual for a North Carolina residence are the dovescotes on the front and rear façades. "Dovescotes are a vernacular detail frequently seen in traditional English and French rural house design. Here they were incorporated not so birds can roost but to help ventilate the house: The holes are all open to provide air circulation into the gables."

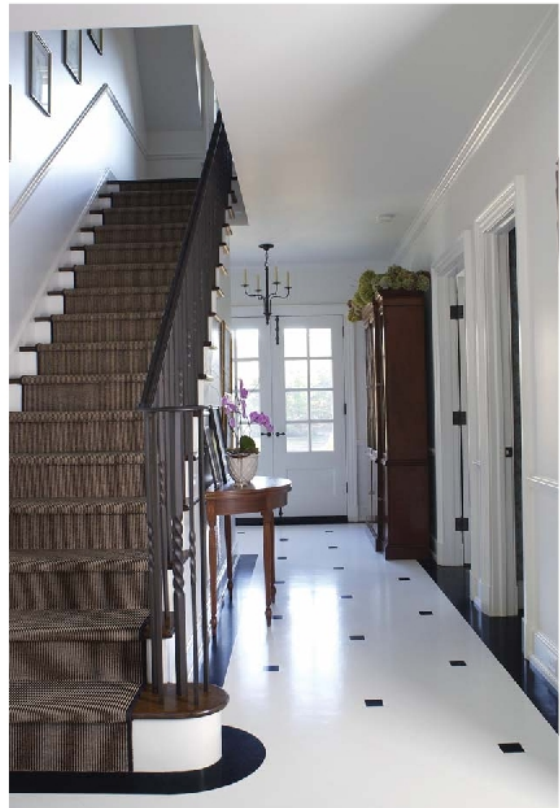
Another unique exterior feature of the house concerns its copper rainwater conductors, which descend into wooden containers. "In Colonial-era designs in Philadelphia, such as Congress Hall or the State House, you often see wooden boots for the rainwater conductors," Collins comments. "As metal conductors terminated at the sidewalk or street, they were often kicked and damaged by horses or carts, so people began protecting them in 'boots.' In the Fischer residence, the boots hide the conductor as it connects to the plastic sleeve of the underground drainage system — all you see is the copper and wood."

The Fischers had a clear sense of how they wanted the interior organized in their new home: On the first floor, a master bedroom with separate dressing areas and a shared master bath, an adjacent study, a combination living / dining room next to a pantry and kitchen, a family room and a small home office; on the second floor, four guest rooms with shared bathrooms, plus a large game room. The 150x450-ft. lot on which they would build would also have to accommodate a two-car garage with a separate studio where Gary Fischer could pursue his glass art near the main house. The lot also situated the house approximately 250 ft. from the public road, so off-street guest parking near the house became necessary as well.

"The clients and I worked very closely together right from the beginning with the interior decorator, Cynthia Schoonover," Collins says. "The Fischers wanted to reuse furnishings from their previous home, and we

were able to design the house to accommodate various pieces of their furniture within their program. All of the moldings, door and window casings and chimney pieces were designed and milled specifically for this project. The general contractor, E.S. Nichols, did a really wonderful job, as did the individual millwrights who took such care in the execution and installation of all the cabinetry and chimney pieces. The general contractor also fabricated and installed all of the paneled wainscoting on-site, installed the oak plank floor in a herringbone pattern in the living / dining room and provided the traditional hand finish of oil, shellac and wax for the mahogany-paneled study."

Completed in August of 2004, the Fischer residence is an eloquent example of how readily traditional European architecture can be adapted to the unique demands of contemporary American life. — Nicole V. Gagné



This view down the central hallway reveals the French doors that lead to the central terrace at the rear of the house. The black and white vinyl floor tile is laid in a pattern inspired by the designs of David Adler and Frances Elkins.



Left: In the dressing room for the master bedroom, clothes closets flank a central dresser with drawers and a mirrored panel above.



Above: The kitchen features painted flat-panel cabinetry and white marble countertops with a white subway-tile backsplash. The casement windows include a window seat, flanked by closets.

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