

ARCHITECT JAMES DIXON OF PORTLAND, OREGON, AND CHATHAM, NEW YORK, HAS LONG HAD A FASCINATION FOR BARNs. THIS ONE - FASHIONED AS A POOL HOUSE - LOOKS LIKE A SIMPLE VERNACULAR BARN WHEN SEEN FROM AFAR, UNTIL YOU GET UP CLOSE AND FIND IT'S PART OF A PAVILION THAT'S SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT.

HINTS OF AN AGRARIAN PAST

written by DONNA PIZZI photography by JOHN KANE

LEFT: A Millwork Cube, containing kitchen, bath, and laundry, was designed as a freestanding box that fits within the post and beam framework. CENTER: When coming upon the farmstead from a country road, the pool is completely hidden behind outbuildings used for storage of pool equipment and furnishings in winter months. RIGHT: A stone wall constructed from local granite connects the two outbuildings, and is used as an entrance for guests arriving for a party.



AWARD-WINNING ARCHITECT JAMES DIXON OF JAMES DIXON ARCHITECT, PC, CAME HOME TO ROOST LAST YEAR, and reliving, you might say, the same passion he felt as a teen from the Midwest, discovering Oregon for the first time. Only this time it was to raise a family as well. Back then, he'd recently moved to Portland and fell in love with the state. He then enrolled at the University of Oregon, packed up all his belongings, and moved to Eugene; there he earned a Bachelor of Architecture degree in 1992.

After receiving a Graduate Diploma from the Architectural Association in London, Dixon spent his early years working in Portland. A position in Austin, Texas, was the springboard for moving to Manhattan, where he opened his practice in 1999. In 2002, Dixon relocated his firm, which specializes in high-end residential design around the world, to Chatham, New York, in the beautiful Hudson Valley.

In nearby Litchfield County, Connecticut, Dixon was asked to design a pool house on a 200-acre property on which his clients planned to build a large home. In the interim, the family spent their summers in a small cottage, and preferred the pool to be located some distance away.

"We worked with Dirk Sabin, of Sabin Landscape Architects, to walk the acreage, looking for a spot for the pool with plenty of sunshine," says Dixon.

The location they chose promised spectacular views of Lake Waramaug, once permits were obtained to cut through some of the surrounding trees. Given the proliferation of vintage barns in the area, Dixon suggested creating a farmstead, with a traditional timber frame barn, custom fabricated from antique wood, replete with mortise and tenon joinery, and post and beam frame. Once its sliding barn doors are opened, however, a very different architectural experience awaits through steel and glass doors.

In working with clients, Dixon tends to be very collaborative, discussing what clients hope to achieve. In this case, he says, Litchfield County is so beautiful it was important not to have the project stand out or look too flashy, but rather fit within the environment.



“I’ve always had a fascination for barns,” says Dixon, pointing to time spent in Lancaster County, PA. “There is something so wonderful about them. They speak to our American heritage, which in this very rural part of the country, still has barns throughout the landscape.”

Once they came up with the idea for a barn, then they had to decide how to use it. With budget as an element, they decided to keep it as simple as possible.

“It was also very important that it be a kid friendly space, yet elegant enough to host parties for grown-ups as well. The floors are basically indestructible, and if the rustic timber frames got banged up, they’d look all the better.”

Although the clients considered adding a bedroom for possible sleep overs, local building restrictions prohibited that. Therefore, since it was not a “lived-in” structure, that made the project even more affordable without the consideration or need for insulation, heating or cooling.

Because Dixon started by designing a 30’ x 40’ standard sized barn, he knew the height had to be tall enough to make it appear as if the structure were a real barn. “The wall height also protects the structure from the sun,” explains Dixon, “which, as a seasonal building without insulation, heat or air conditioning, also helps it to stay cool.”

The contrasting modern interiors serve multiple usages. An expansive screened-in porch houses a dining area large enough for the elegant, sit-down meals the family loves to host, while the barn’s sturdy construction can easily withstand children’s pool parties. Polished concrete floors enable traffic to flow out of the pool and into the interiors without worry or incident. Spectacular views are witnessed from both poolside and the screened-in porch.

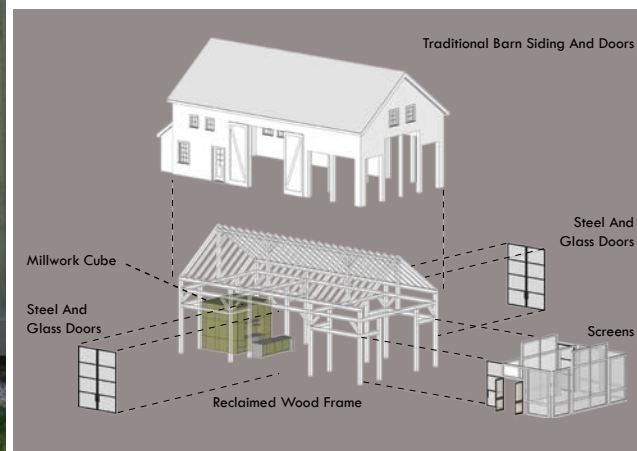
The Millwork Cube sets the stage within, with straight-as-an-arrow modern lines accentuated by striking gray stained plywood cabinetry that produces a sleek, smooth finish. “We treated the plywood so the wood grain would show through, even though it’s a highly



OPPOSITE The 30’ x 50’ pool patio features locally sourced granite to make it in keeping with the rural landscape, which is dotted with the remnants of stone walls. CENTER Steel and glass doors open up the barn on three sides to reveal stunning vistas. ABOVE A pair of 12-light windows seen from both inside and out continue the look of a vintage barn while adding more light. French doors open the living area onto the vast dining area.



LEFT The larger outbuilding at left was designed as storage for pool furnishings during off seasons. To its left is the dramatic stone wall built from local stones – remnants from walls on the 200-acre property. BELOW Architectural drawings showing the various elements that make up the barn’s construction. BOTTOM The barn seen from the screened-in porch, and looking toward the traditional barn siding and doors.



finished product,” says Dixon. A single piece of wraparound, stainless steel that includes counter and sink adds an industrial feel that’s in stark contrast with the barn’s traditional exterior wood siding.

To create the look of an old farmstead, Dixon and his team designed additional outbuildings that also serve to obscure the pool from view from the road. The structures look aged thanks to the use of random width boards treated with a simple stain, which Dixon says will create a nice patina over time. “We didn’t want the exterior to look shiny and new,” he says, “just lovely and well maintained. Also, the cedar shake roof, which is traditional for that part of the world, requires very little upkeep.”

The use of recycled materials such as the reclaimed wood frame and barn board ceiling made the project more sustainable as well. “It also supported local craftspeople,” he adds, “which is a great thing, since there aren’t as many of those around as there used to be!”

The windows designed by James Dixon Architect (JDA PC) and custom-fabricated by Peter Kirkiles, one of those very talented local craftspeople, add to the airiness of the barn. A pair of sliding glass doors maintain the vintage barn look. The screened-in porch was designed to look as if it was added later, as if the barn changed over time, just as Dixon’s firm has grown over the decades to include 10 staff members on two coasts.

“Regional styles differ, and the local vernacular is often what gives a place its unique character. But good design is universal,” remarks Dixon. “Here in the Pacific Northwest, as with all our projects, we harness both style and good design to help clients create homes they love.”

PROJECT SOURCES

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James Dixon Architect PC
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- Plumbing Fixtures: Waterworks, Kohler; Appliances: LG, Jenn-Air, GE

What books do you have on your bedside table?

DIXON It’s quite a stack, I’m afraid; I tend to read one book for awhile, then pick up something else before I go back and finish what I started. A friend just sent J P Delaney’s *The Girl Before*, and I fear my weekend chores won’t get done. I’m also working my way through Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* which I haven’t looked at since college. Such delicious gossip and fun stories about everyone who was anyone in Renaissance Italy.

What did you find most interesting about living and working in New York?

DIXON I love the challenges that come with working in an urban environment. I’ve had the occasion to work on apartments in the same building with identical layouts, yet the end results are very different.

What do you find most interesting about living and working in Portland?

DIXON I’m fascinated by how the city has changed over the years. At the same time, it’s such a comfort to see many of my old haunts extant.

What are some of the things outside of architecture and design that you’re interested in? How do you incorporate them into your work?

DIXON I have 5-year old twins, so there’s not much time for outside interests. But it’s been fun to see how they’ve influenced my work; laundry rooms have certainly taken on a bigger sense of priority.

If money was no object, and you could work anywhere in the world, what would your dream project be?

DIXON It would seem I’ve already had this opportunity when I renovated a 17th century town house in Paris. The client - with whom I’ve worked on several projects - would send me lists of restaurants to try. Then he’d fly over for site meetings and we’d eat, eat, eat. Oh, and he’s quite the wine connoisseur, too. It will be difficult to top that, but I’m up to the challenge... say, a Venetian Palazzo?

When you were a child did you always want to become an architect?

DIXON Yes! And strangely enough, I’m not even sure I knew exactly what an architect did. But I’ve never wanted to do anything else. I’ve seen friends struggle with finding the right career, and I know how lucky I am to do what I love.

What are some projects you’re working on now?

DIXON All sorts of fun things. I was out in the Columbia Gorge last week with some clients looking at an amazing site for a weekend getaway. Georgian Bay in Ontario is another beautiful spot where we’re working. And we have eight Manhattan apartment renovations underway, so I always have an excuse to get my Big Apple fix. Best of yet are the ones right here in Portland, some of which I can walk to from home; that’s my favorite commute!

