

Home Base

After thirty years as an architect in town, Doug VanderHorn decided it was time to create his dream “home” office. We take a tour and talk shop



The newly restored headquarters was originally built as a home in 1928.

The historic circa-1928 house located on prime downtown property has gas lanterns flanking its entry, a kitchen with custom cabinetry, antique leaded glass doors leading into a gathering space and a lower-level rec room with Ping-Pong table, vintage bar cart and garage doors opening to a landscaped bluestone terrace. A cavapoo named Rugby wanders from room to room, nosing up to visitors. Yet no one lives at this beautifully restored shingle-style house. Instead, the renovated West Elm Street address is the cool new office of Douglas VanderHorn Architects.

Celebrating thirty years as an architect in town this year, Doug purchased the old house—which had been converted

into rental units—and transformed it into a custom office that’s fitting for a firm focused on creating homes with timeless style. “The character of the building was right for our practice, a residential practice. Having our office in a really nice old house is a good thing,” says Doug, who notes that the very convenient location, a block from the Avenue and close to the train, also attracted him to the property. “Over the years we’ve been able to work on quality older homes and that led me to the theme of the firm—designing classic homes, homes that you can’t pigeonhole into a period.” He notes that the 4,400-square-foot office, which is equipped with a state-of-the-art conference room with



Doug VanderHorn

SNAPSHOT

A look at the architecture of Doug’s career

FIRST PROJECT

A major renovation of a home in Belle Haven in 1987

GEOGRAPHY CLUB

Current projects are located in several states, from a house on the Hudson River in Nyack, New York to waterfront homes in Belle Haven, Darien, Essex and Watch Hill, Rhode Island. “We’re lucky to be working in a broad area, up the coast.”

ARCHITECTURAL STYLES

As the practice has evolved, so has the diversity of its projects. Recently the firm has been designing houses that are French Normandy, Shingle-style, Federal-



A French Normandy-style home overlooking Greenwich Cove and the Sound

style, English Tudor, French eclectic barns, English Georgian and even English country cottages.

FAMILY TIES

When he was a teen, Doug worked for his builder father learning the crafts of the trade, and today his own son, Colin, has joined the firm.



The VanderHorn office rec room

GAME PLANS

Doug is quick to credit his team of fourteen, including his associate partner, William Malmstedt, and office manager, Deb Biondolillo, among others, for their contributions to the firm's success. His employees like to hang out in the new office rec room for lunchtime Ping-Pong matches and Friday afternoon happy hours.

WHEN NOT AT WORK...

Doug can be found playing tennis or cruising on Long Island Sound in his Grady-White. "I love to be on my boat, sometimes fishing and other times just cruising around looking for nice old houses. There's a special dialogue between boaters and waterfront homeowners."

a rounded TV, special modeling systems and many other features, was completed in record time (five and a half months with Peerless Construction as the general contractor) and required special approvals from the historic district commission.



(above) A sun-soaked screened porch boasts French-style timberwork with brick infill and flooring and 180-degree views of the harbor.
(below) This new English Tudor façade flaunts an elaborate array of textures and materials and a compelling variation of traditional forms.

All in the Details

Doug is well-versed in the town's building regulations and in overseeing a project from design stage through to completion. The son of a builder, he learned carpentry from his father, and he's happy to roll up his sleeves to get a job done. Early in his career, which started in 1987 in town, he worked primarily on updating and expanding older houses.

"Doing all that renovation work, I learned how old houses were put together and how the detailing was done. I use those lessons to make new homes look like they weren't built currently," he says, pointing to large glossy photos of a waterfront Shingle-style and an English Tudor that hang on the wall in his new conference room. "My hope has always been that people can't tell that the homes weren't built during the heyday of that particular style. I try to keep the work contextual and timeless."

One of the ways he achieves this is by salvaging and repurposing original elements from older homes (the leaded glass doors leading to his new conference room were salvaged from a waterfront Victorian in Nyack, New York). From that same older house on the Hudson River—which was in too much disrepair to renovate—Doug's team was able to save old plumbing fixtures,



doors, windows, decorative brackets and a mantel that will be used in the new house, giving it the flavor of the original.

Luxury House Rules

Though Doug still handles renovations and enjoys the “happy accidents” they



inspire (creative solutions for preexisting conditions), more of his clients are requesting new builds. “Fewer people are ready for the challenges and time involved in a complex renovation. They are just as expensive if not more expensive than building new.” So what do clients who are building high-end homes today seek in new construction? The wish lists are long and may include energy efficient materials, geothermal heating/cooling systems as well as lots of amenities—especially features for outdoor living, such as backyard kitchens, pools and spas.

In his new office, Doug has cutting-edge technology to help present ideas and designs to clients. The conference room features a curved wall and a flat-screen display that fits into the rounded space. He grabs a remote



(above) Within a seaside Shingle-style home, the classic detailing of the mantel, paneling and trim is elegant but not overdone. (left) Paired Tuscan columns add formality to the graceful front porch of this stone and cedar shake home.



and plays a video that simulates a “fly-through” of a home he’s working on in Field Point Circle. It gives a sense of what it would feel like to stand in the space and move from room to room. Along with these 3-D digital models, the team also has the capability to create laser-cut models of houses. And from these high-tech tools come high-tech homes.

Says Doug, “Even though our homes look like classics, in terms of technology and energy savings, they’re leading edge.”

—Mary Kate Hogan

(left) This bath features a marble mosaic accent wall, and a porcelain tub with a brushed-nickel exterior. (below) Projecting wings surround the rear terrace of a Colonial Revival-style home.

