

# little house, **big city**

A quirky 200-year-old cottage survives—and thrives—in the middle of Manhattan

BY RYAN ROBBINS



*A clever renovation turned a modest clapboard house—originally a farm outbuilding from the early 19th century—into a comfortable family home in downtown Manhattan.*





**NESTLED AGAINST A NEW YORK CITY APARTMENT BUILDING**

and half hidden by an ivy-covered brick wall sits a crooked, 200-year-old cottage covered in clapboards. Called Cobble Court for the stones that have long paved its entry courtyard, the house is an eccentric survivor of the city that sprouted up around it. In fact, it originally resided 5 miles north of its current location, where it nearly met the wrecking ball. Although built circa 1800 as part of a Manhattan farm, by the middle of the 20th century it was entirely hemmed in by tall buildings. Development threatened, and eventually a demolition order loomed. ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLES MARAIA



So one snowy morning in 1967, the lucky 12-ton house—and every last cobblestone—was loaded onto a trailer and trundled to an empty corner lot downtown.

Hardly had the house settled onto its new foundation when a Virginia school-girl, riding by on a family car trip, saw it and declared, “The people living there are the luckiest people in New York.”

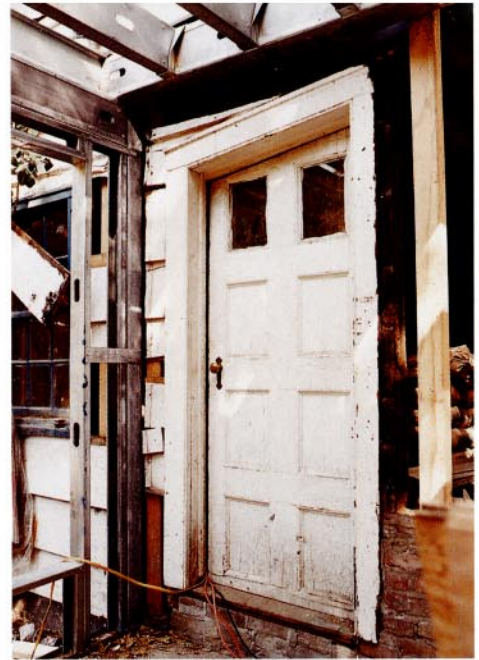
Some 20 years later, in 1989, the by-then-grown woman, pretty lucky herself, returned with her husband and bought the place.

The years had not been particularly kind to the modest structure. The two-story, two-bedroom cracker box with a staircase on the outside had long since settled. The roof sagged, the windows were badly out of square, and the front door measured 5 inches taller on one side than on the other. By the time the current homeowners took possession of it, the stairs and a side porch had been enclosed to create an entry vestibule and a cramped galley kitchen. And because the house had stood vacant for several months, it was covered with graffiti and had only plastic over its broken windows as protection against the elements.

The couple spent their first 10 years in the home charmed by its various quirks. But ultimately, with a

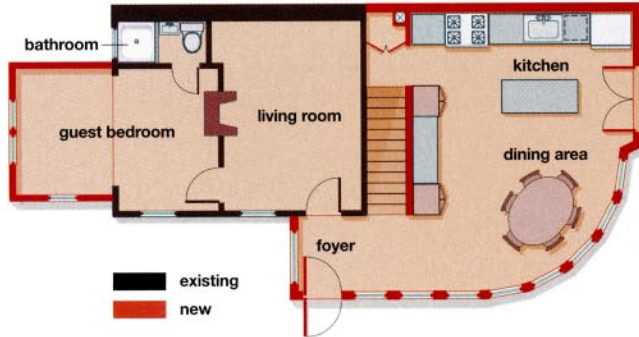
**RIGHT:** *The house's original front door—now sheltered inside a new steel-framed entryway—was left crooked and covered with 200 years worth of paint.*

**BELOW:** *The new dining area features a curved wall of six-over-six windows.*





First Floor



young son to raise, they found that “the little house that could” simply couldn’t any longer. “It was just too small, and it badly needed attention,” says the husband.

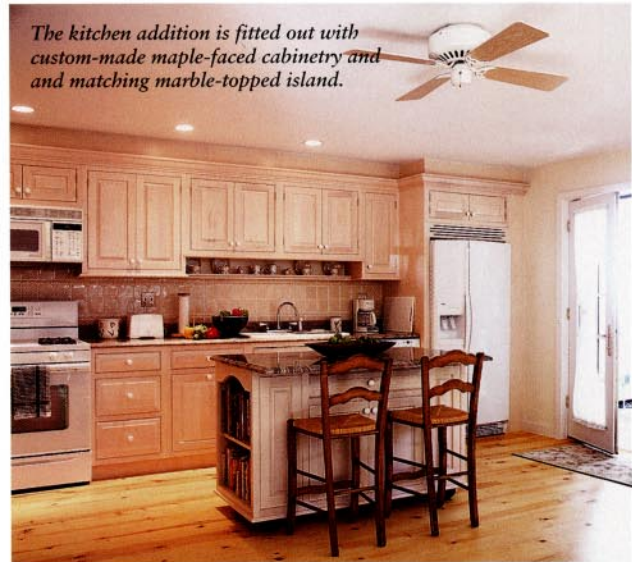
**PRESERVING THE PLACE’S SPIRIT**

“The house is such an anomaly,” says the project’s Manhattan-based architect, George Boyle. “The only thing that kept it alive all those years was its charm.” And that is exactly what the homeowners wanted to safeguard, even as they planned a full renovation, including a new wing that would nearly double the house’s size—from 920 square feet to almost 1,900. The addition would provide space enough for an ample kitchen with a dining area, a bedroom for their son, and a full finished basement.

“We all wanted the new construction to be in tune with the old,” says Boyle, “as if the house had grown over time.” The original structure was framed entirely in wood, a practice long since outlawed in New York City. “The old parts of the house were grandfathered in,” says Boyle. But for the new portions they had to use noncombustible elements: steel framing and reinforced concrete-block walls.

**MARRYING THE NEW WITH THE OLD**

The first floor of the new addition is essentially a 400-square-foot quarter-circle, with a small leg off one corner that serves as a foyer



The kitchen addition is fitted out with custom-made maple-faced cabinetry and matching marble-topped island.

for the main house. The rest of the space opens into a large kitchen-cum-dining-room that replaces the old galley kitchen. Light streams in along a curved wall of nearly floor-to-ceiling south- and east-facing windows, showing off new maple cabinetry, a granite-topped island, and wide-plank yellow pine floors.

One of Boyle’s challenges in marrying the new part of the house to the old was reconciling ceiling heights. The original home’s ceilings measured 7 feet 3 inches, but code required that the new addition have an 8-foot clearance. So in the kitchen Boyle specified thin-profile steel joists for the floor and ceiling, rather than the thick timbers of the original house, which enabled him to squeeze in a few extra inches of headroom without raising the roof significantly.

Beneath the kitchen addition Boyle created an identically shaped basement. The family has since furnished the underground space with a projection television and movie posters and uses it as a media room. It connects to an existing partial basement that houses a washer and dryer, a workshop, and the home’s mechanicals. On top of the kitchen sits a trapezoid-shaped upper (continued on page 156)

**A Storied Past**

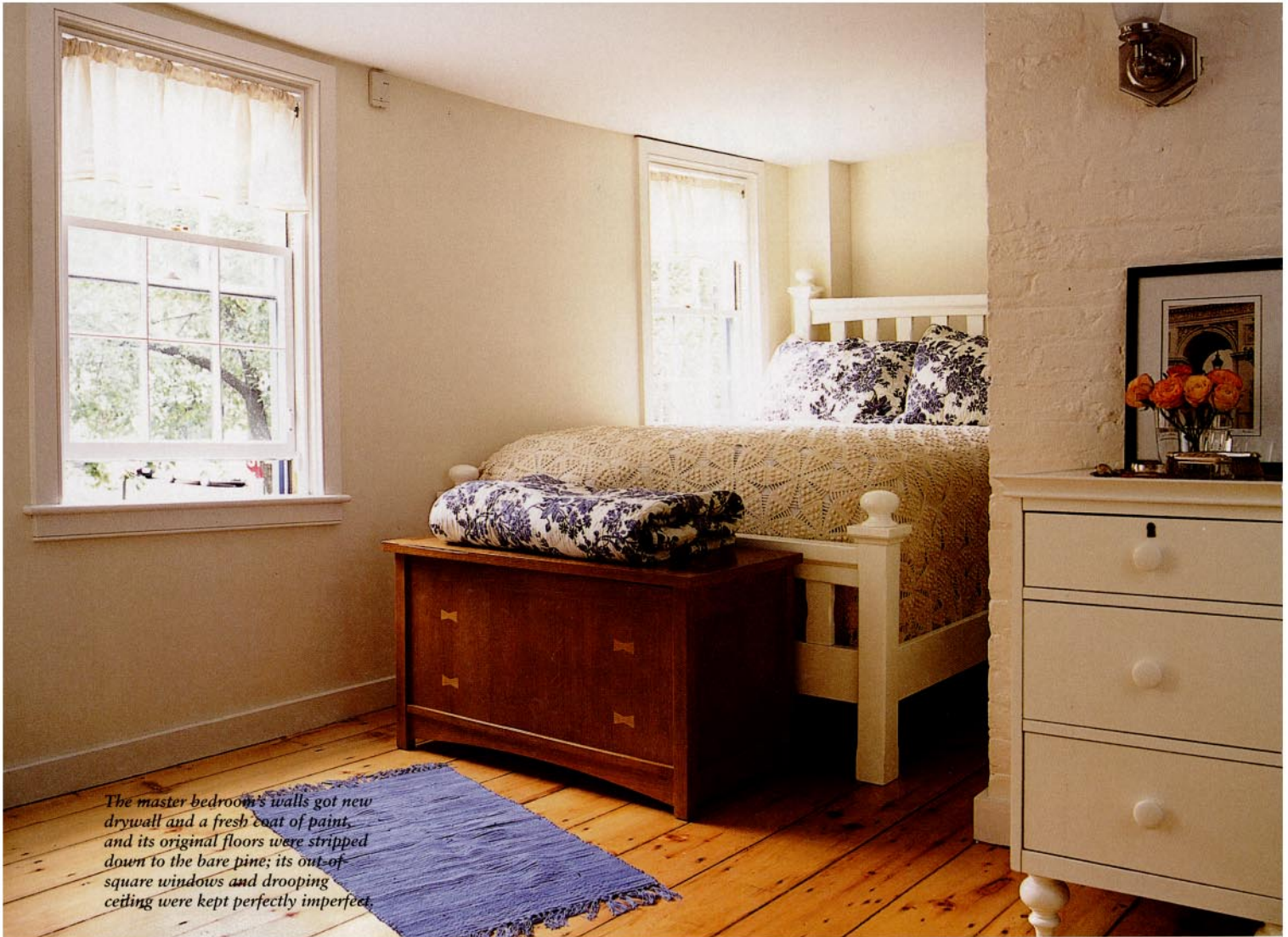
In the 1940s Cobble Court was occupied by Margaret Wise Brown (right), author of *Goodnight Moon* and other much-loved children’s books. At that time, the home was located on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, where high-rises completely hid it from the street. The eccentric little house, which she shared with a Kerry blue terrier named Crispin’s Crispian, provided the author with a cozy refuge where her whimsical imaginings could flourish. It also found its way into some of her stories, none more so than *The Hidden House*. The “protagonist” of the tale is a sweet clapboard farmhouse that “stood in a hidden garden in the middle of a big block of skyscrapers.” Brown goes on to survey the house’s details, including the exterior staircase, windows, and chimney, where “there was a fire burning... and no one knew where that sudden smell of sweet wild wood smoke came from in the middle of the big iron city.”



Margaret Wise Brown, author of *Goodnight Moon* and *The Hidden House* (INSETS), lived in and wrote about the cottage in the 1940s.







*The master bedroom's walls got new drywall and a fresh coat of paint, and its original floors were stripped down to the bare pine; its out-of-square windows and drooping ceiling were kept perfectly imperfect.*

## Replicating Windows

A big part of Cobble Court's charm comes from the out-of-square double-hung windows, three of which brighten the master bedroom (above). After almost 200 years of service, they were ready to be retired. But the homeowners had no desire to replace the originals with plumb-and-level units. Instead they made the unusual decision to replicate them out of square, a job that fell to their Brooklyn-based contractor, John Kemp.

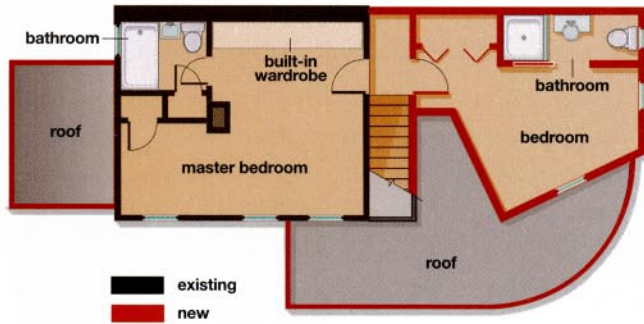
Kemp and his crew began by removing the exterior window trim and the interior sheathing to expose the windows' frames. Then they screwed sheets of plywood to the jambs to prevent them from racking out of shape any further. "We had to handle them with kid gloves," says Kemp. "They were held together by paint." They cut out the old units with a reciprocating saw (right)—a job made easier by the fact that there weren't any headers over the windows. In a temporary workshop set up in the house's unfinished basement, the crew measured the originals and cut five matching jamb sets, sash, and muntins from mahogany stock (far right). After assembling and priming the new units and fitting them with glass, the crew hung them back in the reframed—but still crooked—openings.



PHOTOS: KOLIN SMITH (BOTTOM 2)



Second Floor



floor, which houses the son's new bedroom and bath. "It's the only part of the new construction you can see walking by the house," says Boyle, "so I wanted it to fit in with the existing streetscape." Consequently, the long front wall of the bedroom is not squared with the rest of the house's second-story facade but is angled to run parallel to the street. The two floors are connected by the once-exterior staircase, which is still lined with the original clapboards.

**PRACTICAL CHANGES**

While the new wing was being built, the original structure—which comprises the master bedroom and bath stacked atop a smaller bedroom, a second bath, and a small living room with a brick fireplace—underwent a gut restoration. The house's envelope was tightened up, its framing was reinforced, and new plumbing and electrical systems were installed. But the finished space looks exactly as it did decades ago: sloping ceilings, off-kilter windows, and all. "The goal was not to make things plumb," says Boyle (see "Replicating Windows," page TK). The only significant change to the original structure was an 8-foot bump-out of the downstairs bedroom.

The old and new structures are tied together under a wavy roof Boyle describes as a "potato chip." Its various peaks and valleys add to the illusion that the structure was expanded ad hoc over the years; they also enable water to drain toward the rear of the building, where it is carried off via an exposed scupper. Most of the roof is covered in a waterproof rubberized membrane. But the small shed roof above the house's stairwell, the

**RIGHT:** A built-in wardrobe in the master bedroom helps compensate for the house's minimal closet space.

**BOTTOM:** The birdhouse, patterned after the original Cobble Court, is sheathed in fiber-cement siding, just like the house.



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only roof surface visible from the street, is covered in standing-seam copper. "It creates the illusion that the entire roof is copper," says Boyle. Another architectural trick: The house's quaint, white-painted clapboards aren't wood, they're fire-resistant fiber-cement siding, a final nod to the city's building codes.

But that's about all that Cobble Court and its owners have conceded to the city around them. The homey cottage is surrounded by a lawn dotted with fruiting fig trees, a flowering cherry, and rosebushes planted in the late 1960s. There's also a trellised garden bench and a birdseed-filled replica of the original house, built by a friend of the family. "The dog can run around outside, and I can play catch with my son in the yard," says the husband, "right in the middle of downtown Manhattan." ■