

preVIEW

MASSACHUSETTS

feb 2011



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A kitchen designed by Pam Sandler



*View of Water,
View of Woods*

Architect Pamela Sandler thought green before green was green.

BY SARAH WERTHAN BUTTENWIESER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL SHOUL



“Before the word green was thrown around,” says architect Pamela Sandler, “we were all green. We cared about making smart choices, about materials, insulation and how houses fit into the environment. That really is what architects think about.”

However, Sandler concedes, in other ways architecture’s “academy” didn’t always see it quite that way. Sandler recalls how her architecture school thesis project wasn’t initially viewed as legitimate because the kind of renovation it embodied—she created designs to rehab and add on to an existing mill building—wasn’t considered “real” architecture.

Not only is it architecture, she insists, but “that project was as green as you can get.” She laughs a bit ruefully. “Restoration has found its way into architecture.”

Because of environmental concerns and a shaky economy, Sandler says, “These days, people consider renovation of existing buildings before beginning to think about starting something new.”

The reuse project that provided Sandler with her steepest learning curve was at 47 Railroad Street in Great Barrington. The former grain warehouse’s first floor—built

in the mid-1800s—had been home to a retail business, upper floors left vacant. No longer: the building houses Pearl’s restaurant, private offices and the Iris Gallery of Fine Art Photography. Sandler describes the owners as “very motivated to explore materials and consider the building’s renewal carefully.”

She’s worked on renovation and restoration projects at Hancock Shaker Village, Stonover Farm and the New Marlborough Meeting House in New Marlborough, Massachusetts.

These days she’s excited about putting some of that experience into her first project as a developer: office condominiums—including space for her own offices—in the former Hall’s Garage in Stockbridge. Construction on the two 1920s buildings—a 7,000-square-foot garage and a smaller livery building—is set to begin in the spring.

“I’ve lived here twenty-six years,” Sandler says, “and have always been fascinated by these buildings. ...This [the garage] will be the first LEED-certified building in Stockbridge. I wanted to bring life back to the site and have the public rediscover this in-town spot.” She plans to install a grass roof on the livery building.

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Pam Sandler in her studio

When you hear about Sandler's history, it isn't at all surprising that she's wound up as an accomplished small-town architect with a big reputation in the region. Self-described as a "small-town girl," having grown up in Newburgh, New York, she says she first wanted to become an architect when she was twelve. There were no girls in the architecture-related classes she took in high school, and only about twenty percent of her architecture school class was female.

This didn't daunt her, though. Nor did having children—her three now span teens to twenties—keep her from her architecture career; she began her own firm after the birth of her first child.

Unlike many architects, Sandler never felt urban architecture catching her fancy. She recalls, "When I was studying architecture in college and my peers were all about designing massive buildings, I worked on a project designing many villages. One village was on the bend of a river... The villages so resembled the place I live now. I love having an office on Main Street in Stockbridge and watching the Norman Rockwell scene outside the window."

interiorview

Sandler considers the task of creating commercial and residential spaces somewhat different. “Designing commercial spaces is less personal,” she muses. “In a public space, making an architectural statement is easier to do. But I really enjoy working with people on houses. Heart and soul goes into people’s houses. I enjoy learning how people live and trying to help them understand their own priorities. I like to design houses that really work as homes.”

To that end, when she designs a house, even a second

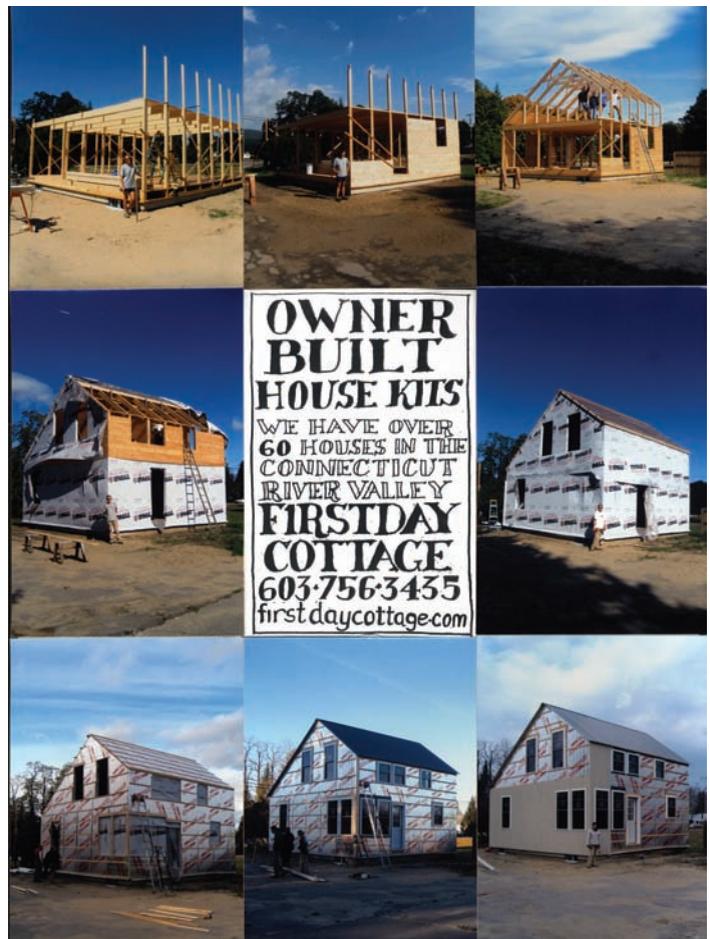
“I try to create something timeless, a building that can’t be dated.”

residence—as is so often the case in the Berkshires—she first travels to the client’s primary residence.

“When you get down to it,” Sandler says, “houses are a series of spaces. I want to see my clients’ primary residence[s] because I like to see how they live. ... How much stuff do they have? Do they like things streamlined and spare, or do they have a lot of knickknacks and collections?” She recalls how a client from Manhattan raved about her giant shower. It turned out the shower—by non-Manhattan standards—was not at all oversized. Sandler offers, “People aren’t able to verbalize what they like or how they live in a space. It’s hard to put words to.”

Not surprisingly, given the way she tries to get to know her clients’ preferences and lifestyles, Sandler’s description of herself as “not wanting a signature style” rings true. “I love to work with clients,” she says. “I believe each house should be different.”

She does pay careful attention to ensuring that houses work well within their environment. Having designed about fifteen or so cottages in the Stockbridge Bowl, she says, “I’ve gotten to design some really interesting cottages. I love these smaller spaces and I love thinking about what kind of building works on the water and in the woods. I try to create something timeless, a building that can’t be dated.”



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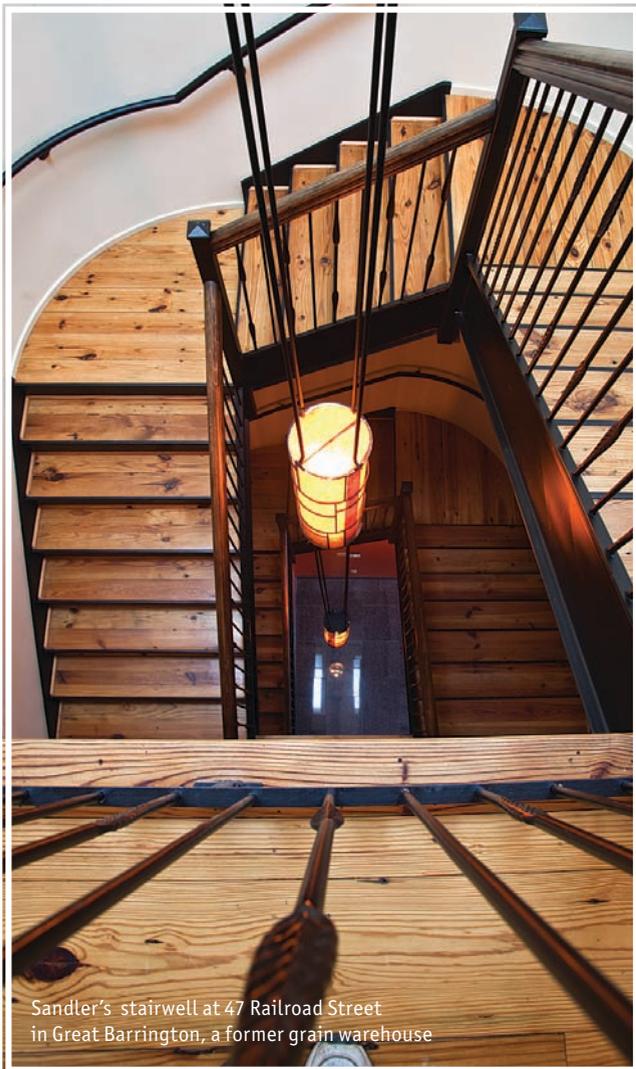
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interior view

Beyond cottages, Sandler has great enthusiasm for smaller houses. She says, “I love designing smaller houses. Intimate spaces you can curl up into—nooks, alcoves, window-seats—are so pleasing.”

Smaller houses are akin to puzzles that must be solved, Sandler asserts. “You get to design spaces under stairways, and draw out interest by creating a range of details playing off one another, and consider the diagonals,” she says. “You have to figure out how to make the space feel big inside.” She thinks smaller houses will be a trend, one that she deems thoughtful and appealing.

Being thoughtful has everything to do with Sandler’s approach. Not only does she consider how people live, she likes to help them reflect about how they live. She often counsels people not to jump into renovations right away: “I tell people to live in a space for a while. When they do, they begin to figure out what they want and need.” P



Sandler’s stairwell at 47 Railroad Street in Great Barrington, a former grain warehouse



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