

A Manor House With Family-Friendly Ease

Designer Ernest de la Torre puts a hip spin on a historic mansion

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When a couple peruses a house to buy, they usually either share the same opinion or differ completely. Jennifer and James Cacioppo did both.

For a few years they had happily rented a weekend getaway in the elegantly old-fashioned enclave of Tuxedo Park in upstate New York. But they had come to realize that buying the place of their dreams there would require patience. Houses in one of the country's first gated communities, established in 1886, tend to stay in the same families for generations; the few that hadn't, they hadn't liked. So the pair was only mildly curious when they heard a large residence had come on the market. Perched high on a hill, it was a 17-bedroom, 17,000-square-foot Jacobean Revival manor house dating from 1900. It may have been built for Charles W. Cooper, whose family's name graces such New York institutions as the Cooper-Hewitt Museum and the Cooper Union school, but it sounded like something out of a Harry Potter novel. Then they took a look.

"We both loved it," says Jennifer Cacioppo, a vivacious blond, smiling at the memory. "We had been walking around the house separately and met up, and James said, 'The best thing is that we can just

move right in!’ And I said, ‘This place has so much potential—just think what we can do!’”

Needless to say, they didn’t move right in.

One thing that needed no improving was the spectacular views—southwest over Tuxedo Lake and southeast clear down to the skyline of Manhattan, where the couple lives during the week. While the Gilded Age spirit of the exuberant exterior grew on them quickly, the interior hadn’t been renovated in decades. Jennifer turned to decorator Ernest de la Torre, whom she had met years before when they both worked for Ralph Lauren. They instantly clicked, sharing many of the same ideas about how to turn the great house into a great home.

De la Torre, who had grown up amid similar mansions in Lake Forest, Illinois, instantly recognized the structure’s terrific bones. “The façade can be intimidating, but the interiors are really livable,” he says. “So many residences built now are wide and shallow. They’re designed to impress, so the proportions of the individual rooms don’t work. This one is so deep it’s like two houses back-to-back. The rooms are wonderful.”

Like Jennifer, he had a strong instinct about how to both play down and play up the grand interiors, to make them at once appropriately elegant and charmingly comfortable. The last thing the Cacioppo family wanted was a weekend place where their four energetic children—Annabella, 10; James Jr., 7; George, 5; and Richard Albert, 2—wouldn’t feel free to relax and play. One early puzzle was what to do with the main rooms downstairs, covered in somber wood paneling better suited to a law library than a young family.

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“My first thought was to just whitewash all the woodwork,” Jennifer says. “But Ernie talked me out of it.” Instead, de la Torre had the mahogany paneling hand-lightened. The kitchen and butler’s pantry were completely remodeled to make them true to the spirit of the house, if not to the letter—back in the day, the space served as a billiard room, and the original kitchen was in the basement. Another modernizing touch that all agreed upon was that half of the eight bedrooms on the second floor would work better transformed into a single master suite—with separate baths and dressing areas, a sitting room, an office, and a corner bedroom with windows that take sweeping advantage of the knockout views.

The suite is so glamtastic some might think it out of sync with the rest of the place. But it is those kinds of unexpected juxtapositions that make the home so seductive. Certain elements seem to have been there from the beginning, while others look like they were added over decades. Nowhere is this illustrated more dramatically than in the dining room, where suspended from the intricately coffered plaster ceiling is a stunning rock-crystal-and-bronze chandelier by Hervé Van der Straeten.

“What was amazing was that we were able to combine so many periods,” says de la Torre, who found antiques and modern pieces—a Knole sofa, torchieres by Tommi Parzinger, a Moroccan settee, and Herter Brothers chairs and tables—that harmonize with that vague yet distinctive Jacobean look, as well as some standouts—classic circa-1925 leather seating by Jacques Adnet and a ’70s side table by Karl Springer—whose ties to the Jacobean style are nil. This unpredictable, personal mix of styles and centuries lends the rooms the sense that they have long been cared for by lively, curious, and cultured people. So it feels as a place in Tuxedo Park should: a great house that bustles with activity and guests and parties, and that, as the expression goes, seems as if it has been

in the family for generations.

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