

TRADITION WITH A TWIST

Award-winning architect focuses on details, ecology

Designer praised for blend of classic and contemporary homebuilding styles

By Ken Valenti



GREENWICH — Douglas Vander-Horn's schooling in architecture did not lead him directly to the traditional designs that have won him praise. It was the homes of Greenwich that shaped his style.

The son of a builder, VanderHorn worked in construction himself, then studied architecture at Pennsylvania State University, where he was trained in contemporary modes.



Contributed photo

An interior room of a Greenwich waterfront Shingle-style house, designed by VanderHorn Architects.

But when he began working at a firm in Greenwich called Wyrick and Associates in 1987, he found himself designing renovations of older houses and rekindling an appreciation for traditional styles he picked up from his father, a lover of antiques and classic homes.

"Greenwich has a great stock of really fine, old, traditional homes, and not wanting to screw them up was really the impetus for learning about these styles," VanderHorn, 53, said.

His goal, he said, was to design a renovation "in a way that

looked as though the original designer had done it — as though I was never there."

Now the head of Douglas VanderHorn Architects, he oversees a team of 14 designers (including his 23-year-old son, Colin), as they create plans for homes in French Normandy, Georgian, English Tudor, Shingle style and others. But while he remains true to the design vocabulary, he updates the home for modern families, who often fill their homes with contemporary furnishings.

That means a less ornate look on the inside.

"We keep our millwork a little cleaner, our trim detailing a little more simple, but still stylistically on target," he said.

Since he established the company in 2012, after separating from a longtime partner, the shop has designed 30 homes, he said.

Last year, he was inducted into the New England Design Hall of Fame, an honor bestowed by New England Home Magazine. He was the first architect from Greenwich to receive the honor, which will mark its 10th anniversary in November. Although, other types of designers have made it as well, said Kyle Hoepner, editor-in-chief of the magazine. Interior designer Charlotte Barnes, of Greenwich, received the honor at the same time VanderHorn did.

The winners' names are displayed on a Wall of Honor in the Boston Design Center, Hoepner said.

VanderHorn was chosen because of "his sense of proportion and his ability to deploy a number of historic styles beautifully adapted to contemporary living," Hoepner said. He said the Hall of Fame recognizes top designers in the high-end residential industry.

A VanderHorn home, Hoepner said, does not feel "bloated or overblown."

"The whole thing really feels quietly beautiful without really calling attention too much" to specific details, he said.

Although the homes range from 7,000 to 14,000 square feet — the latter figure amounting to almost a third of an acre of indoor space — they are not generally referred to as mansions, VanderHorn said.

That term, he says, is out of date. Hoepner echoed that viewpoint, saying the term seemed more fitting to Edwardian times, describing "a big, important house for a big, important family" with public spaces and rooms for servants.

VanderHorn, showing a photograph of one award-winning Shingle style home on the Greenwich waterfront, explained that his firm designed it to be more welcoming than imposing.

"People just want to live in this house," he said. "The spaces are generous but not trying to be grand. The detailing is elegant but restrained."

For all they owe to times past, the homes he designs have a distinctly current approach to energy use, with some major ecofriendly features. They include spray foam insulation, LED lighting and geo-thermal systems featuring wells 150 to 200 feet deep with pipes carrying water treated with antifreeze. The system takes advantage of the below-ground temperature of 55 degrees to help keep the homes cool in summer and warmer in winter.

A walk through the VanderHorn offices in Greenwich showed the old and the new in concert. One architect worked on a virtual home on a program that can display the future edifice from any angle and can produce floor plans. Another studied drawings and photos of chimneys to devise just the right one for a new home.

VanderHorn showed various aspects of the work taking place, including a design of a 14,000 square-foot home that will overlook the Hudson River in Upper Nyack, N.Y. This one is perhaps a touch different: a Palladian Revival home, it is strikingly symmetrical and will be made entirely of limestone.

Showing the drawings, VanderHorn said, "This is what I would call a mansion."