

AUGUST 2011

LUXURY HOME

quarterly



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DESIGNER SHOWCASE



PORCH PARTY

The Watch Hill residence's screened-in porch is ideal for outdoor entertaining.



Ken Gemes Interiors

Ken Gemes—once a business manager, now an interior designer—creates spaces that offer simplistic, understated elegance with a nod to British Colonial style. “Instead of strewing things everywhere, I prefer to place them in groups,” he says. “I think objects have more impact that way.”

TEXT BY **FREDERICK JERANT**
PHOTOS BY **NAT REA**



BEFORE FOUNDED his own firm in 1999, Ken Gemes was known only as a successful businessman. He had spent years in management positions for a major retail chain and as the senior vice president of merchandising and design for a sportswear company before starting to conceptualize, import, and sell British Colonial-style furniture as a sideline. "Some of my early customers bought my furniture only after I agreed to arrange it, showing them how seamlessly it combined with their other furnishings," he says.

Gemes approached this initial practice arranging furniture with a cue from the fashion world. "When you're dressing a model for a photo shoot," he says, "you often remove the last accessory you put on. My spaces have a balanced, Zen-like quality, so my clients feel relaxed when they enter." He later brought this philosophy to a number of specialized, high-end residential projects, and his opportunities began to compound. "They liked my work, and I got more design projects from their referrals," he says. "I gave up the furniture end in 2001 and solely focused on interior design."





Watch Hill Residence

The Watch Hill residence project involved a major renovation of a former carriage house built at the turn of the century in Watch Hill, RI. Awkwardly expanded by previous owners, it sat on a 1.4-acre lot, but tight lot lines and an adjacent wetland precluded any construction beyond renovations. Ken Gemes Interiors, working with Clifford M. Renshaw Architects (renshawarchitects.com), completely revamped the property. This Shingle-style, 3,036-square foot second home now includes five bedrooms and four baths, a finished basement that can sleep 10, a screened-in porch ideal for outdoor entertaining and relaxing, and a sense of openness and lightness—all ideal qualities for a seaside getaway.





Westchester County Family Home

This 1930s Colonial-style residence in Lower Westchester County, NY, is home to a family of four. The 4,325-square-foot home includes five bedrooms and five baths. It originally held heavy, large-scale furniture that contrasted jarringly with the owners' extensive art collection. Ken Gemes Interiors reupholstered several of the family's heirloom pieces while also introducing new furnishings, designed to be at once less imposing and more modern. New LED lights replace the former recessed cans, and glass-topped tables contribute to an airier appearance. The renovations achieve a style that better resonates with the home's abstract artwork.

Gemes' firm, Ken Gemes Interiors, has worked in River Oaks, Texas; Watch Hill, Rhode Island; Pinehurst, North Carolina; Boca Grande, Florida; The Plains, Virginia; and other states. But, its primary market area is Bronxville, New York, a village within easy reach of Manhattan that brings its own challenges. "Often, the homes are rather large, but their small lots prohibit large additions," Gemes says. "I have to make sure that every room in the house draws you in and functions as well as possible, and I encourage my clients to repurpose existing spaces—turning a former nursery into a library, for example."

"I have to make sure that every room in the house draws you in and functions as well as possible."

KEN GEMES, OWNER.

A beach house project in Watch Hill, Rhode Island, illustrates how Gemes achieves marvelous results within restricted spaces. Previous owners had awkwardly expanded the former carriage house, and "it was very linear," Gemes says. "Each room led straight into the next."

The results of the complete renovation are dramatic. On the first floor, delicate muted blues, greens, sea-foams, and grays reflect the nearby beach, and pewter and khaki accents complement the home's touches of stainless steel and antique pewter hardware.

The large living room's three-cushion sofa is covered in sea-glass chenille. Four club chairs—in an indigo-blue and bottle-green batik pattern in hemp fabric—can easily be rolled into place to enjoy the 50-inch flat-screen TV above the fireplace. Black granite surrounds the fireplace, and other black furniture punctuates the room, contrasting with the softer furnishings, wall color, and rugs. Mother of Pearl lamps and framed sea fans provide gentle nods to the sea.

The large kitchen serves as a command center, with computer and phone. There is plenty of cabinet space, a bar area with a beverage refrigerator and icemaker, an island with bar stools, and even a 10-seat zinc-top dining table originally intended for the living room. The kitchen and living room open onto a screened porch with an additional dining area, a haze-grey wicker furniture, and a blue-grey bead-board ceiling. A series of electrified hanging lanterns, used in tandem with tall pillar candles, provide ambient lighting in the evenings.

The master bedroom's soft blues echo those on the first floor, and tropical-print linen-cotton window treatments and a dark tobacco-caned bed continue the island vibe. A chaise longue in a spot checked pattern from GP&J Baker offers another space for unwinding or napping.

Sometimes Gemes must resolve a bit of culture clash—a situation that results when owners' tastes and existing décor simply don't mesh. "One client in Lower West Chester County, New

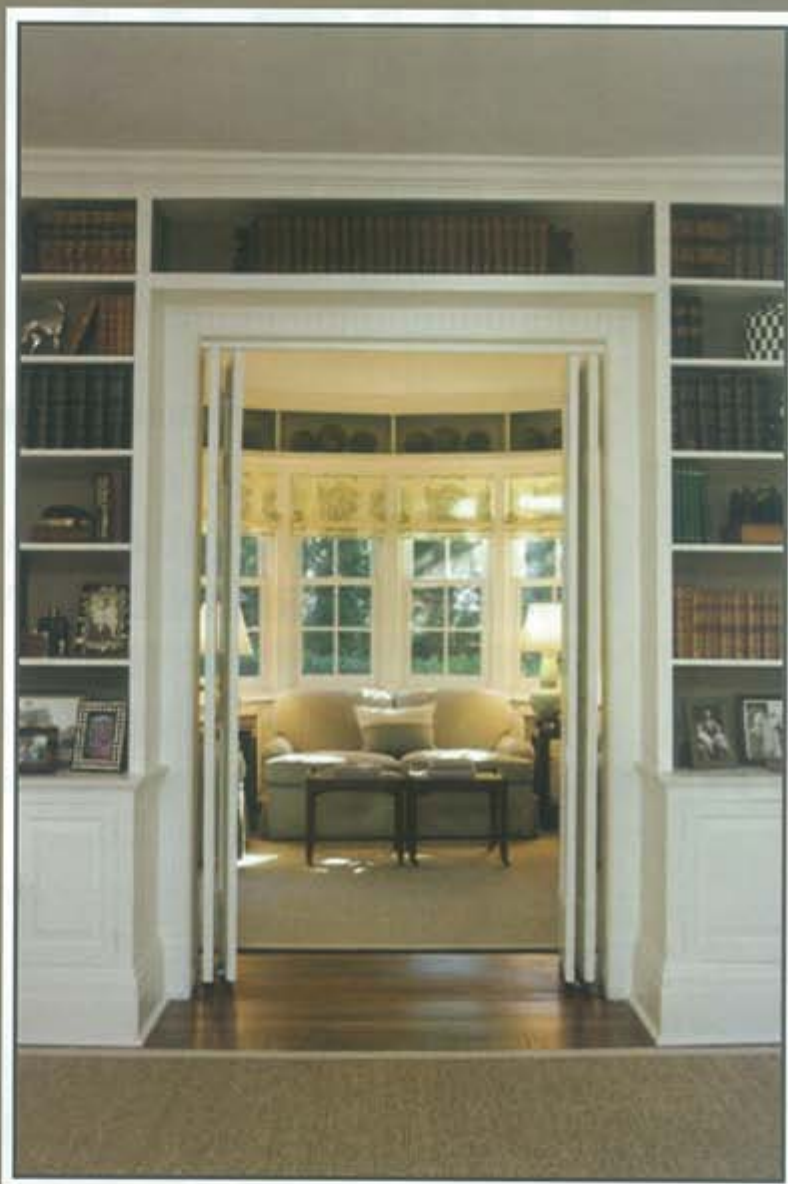
York, had planned the complete makeover of a 1930s vintage Colonial home but—after living through extensive construction work, new furniture, carpet and window treatments for certain rooms—never fully completed the interior spaces,” Gemes says.

The biggest challenge of the job was finding a way to feature the owner’s extensive (and impressive) art collection while replacing oversize sofas and club chairs that crowded and dated the rooms. After extensive consultations, Gemes hit on several satisfactory approaches, and two rooms serve as prime examples: the living room and dining room.

“In the living room, we used light taupe on the walls to highlight the collection of American abstract paintings in black-and-white,” Gemes says. “We replaced the large recessed canned lights that checkered the ceiling with tiny LED lights around the periphery,” he says. “They wash the walls with light for a more robust but less intrusive appearance.” Smaller-scale furniture with clean lines provided a more tailored look and permitted easier navigation around the room. And, pale aqua accents, contrasted with upholstery in shades of mushroom, tobacco, and off-white, eliminated the previous “precious and untouchable” look.

The dining room features window treatments in an Asian-inspired bamboo floral pattern, a china-storage console with an antique mirror front, a stronger wall color to complement paintings, and raffia-covered dining chairs with nail-head trim that blends with the sisal carpet.

Gemes thinks the days of “McMansions” are ending as homeowners realize they really do not need and must spend too much to maintain all that space. Now, he says, people are thinking less about adding on and more about maximizing every square inch and making their spaces as aesthetically pleasing and as functional as possible. Gemes says that sometimes even first homes can benefit from an immediate makeover. “The owners often want a grown-up look, but they choose the same dark oriental carpets and the burgundies, blues, and golds found in their parents’ or grandparents’ homes,” he says. “Sometimes they even use their old furniture. It gives the home an old-fashioned look right at the start.” When this happens, Gemes and his team are prepared to turn the home around with a design aesthetic based on simplification. ■



KEN GEMES

INTERIORS

www.kengemes.com