

HOMIE

DOUGLAS VANDERHORN ARCHITECTS

BY MARY KATE HOGAN



This stately mid-country Tudor by VanderHorn Architects fits right into the historic Khakum Wood neighborhood, which is filled with English-style brick and stone houses.

Classic Style

Architect Doug VanderHorn on preserving history—and when that’s not possible, re-creating it



Doug VanderHorn

When someone mistakes a new house for an elegant older estate, it may be the best compliment an architect can hear. The words “this looks like it’s always been there” have been used to describe homes designed by Doug VanderHorn, an architect who’s been practicing in Greenwich for twenty-nine years and strives to blend classic style, appropriate details and good proportions with modern comforts. Doug enjoys studying the history of buildings and surrounds himself with a rich library of books on the subject. As a builder’s son who worked on job sites and for a carpentry shop during his teen years, he has a keen appreciation for the effort that goes into fine craftsmanship. We caught up with Doug to talk classic architecture in Greenwich and what gives new homes character.

GM WHERE ARE SOME OF THE MORE SIGNIFICANT HOUSES STILL STANDING IN GREENWICH TODAY?

DV Greenwich was originally a farm community, and early architecture was very basic. The colonists were building timber-frame homes covered with wood boards for siding and wood

shingles for roofing. As things evolved, New Yorkers came here and gentlemen farmers built “farms” that were more like weekend retreats. It was about making a beautiful place to escape the city. Those included very large estates like Conyer’s Farm, which used to be one estate;

the Rockefeller Estate on Lake Avenue; and a host of others in *The Great Estates*. What we think of as the Greenwich Estates came around the turn of the century when New Yorkers decided to build mansions out here. This led to properties like Horse Island (a spectacular

Tudor castle built in 1921 on Mead Point on Long Island Sound) and Old Mill Farm (an Elizabethan-style stone country house and horse farm in northern Greenwich).

GM WHAT MAKES ARCHITECTURE CLASSIC?

DV For me it's the quality of the design. That means if you're designing a Georgian Revival house, you don't mix Italianate with it. You don't mix and match styles. There's a design purity to it. It incorporates fine craftsmanship and appropriate detailing of staircases, mantelpieces, doors and trim. Those things all match the style of the house. When people look at our work, whether it's a shingle style or a Georgian or a French Normandy, they know what it is. They feel like they're getting a classic design, and there's value to that.

GM WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BUILDING A CLASSIC?

DV People associate these fine old homes with successful people. They want to be perceived in that way and don't want to live in a mishmash house. A lot of people will not spend their entire lives in their home. When sellers come along, they say, "Oh, this is a really fine old home." It may be a new home, but it has that look and that has value in the marketplace. I think that building a classic home is a safer investment. It takes on significant meaning when you're building on land that may cost \$2 million or more and you're going to invest millions in a home. Having something that other people will appreciate is important.

GM DO YOU HAVE EXAMPLES FROM YOUR PORTFOLIO?

DV One of many...we worked with a family that bought a small Tudor house in Khakum Wood, a historic neighborhood in mid-country that was laid out by Olmstead Landscape Architects



One of Doug's favorite historic Greenwich homes is Horse Island—a Tudor Revival-style home that features a graduated slate roof, stucco with half-timber upper walls, and ornate patterned brick and stone chimneys.

Chimney Corner is another one of Doug's favorite homes in town. This exquisitely detailed Georgian-style home was built during the Colonial Revival period of the 1920s. It features cut granite quoins, a wood bracketed cornice and an ionic columned portico.



The stone base, painted blue shingle upper story and natural shingle hip roof of this VanderHorn home are hallmarks of the classic Shingle Style. The paired Tuscan columns add formality to the graceful front porch.

(established by Frederick Law Olmstead). The deed stipulated that the houses should be masonry and of a certain quality, and that led to a lot of English brick and stone homes with slate roofs. The Tudor house was very small and right on the perfect spot for a house. We did make the decision to demolish it and build this substantial Tudor. The quality of the new home is superior to that of the previous home. This is one where people truly feel that this was a renovation; they think that we renovated an old Khakum Wood house. It fits right into the neighborhood. Tudor was the obvious choice, contextually.

We have been lucky enough to work on many beautiful renovations of older homes as well. We're currently doing a fine brick Georgian Revival on North Street that was built in 1898. We've done an extensive renovation, and we will be relocating the driveway back to its original location, and we also added a garage in what would have been the same period as the house.

GM WHICH SPECIAL DETAILS GIVE A NEWER HOME THAT 'OLD HOUSE' FEEL?

DV Incorporating handcrafted elements—such as antique

pieces, carvings or leaded glass—helps the home to have an older feel. Getting the detailing correct. One thing that makes a very substantial difference is stonework. A lot of the stonework done now looks artificial to me, cut into perfect rectangles by gas-powered cutters, fitted on the wall like puzzle pieces. This does not look handcrafted at all. That's one of those things that can really make a difference. Take that saw away from your mason if you want your stonework to look old. It also pays to preserve larger trees, which make a big difference in making the house look old. I'm a big tree guy.