

The background image is a high-quality photograph of a traditional living room. The walls and ceiling are finished with dark wood paneling. A large, ornate wooden fireplace mantel is the central focus, with a fire burning in the hearth. Above the mantel hangs a framed picture of a winter scene, flanked by two candle holders. To the right of the fireplace is a built-in wooden bookshelf filled with books and decorative items. In the foreground, a brown leather tufted ottoman sits on a patterned rug, holding a wooden tray with a teacup, a remote control, and a book. The overall atmosphere is cozy and inviting.

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Before

Mark P. Finlay Architects

Photos top to bottom: Before-and-after views of the back of the Harbor Road home, renovated by Mark P. Finlay Architects AIA and Mark P. Finlay Interiors LLC following Superstorm Sandy. This Colonial Revival-style home was designed in the 1930s by Cameron Clark, a well-known Fairfield architect from the 1930s to 50s, and is one of only two houses in the Southport Historic District designed by Clark. — Warren Jagger

A mark of distinction

by Janis Gibson

While many architects have certain design signatures, Mark P. Finlay AIA of Southport is not one of them. In fact, he says, “I don’t like it if people can tell I did it. I don’t like to leave fingerprints.”

For more than 30 years his eponymous, award-winning, full-service architectural and interior design firm has been designing and creating homes and golf clubhouses around the country. If the properties have anything in common, it is that “many of them are waterfront, be it on

the Sound, an ocean, a river, or a lake.” One of the firm’s most visible projects was essentially rebuilding a historic home on Harbor Road in Southport that was flooded and damaged by Superstorm Sandy five years ago.

Close to the road and at the mouth of Southport Harbor, the Colonial Revival-style home was designed in the 1930s by Cameron Clark, a well-known Fairfield architect from the 1930s to 50s, and one of only two houses in the Southport Historic District designed by Clark.

Because it is a highly visible property, the goal, says Mark, was to “keep the character of the house from the road — people walking past it feel the romance of Southport Center and particularly like its vestibule — while reinforcing it against future storms and bringing the interior design and amenities into the 21st Century.”

Having added onto and restored four Clark houses previously, Mark says, “I know his work well and channeled him in doing this project. I wanted to respect the original, which is why keeping the vestibule detail was important.” From the road, the look of the home remains similar to what it had been, but it was expanded and opened up on the harbor side, working with the local historical commission to ensure additions and renovations were historically appropriate. The interiors, designed to keep the scale of the 1930s house, have a contemporary classic style and much more natural light.

The first steps, however, were to raise



Bryan Haeffele



Mark Finlay’s first book, a collection of 12 of his finest works, will be publishing this spring.

— Eric Piasecki



Warren Jagger

the house, patio, and grade 18 inches, and also increase the height of the waterfront retaining wall.

Now totaling about 8,400 square feet, the house was expanded by taking advantage of the third floor, which was basically attic space, bumping out the kitchen, which overlooks the harbor through a set of bay windows, and situating the new master suite to take full advantage of the waterfront views both up and down the harbor and converting a garden shed to a small gym. The end project has been well received.

Depending on the economy, Mark's business is about 70% new construction, 30% renovation and/or expansion, and the company has two sides: Mark P. Finlay Architects AIA and Mark P. Finlay Interiors LLC, which is headed by Tina Anastasia, who has degrees in interior architecture and interior design.

Mark notes, "We do everything in a house; we do big jobs, little jobs, and even really small stuff for nice people. We have a lot of repeat business — we've done five to seven projects for some clients; the trust level is really high — and much comes from word of mouth and referrals. We offer our services separately or together, although working both sides saves lots of time and is easier to coordinate."

"We are super service-oriented," Tina adds. "We want clients to have a good experience all the way through. You're always going to get your questions answered." When designing and decorating a room, she says, "we feel a responsibility to prepare a room with the clients' needs and end use in mind, to determine what it is they really want. It's easy to do the same thing over and over; we want them to be excited about the result, to find coming home a solace."

"We pride ourselves on being on time and in budget," she continues. "We create amazing spaces and oversee unboxing and installation, creating foundational layers. Between furniture and décor, we might install a thousand pieces on a project. And while most projects are decorated new, we always find homes for clients' favorite pieces. We're also very good at repurposing things; clients are often pleasantly surprised."

So how does an architect end up working on projects all over the country? Mark cites a Greenwich home client as an example. "He later asked if we would be interested in building a mountain retreat for him in Colorado ... his father visits, loves the place, and asks if we

build country clubs — which we do — and we get a job in Vero Beach [Fla.]." Mark has, in fact, designed 24 custom golf clubhouses to date.

Mark notes that "drones are an amazing tool for golf course work, especially when working from a distance. When a problem comes up, often you can survey it with a drone and come up with a solution without having to make a site visit to assess the situation."

Describing his staff of about 30 people and their approach to their work, Mark says, "We have an office full of nice people, and we try to do something different, which makes life fun. We treat everyone the same. When prospective clients come in, I use pictures [slide shows on a large screen in the conference room] to make them comfortable, then walk them around so they can see what all we do and meet people they would be working with."

If considering building a new home, the best time to call an architect, Mark advises, "is when you are looking for land; an architect can tell you if your ideas will work on certain sites. Building a house is a minimum two-year project," he continues, "so you'd better be sure you can get along. ... It's not like dating, it's like being married for two years — or more, depending on the project."

In the spring, Mark will be publishing his first book, *Country Houses: The Architecture of Mark P. Finlay*. The monograph is a collection of 12 of Mark's finest works, and can serve as inspiration for anyone imagining their dream home.

For additional information, visit mark-finlay.com or call 203-254-2388.



Warren Jagger



Mark P. Finlay Architects



Warren Jagger

Photos top to bottom: The former small kitchen space was bumped out and now totals 330 square feet, overlooking the harbor through a set of bay windows. This photo, taken after Superstorm Sandy hit Connecticut, shows why elevating the grade, and thus the home, and the retaining wall of the Harbor Road home were the first priorities. The center of the home was opened up, creating an airy and natural-light-filled space; here, another view of the renovated kitchen.