AS SEEN IN THE APRIL 2010
ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

Classic American Pastorale

PAST AND PRESENT MERGE ON A LANDMARK PROPERTY OUTSIDE CLEVELAND

Architecture by Ferguson & Shamamian
Landscape Architecture by Maggie Williams
Text by Jeff Turrentine
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On a parcel of wooded northeast Ohio acreage once belonging to brothers Oris Paxton and Mantis James Van Sweringen, railroad tycoons who developed Cleveland's Shaker Heights suburb, Ferguson & Shamamian Architects designed a 10,000-square-foot house, integrating it with a 1920s barn, now attached and converted to a garage (right). ABOVE: A restored stone bridge spans a moat.

To get to the property, nestled within northeast Ohio's idyllic Chagrin River valley, one must first cross an actual moat—via a picturesque stone bridge—before passing a turreted dovecote that appears to have been transplanted intact from a medieval French village. Just a few miles west of Cleveland, on a large piece of land once owned by the Van Sweringen brothers, an eccentric pair of turn-of-the-last-century railroad magnates who also founded the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, is this romantic dream hamlet fashioned in the manner of an Austrian village.

When Mark Ferguson, of Ferguson & Shamamian Architects, was approached by new buyers about converting the compound into a contemporary yet historically sensitive family residence, he could see instantly how challenging the project would be. Many of the property's outbuildings were in disrepair and, what's more, says Ferguson, "they were stranded from the original estate. There was the main house, but then there were all of these maintenance buildings consolidated into one area, bounded by a stream and a hill." On top of that, the whole property had local landmark status, which made any attempt at renovation even more complicated. "It was going to take real vision to figure out how a family could make a home there."

Fortunately for the clients, who designed their own interiors, Ferguson has never been short on vision. Ferguson & Shamamian, though based in New York, enjoys a national profile thanks to its ability to channel any and all vernacular styles into designs that are indisputably new while remaining steadfastly true to the regions, cultures and eras in which they were born. For homeowners who wanted their new house to appear "as if it had been there for a long time," in the husband's words, the choice of architects was an easy one.

Oris Paxton and Mantis James Van Sweringen—who never married, died less than a year apart and shared a bedroom into adulthood—christened their 650-acre homestead Daisy Hill and their mansion upon it Roundwood Manor (see *Architectural Digest*, July/August 1972). The parcel of land on Daisy Hill that Ferguson's clients owned didn't include the 54-room Roundwood Manor (which still stands, in somewhat faded glory) but did accommodate a number of other structures, among them a blacksmith's shop, two

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Ferguson gently vaulted the ceiling in the living room and bowed a window toward the rear lawn. *The River*, by Cleveland School artist Paul Travis, hangs above the mantel. The clients designed the interiors, choosing Donghia sofas, an end table and slipper chairs from Baker and floor lamps by Bill Sofield. Ottoman fabric, Osborne & Little.

LEFT: The architects put a spacious outdoor living area off the dining room of the new house. Sofas from Restoration Hardware. Ann Sacks limestone-and-marble flooring. ABOVE: The stable, along with other existing buildings, was refurbished under the owners' supervision. They keep their Norwegian fjord horses there in the summer. An antique bench and trunk are original to the Van Sweringen compound.

stable hands' cottages and a hunting lodge. Erecting a house on the land would mean removing some of them; in this way, says Ferguson, "the central courtyard could be preserved, and we could get a lawn space private from the rest of the building, adjacent to the stream."

The result, as Ferguson tells it, "is a bit of a hybrid. It has Georgian elements, but then something like the dovecote reminds you of medieval France or England." It is, in other words, a perfect example of a certain kind of American pastoral romanticism that cares less about historical exactitude than it does about overall effect.

The new 10,000-square-foot house sits on one side of the aforementioned courtyard, opposite the stable and hunting lodge, now completely refurbished. (The latter is used primarily as a space for entertaining and putting up guests.) Another architect might have been satisfied to integrate the new house with the old complex thematically, even nostalgically; Ferguson, who aspired to a more literal connection, sited the house in such a way that an existing barn became the new attached garage. Stone for walls and façades was taken—by hand—from the nearby Chagrin River, in an effort to connect new structures to the land.

Inside, Ferguson added height to the living room by giving the ceiling an almost imperceptibly gentle barrel vault; the bay window looks out onto one of the six gardens designed by British landscape architect Maggie Williams. Light flowing into the room is soaked up by the panels of white oak, adding richness and warmth. Other touches, like a bath and dressing room clad in dark mahogany, or elaborate wrought iron banisters on stairwells, pay subtle homage to an era that regularly spawned railroad tycoons.

The husband, a business executive with very little spare time on his hands, volunteered to serve as general contractor for the project, which entailed overseeing renovation of the historic buildings while Ferguson and his colleagues concentrated on the new residence. "I didn't really feel comfortable handing it off to anyone, given how much work there was to be done," he says. Working so closely with Ferguson helped ensure that the ultimate goal—to retain the property's villagelike atmosphere and honor the legacy of its illustrious previous inhabitants—was met. Laborers, he says, would "arrive and look around, but they couldn't find the new house because it looked so much like an old house." Fait accompli. □