



REFINED RUSTIC

With an architecture degree from the Rhode Island School of Design and a broad knowledge of antiques, design history and art, Glenn Gissler is as skilled at building “newly old” homes as he is at re-decorating a space to remove the generic stamp of the builders’ home. In his experience, the latter is often the bigger challenge. “Many of these new homes don’t have a soul,” Gissler laments from his Manhattan office. “They don’t have a personality. All they have is square footage. People who come to me are desperate for change.”

The designer’s admiration for objects from earlier time periods is obvious in all of the homes he decorates. As a young adult, Gissler collected architectural fragments, including newel posts and column capitals. Now he focuses on artifacts that predate Christ. “I personally like to have a little B.C. in a room,” Gissler says. “My wife and I collect contemporary art, and I like having things with the collection that add a little history. Everything that is new is an outgrowth of something that preceded it. Otherwise, we are living in a vacuum.”

Although the rooms Gissler designs look organic and unforced, a rich layering process goes into creating them. For the home pictured in this chapter—a dwelling near Westhampton Beach, New York—Gissler needed to eliminate all the builders’ details, from the doors and fixtures to the sheetrock walls and fireplace surround. “There was no dimension, no texture and no style to it,” the designer remembers. He had to find a way to enhance the structure’s bones, then just choose the right furnishings and decorative touches to finish it off.

Gissler added beams, a large wooden antique chandelier and heavy, grounding furniture to tame the height of the 18-foot ceiling in the living room.



Enhancing the Bones

Gissler began by making architectural changes. To balance the asymmetry of the exterior, he added more windows to several rooms and replaced the sliding doors with French ones that matched the original window frames. "As a 21st-century builder's home, the house didn't have any architectural integrity," Gissler says. "But by creating balance and consistency in the façade, we were able to give the house a

sense of architecture that it was lacking."

To create interest on the inside, Gissler added Shaker-style moldings and beams throughout the home, then painted them a taupe color to contrast with its cream-colored walls. Shaker architecture and furniture is marked by quality workmanship, straight lines and little decorative detailing, all of which gave a sense of craftsmanship to this home's formerly generic interior. Although Shaker furnishings often come in

This newly built stone fireplace dominates the living room, adding shadows and dimension to the room.

Symmetry Matters: Add architectural integrity to generic builders' homes by creating symmetrical façades. If the doors and window frames don't match, replace them so that they do. A home shouldn't look like a hodgepodge of styles.

Architectural Elements: Add moldings and beams to rooms without them. If the house is meant to be casual, choose simple Shaker-style moldings.

Optical Illusions: In double-height rooms, add large antique or reproduction chandeliers. Hang them down about ten feet. They help make large, open ceilings feel less towering.

solid, high-quality wooden ones. The doors you choose should echo the style of your home and be used throughout it.

Keep Floors Consistent: Use one flooring material in the public rooms to give a sense of continuity. Contrasting floors tend to chop up rooms.

Door Solutions: To give a new space immediate character, replace cheap, hollow doors with

bright colors, Gissler choose to keep the hues muted here.

He recalls his first impression of the place. "The rooms were plain sheetrock and completely lifeless without moldings or beams. But with this type of home, we didn't want highly ornamental details either. What were needed were flat architectural elements. They added the dimension and shadow that brought the rooms to life."

The moldings and beams also helped bring a large room down to size. "There was a problematic double-height ceiling in the living room," Gissler remembers. "It was 18 feet tall. To bring the scale down, we added the architectural elements and a large 19th-century wooden chandelier. They eliminated the awkward feel of the room."

Gissler also added extra doors, replacing the originals with simple Shaker-style versions. It was an easy way to breathe life into the house. "There was no weight or dimension to them," he says of the originals. "And some openings had no doors at all, which created empty, lifeless gaps in the home."

In the public rooms, Gissler removed all the floor tiles and replaced them with dark wood. "Having some rooms tiled and others wooden can chop up a home," he says. "Using one flooring material brought a greater sense of continuity—and the wood added warmth." As a crowning touch, Gissler used area rugs made from sea grass and sisal, a strong Mexican fiber.

In the living room, the designer replaced an uninspired sheetrock fireplace surround with a fieldstone façade that ran from floor to ceiling. The new fireplace was made from Connecticut fieldstone and was built in the "dry stack" method, where the mortar is not seen. A bluestone slate slab served as a mantel.

"I love the drystack method of fireplace-building.

When framed properly, even common garden ferns take on a delicate, intriguing beauty.



*"I am pretty obsessive about **light** fixtures. I think they are a real opportunity to bring **character** to a space. They can really **enhance** or support the architecture."*



In the den, Gissler uses an African tribal dress as art. Its texture and abstract pattern enrich the room's rustic-yet-exotic design scheme.

because it creates so many shadows and adds so much texture," Gissler says. "What many of these new homes lack are shadows and texture. Everything is so flat."

To retrofit the house with a sense of history, Gissler then added clapboard shingles on one wall in the dining room, making the room appear to be a late addition. "In older homes, you can see where changes were made," he says. "For example, a wall may have exterior cladding that shows where the house used to stop. That aspect of an older home is charming, and when added to a new home, it brings charm with it."

Rustic-on-Rustic Furnishings

In the living room and kitchen/dining area, Gissler installed a mix of antique and custom-made light fixtures (the latter including the dining room chandelier and kitchen wall sconces). "I am pretty obsessive about light fixtures," he says. "I think they are a real opportunity to bring character to a space. They can really enhance or support the architecture."

Budget limitations affected Gissler's choice of furnishings. Unlike some of the homes he decorates, this one would not be filled with fine antiques and artwork; rather it would derive charm from its unusual art and furniture. "The basic design concept of the home was rustic-on-rustic," Gissler recalls. "The furniture, fabric, lighting and decorative accessories were all rustic, but in different ways, which created interest. What tied everything together—in addition to unpretentious rusticity—was the muted color scheme and dark brown wooden furniture."

Gissler filled the rooms with furniture that was a combination of styles, largely British colonial, Anglo Raj, South American and 19th-century American. British colonial furniture, loosely based on the historic Regency style, is generally



This kitchen was completely gutted and rebuilt in a nod to early American Shaker style. The flat molding, in a contrasting color, adds needed dimension to the room.



The Natural Focal Point: Hire a mason to build an impressive fireplace with aged-looking stone. Fireplaces are often the most natural focal point in a room, and if done well, they can give a room immediate presence.

Retrofitting History: Exterior shingles or clapboard on one wall will give the impression that the room was an addition to an earlier structure. Because Colonial homes grew as families grew, older homes are filled with rooms like this.

Fabric and Artwork: Collect fabrics and art that follow the interior design scheme. Woven fabrics, velvets and leathers are rich in texture and enrich new spaces, while black-and-white photographs and antique engravings can be inexpensive old world additions to your home.

Furnishings: Buy antique or reproduction furniture to enhance the effect of Third World antiques—or try newly hand-constructed furniture from South America. There is a rusticity to these types of furniture that helps age a home.



Gissler's tabletops are rich in variety and texture. He had the lamp cast himself, while the framed engraving—which demonstrates how to build an obelisk—is a relic from the 18th century.

offering a subtle contrast with most furniture choices.

Although he bought a few key pieces at fine antiques stores, Gissler largely visited lesser antiques shops, junk emporiums and specialty stores that carried South American, Far Eastern and Indian furniture and objects. One of the most special pieces he found was the armoire now in the home's living room. Nearly ten feet tall, the 18th-century Italian antique serves as a high-end TV stand and balances out the floor-to-ceiling fireplace on the other side of the room.

For fabrics, Gissler and his clients settled on "simple, earthy" selections, including natural-colored weaves and plush materials such as antique linen velvet and leather. "All the fabrics carry a lack of pretension," the designer says.

The artwork, which Gissler bought specifically for this home, includes framed antique engravings and photographs, and traditional African garb. "In the den, we hung a tribal dress from Zaire over the sofa," Gissler says. "It looks like abstract Western art, and adds more history and texture to the room."

Gissler's tabletop designs further demonstrate the complexity at play in his rooms. Atop one rustic Third World cabinet in the living room, there is a wooden lamp Gissler had made from an antique casting mold. A simply matted and framed print leans against the wall, while a short, thin, silver-plated square cup is used as a flower vase. In front of the vase sits a low, flat ceramic bowl that Gissler calls "hippie art from the 1970s." Two stacked books complete the scene.

"I approach designing a tabletop vignette in the same manner that I do a home," Gissler explains. "The concepts are similar. You just need a variation of scale and texture and styles for it to be successful."

Complex design schemes never looked so easy.



Gissler says that this home once lacked architectural integrity. The designer remedied the problem by adding French doors and matching windows, both of which gave it a sense of balance.